

The Indonesian language and its potential to become an international language

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Abstract: The potential shown by the Indonesian language in less than a century for a neutral *lingua franca* is continually progressing, not only for the nation alone but it is indeed becoming more popular abroad thanks to Darmasiswa and other Indonesian scholarship programs offered to foreigners. Besides the cited phenomena that has seen an increase in the use of the Indonesian language all around the world, there are many other factors to consider in the potential success of Indonesian as an international language used not only by locals but also by foreigners either for daily conversations, for academic purposes, medical or any other needs inside and outside of Indonesia. The present paper approaches this phenomenon from a sociolinguistic perspective in field.

Keyword: Bahasa Indonesia, standardised language, second language, international language.

Introduction

The popularization of the Indonesian language as a second language among foreigners is due to the interest in many Indonesian sectors such as Arts and Humanities among other disciplines and activities. This phenomenon could be if not the most important, at least the most obvious scenario for the expansion of Indonesian language in order to become a recognized international language.

While this phenomenon is happening there is a consideration to observe, that is, if foreigners are learning Indonesian, what kind of Indonesian are they learning, using and spreading among other foreigners?

After one year or more attending the Darmasiswa program, the majority of its students are able to communicate in at least a basic level of Indonesian on a daily basis. Their level of Indonesian proficiency varies according to the personal environment each individual has been focused on. Sometimes more formal, sometimes more informal. Such irregularity can become a potential barrier in order to promote Indonesian language abroad.

Under these circumstances, there's a need to understand the source of the inconsistencies and after that, we can formulate solutions from within.

Methodology

The methodology applied in this paper is mainly a qualitative method using ethnographic narrations in the personal experience of the author as a foreign speaker of the Indonesian language. In this case, Many generic examples are been given, this, in order to describe what are the many variables of Indonesian among foreigners, how Indonesian people influence directly to in this usage, and what are the last considerations to understand the future of Indonesian language as an international language.

Understanding the problem

Even though BIPA (*Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing*) is the official program to teach Indonesian language as a second language it unintentionally alienates foreigners from “usual conversations”, while on the other hand, foreigners that stay long enough to be fluent in the Indonesian language mostly do not follow the standards given, for example the BIPA program, such as the regular / formal sources, due to the lack of application of its formal speech in a daily context. (unless of course, in some cases where the foreigner is a writer who uses formal speech in texts.) This condition among foreigners creates a difficulty in spreading the Indonesian language worldwide.

In Indonesian native context, it is taken for granted that any Indonesian speaker (whether a native or non-native speaker) should make a code switch between all Indonesian in a speculated “spontaneous” way. Among Indonesians alone, this is taken for granted since it’s speculated that they will automatically switch, at least in a more “natural” way, between formal and informal Indonesian.

In fact, this code-switching is not “naturally” suitable for foreigners at first instance. It actually becomes a barrier for foreigners. In order to learn all the levels, we need to be aware of this condition. If the learning process of these sociolinguistic levels is hard for foreigners in an immersion context it becomes absolutely impossible to even try to understand this code-switching as a student of Indonesian language who lives overseas.

At this point, the question that emerges can be formulated as follows: How can a foreigner learn Indonesian since the standards of this language vary so much? Let’s imagine a scene where two foreigners meet, let’s say in China, a Thai citizen and a Peruvian citizen. Neither of them speaks English or Mandarin yet they share a common language - properly speaking, a *lingua franca* - Indonesian. Unfortunately for both, they have a basic understanding of Indonesian with quite different backgrounds but each of these individuals learned Indonesian in a different way.

The Thai citizen learned Indonesian when she visited Indonesia as a tourist for a couple of months on the Island of Java. Meanwhile, the Peruvian citizen learned Indonesian for three months in his homeland from a BIPA teacher as the only contact with this language. Ironically, it will be complicated for both to communicate even though they share a common language.

Another situation where foreigners would potentially face issues while using Indonesian as an international language would be when writing formal letters and any other documents since these foreigners are mostly able to communicate in an informal Indonesian but not a formal one.

In case of promoting Indonesian as an international language, Indonesian authorities and Indonesian citizens as a whole could reconsider their habits while using Indonesian language in order to make it potentially international.

What kinds of habits are preventing Indonesian to become an international language?

First of all the intentional formulation of a pidgin language mixed with English as “slang” that already crossed the border to official events and academic spaces, making the Indonesian language a confusing one. It’s usually called “Endoenglish” or “Englonesian” and has some sociolinguistic similarity with the spoken “Manglish” in the neighboring country Malaysia. In 2017 a motion that demanded Bahasa Malay as an international language in ASEAN after English was quite unexpected since Bahasa Malay is mainly used by Malay people and expatriate people living in Malaysia. As Malay and English are both used in that country,

Malay/Bahasa Melayu becomes a second term language, making it a mixture with English, giving as the result the common use of its pidgin mixed language that is well known as Manglish. In this context, Malay alone is not so standardised enough to become an international language.

A similar situation with Manglish can threaten the plans to promote Indonesian language as an international language. If Indonesia does not fit its standards properly, as mentioned before, different levels of communication can be expected in an Indonesian environment, yet, to make it international it needs patterns that make other people besides Indonesians better able to communicate without having any handicap in the lack of understanding of grammar.

A simple example of this could be the use of the verb “*beli*” which in its more elaborate form could be: *membeli*, *membelikan*, *dibeli*... in which *membelikan* means to buy something for someone else but one's self, yet in daily context, there's almost no use of that term and instead the most popular way to say the form becomes “*beliin*”; such normalised variation in a daily context could not mean a big issue or that would seem so. Yet in reality, this and other normalised terms give the Indonesian language foreign speaker a non-solid basis to communicate properly in this language.

At this point, formal Indonesian, at least in its proper form, is a reality needed to be achieved in order for all Indonesian speakers to clearly communicate with each other; including those who speak Indonesian as their second language. Only then, when formal Indonesian get's its place as the standarised Indonesian, it can be promoted for real as an international language in a more extended way. If formal Indonesian keeps being rejected by its own native speakers – as bilingual native Indonesian speakers - it will not be possible to expand this language successfully overseas.

References

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