

## LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM: INDONESIAN CASE

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**Abstract:** *The discourse of language, culture and imperialism are closely intertwined. In this paper I will describe cultural imperialism through language by taking Indonesian case as an example. This essay will develop two main arguments. Firstly, it sets forth that language is a medium through which cultural imperialism could take place, since language is an important and even fundamental aspect of culture. The cultural imperialism through language starts to occur when a certain foreign language is arbitrarily and irresponsibly used in correspondence and combination with local languages within formal and colloquial contexts. Secondly, using Frantz Fanon's theory as described in his *Black Skin White Masks*, Indonesian case of use of mixed language of Bahasa and English in any medium is an obvious example of how this language imperialism in contemporary setting arises.*

**Keywords:** language, identity, culture, imperialism, Indonesia

### INTRODUCTION

Let me start this short paper by presenting two factual examples. In a mailing-group of Indonesians living in Singapore, a member of group posted a thread under title: *penggunaan bahasa Indonesia di milis ini* (the use of Indonesian language in this mailing-group).<sup>1</sup> In the thread, the writer shared his concern as an Indonesian to conserve *Bahasa* and use it appropriately in any medium and occasions, in this case, in the mailing-group. To be more precise, he protested against the use of mixed language of *Bahasa* and English and the irregularity of the use of language in the mailing-group. Furthermore, the sender also related this phenomenon to the issue of nationalism. More or less, he pointed out that one of the most heated topics in the mailing-group is criticism toward Indonesian government that is often condemned as not sufficiently nationalistic; however, the mailing-group's members are not more nationalistic compared to Indonesian officers in terms of using language.

Shortly after the thread was circulated, rather than getting support from other members, this sympathetic invitation was resulted in blame. Most of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/indo-sing/message/160103>

responses opposed the call. However, two most striking commentaries will be quoted here. The first response of the thread was cynical yet true, criticizing the sender that instead of inviting people to use proper *Bahasa* in the mailing-group, he was already trapped in the phenomenon that he himself criticized. This is true, since in the opening of his e-mail, the thread starter wrote: *Salam kenal, saya newbie di sini...* (Hi everybody, I am new comer here...). This response criticized the use of “newbie”, since it is neither an Indonesian word nor a proper English word.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, another response was also not less cynical. The next respondent wrote: *“sorry only one note, yah makasih buat masukan nya, but tujuan milis ada sharing informasi buat saya bukan belajar EYD, no offense, saya prefer yg free and easy.. itulah knp ada milis indosing dan saya suka gaya milis ini skrg...”* (sorry only one note [already in English], yeah thanks for the opinion, but [already in English] the aim of mailing-group is for sharing for me not for studying EYD,<sup>3</sup> no offense [already in English], I prefer the free and easy one... That is the reason this mailing-group is founded and I like its current language style).<sup>4</sup>

The second example showed different scenario. Earlier this year, Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono delivered a speech in the opening trade of Indonesia Stock Exchange. Yudhoyono’s address has attracted wide criticism as he frequently mixed English phrases and *Bahasa*. As *Tempo* daily newspaper reported, the head of state used English terms and phrases as much as twenty four in the first thirty minutes of his speech<sup>5</sup>. In total, the duration of the president’s address was more than an hour. According to media report, this was not the first time Mr Yudhoyono delivered his linguistically-mixed speech. Almost in every occasion he applied this pattern. Unavoidably, this has sparked controversy among journalists, politician and linguists. Journalists tended to blame the address. This can be seen from the way media coverage was expressed.<sup>6</sup> However,

<sup>2</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/indo-sing/message/160105>.

<sup>3</sup> EYD stands for *Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan*, refers to Indonesian formal pronunciation system. In the past, instead of “u”, Indonesians used “oe”; “j” for “y”, “tj” for “c”. When new pronunciation system was introduced, all kind of use of *Bahasa* have to refer to EYD.

<sup>4</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/indo-sing/message/160114>.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.tempointeraktif.com/hg/politik/2011/01/03/brk.20110103\\_303364.id.html](http://www.tempointeraktif.com/hg/politik/2011/01/03/brk.20110103_303364.id.html).

<sup>6</sup>See for example, <http://us.detiknews.com/read/2011/01/03/154324/1538244/10/pidato-presiden-yang-penuh-taburan-istilah-bahasa-inggris?nd992203605>, accessed on 20 April 2011.

politicians show diverse responses. The chairman of People's Consultative Assembly, Taufik Kiemas, perceived the address in a positive way, while vice chairman of House of Representative, Pramono Anung, implicitly criticized the president by asserting that as a state representation, president should use national language very effectively.<sup>7</sup> Similar to Anung, from a linguist point of view, Remy Silado, a reputable writer, also condemned the president. For him, as long as the Indonesian expression for the phrase could be found, English should be avoided.<sup>8</sup>

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

These two examples represent two different groups and situations. The first occurrence took place abroad, while the second occurred on Indonesian soil. The scenario also diametrically distinctive: the first was colloquial and the second was formal. However, both reflected a shared phenomenon. They are obvious indications of identity crisis among Indonesians, although those speakers and users may not consciously see this as a serious problem, on the one hand. On the other hand, both events could also be presented as an indication of low level of pride with indigenous culture. It is important to underline that the use of mix language of *Bahasa* and English is now becoming very popular trend in major cities in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> Although it is now becoming common, it is not merely a matter of convenience ("free and easy") as one of the mailing-group's participants claimed above. Rather, it is a reflection of colonized mind. In an academic context, Syed Hussein Alatas portrayed similar situation as "captive mind" which refers to "uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source."<sup>10</sup> If we apply this theory to the field of language, the "captive mind" can be manifested in the irregular, careless and arbitrary use of foreign language (in this case English) that incorporated with local language without any concerns of the effects and awareness that such an action can seriously endanger not only a certain

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<sup>7</sup><http://us.detiknews.com/read/2011/01/04/115909/1538748/10/pram-presiden-wajib-gunakan-bahasa-indonesia-resmi?nd992203605>, accessed on 20 April 2011

<sup>8</sup><http://news.okezone.com/read/2011/01/04/337/410079/sby-diminta-tak-gunakan-istilah-inggris-dalam-pidato>, accessed on 20 April 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Saut Situmorang, "Indonesia-