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## National and Official Language: The Long Journey of Indonesian Language

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**Abstract:** Indonesia is a big country with more than 18,000 islands. It has at least 726 regional languages, making it the World's second most diverse, after Papua New Guinea. To choose one national and official language is a big problem for Indonesia because of the diversity of the regional languages. Given the diversity of cultures and vernaculars of our country, it was difficult to find what Indonesians had in common. That common identity would eventually be found by developing standardizing language to unify the islands. This paper will discuss the process of selecting Malay language became Indonesia's national and official language. This is very important because national and official language will show the unity of a nation, especially during the colonization.

**Keywords:** national language, official language, Malay language

### I. INTRODUCTION

In sociolinguistics the difference between national and official language is generally dealing with the ideological-instrumental dimension (Holmes: 2001). A national language is the language of a political, cultural and social unit. It is usually developed and used as a symbol of national unity. Official language, on the other hand, is simply a language which may be used for government business. The function of official language is usually dealing with certain business in a certain territory such as nation's court, parliament, and administration and it is not widely spoken in the society. However, it is possible that one language serves both functions.

In multilingual countries, like Indonesia, the government usually declares a particular language to be the national language for political reasons. Declaring the national language is meant to bind the society, in order to achieve our goal to be an independent nation. 'One nation, one language' has been a popular and effective slogan. Nationhood and independence have been very important political issues throughout the world. The symbolic value of a national language as unifying tool in the fight for independence was quickly appreciated by many countries during the colonization. Countries with hundreds of different regional languages then realized the importance of one national language not only as a lingua franca or official language, but also as a symbolic unifying function for the nations.

In Indonesia, despite of many regional languages, the government chose Malay language as national and official language. Even though Javanese was the most influential language that time but it had a complex linguistically marked politeness system based on relative status. So, it was impossible to apply this language as national language in the society. Malay was chosen because it had been used widely as a trade language.

## **II. THE HISTORY OF INDONESIAN LANGUAGE**

From earliest recorded times Malay was, and still is, the native tongue of the people who live on both sides of the Straits of Malacca that separate Sumatra from the Malay Peninsula. Because the Straits have always been a busy sea thoroughfare, countless travelers and traders came into contact with its language. Over the centuries they bore Malay throughout the islands of Indonesia and the language became a widely used lingua franca, especially in coastal areas. This is one of the main reasons why, in the 20th century, Malay was chosen as the national language of the Indonesian republic and why it has played such an important role in forging Indonesia's unity.

Malay has also functioned as a court language. It was evidently the language of the Sumatra Empire of Sriwijaya (9th to 14th centuries). It was also the language of the greatest of all medieval Malay states, Malacca. When Malacca was subjugated by the Portuguese in 1511, its traditions were scattered far and wide and inspired the court culture of smaller successor states like Johor-Riau, Kelantan and Aceh. So modern Indonesian, too, basks in the

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glow of prestige which adheres to the language from centuries of use in indigenous administration and court arts.

Malay has always been a language of trade and business. The medieval city-state of Malacca, like the renaissance European city-states of Genoa and Venice, and the modern city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore, thrived on trade. The Malay language came to be used for commerce throughout the Indonesian archipelago, so much so that a special, "boiled-down" variant of the language developed which became known as market Malay or bazaar Malay (*Bahasa Melayu Pasar*). Thanks to this tradition, Malay seems to have adapted vigorously to the challenges of modern commerce. In modern Indonesia, the Indonesian language is easily the dominant language of business, especially at the middle and upper levels (local languages dominate in the rural market economy).

When Islam came to the Indonesian region it spread along trade routes and through coastal trading cities where Malay was used. Malay became linked with Islam and played a crucial role in the rise of Islam as the majority faith in the archipelago. Malay was also the language most widely used in the propagation of Christianity, especially in the now largely inhabited by Christian community areas of East Indonesia. In other words, Islam and Christianity helped spread Malay, and Malay helped spread Islam and Christianity. Established religion has an important place in the Republic of Indonesia - there is even a powerful Department of Religion in the central government. Today the Indonesian language is associated with the "modern" religions of Islam and Christianity, and participates in their social prestige and spiritual power.

From the 17th century on, as the islands of Indonesia fell little by little under the control of the Netherlands, Malay came to be used by the European rulers as the most important medium of communication between government and people. Unlike in many other colonies, in Indonesia the language of the European rulers was not forced upon the local populace. Only small elite of indigenous Indonesians ever learned the Dutch language, and consequently Malay, although still very much a minority language in the Indies, was crucial to the smooth administration of the colony. When the Japanese invaded the Netherlands East Indies in 1942 one of their first measures was to prohibit use of the Dutch language. Since very few Indonesians knew Japanese, Malay (now called Indonesian) had to be used in administration even more widely and intensively than it had been under the Dutch. With this

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track record of use in modern administration Indonesian easily and naturally assumed the mantle of official language and language of government under the Republic. Today all government business: legislation, administration, justice, defence, education, national development and so on is conducted wholly in Indonesian.

A good deal of the modern prestige of Indonesian comes from its role in the country's nationalist movement. But in the early years of the century Malay was not an obvious or unanimous choice as the language of indigenous cultural and political revival in the then Netherlands East Indies. At first, nationalism was as much expressed through Dutch, or through the languages of Indonesia's local cultures, as it was through Malay. It was only with the famous Young People's Vow (*Sumpah Pemuda*) formulated at the Congress of Young People in 1928 that the very name "Indonesian" was formally adopted and the language declared the pre-eminent language of Indonesia as well as the language of national unity. When the Indonesian nationalists emerged from the shadow of the Japanese occupation in 1945 to declare an independent republic, the Proclamation of Independence was uttered in Indonesian. Both the state philosophy of Pancasila and the Constitution were framed in Indonesian. The subsequent victory of the Republic in the Revolution (1945-1949) consolidated the prestige of the language and gave its development unstoppable momentum.

### **III. THE FUNCTION OF INDONESIAN LANGUAGE TODAY**

Since the proclamation of Indonesia's independence, Bahasa Indonesia has been used as a means official communication in the community. Despite of the diversity of regional languages, Bahasa Indonesia is now widely used in every aspects of life. Indonesians are overwhelmingly bilingual; indeed many people have a good command of three of four languages. In infancy most people learn at least one of the country's many local languages and later learn Indonesian at school or in the streets of cities or from television and radio. It is not clear how many people learn Indonesian in infancy as their very first language, but at the dawn of the 21st. century it cannot be less than 20% of the country's population, and this percentage is steadily rising. Indonesian tends to be most used in the modern environment of major urban areas. The local languages tend to dominate in rural areas and small towns, and are most used in homes, fields and markets.

Bahasa Indonesia is the medium of instruction in educational institutions at all levels throughout the country. In the early years of the Republic, local languages continued to be used in some places as the medium of instruction in the first years of primary school but this practice has now almost entirely disappeared. In schools and universities most textbooks are in Indonesian, but at the tertiary level, especially in highly specialized courses and at the advanced level of study, textbooks in English are also widely used.

Although there are several newspapers in English and Chinese, their circulation is relatively small and Bahasa Indonesia is by far the dominant language in the country's print media. Indonesia's domestic Palapa satellite system brings television to almost every corner of the country. With the exception of some newscasts in English and a small number of cultural programs in regional languages, domestic programs are entirely in Indonesian, and almost all programs of foreign origin are dubbed into Indonesian or have Indonesian-language sub-titles. Similarly Indonesian dominates in the very diverse and vibrant domain of radio broadcasting, although there are a small number of specialist programs in English and in some local languages.

In politics, administration and the judiciary Bahasa Indonesia is the sole official language. It is the language of legislation, political campaigning, national and local government, court proceedings and the military. In some instances, judges may refer to old statutes and court records in Dutch to help them reach their decisions. In some rural areas of the country, for example in the hinterland of Java and in the mountains of West Papua, local languages may also play a role in administration and in the propagation of government policies.

Indonesia hosts a sparkling variety of traditional verbal arts (poetry, historical narratives, romances, drama etc.) which are expressed in local languages, but modern genres are expressed mainly through Bahasa Indonesia. Modern literature (novels, short stories, stage plays, free-form poetry etc.) has developed since the late years of the 19th. century and has produced such internationally recognized figures as novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, dramatist W.S. Rendra, poet Chairil Anwar and cinematographer Garin Nugroho. Indonesian is also the language of the nation's breezy, inventive popular arts: TV melodrama and comedy, pop novels, popular songs, cartoons and comics.

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Bahasa Indonesia also dominates as the language of modern business. Needless to say, in enterprises that involve expatriate staff or international transactions English, Japanese, Chinese and other foreign languages are widely used often side-by-side with Indonesian. At the rural areas, in the country's many thousands of village markets, Bahasa Indonesia has only a marginal role to play and the local languages still prevail.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

National language is used for political, cultural, and social functions. Official language is used for government business, such as national court, parliament, or business. Malay language was developed and standardized as national and official language, known as Bahasa Indonesia. Bahasa Indonesia was chosen as national and official language to establish national identity and to unite Indonesia's people in order to achieve Indonesia's independence. Nowadays, Bahasa Indonesia is used in every aspects of our life, such as: in education, mass media, politics, administration, or arts.

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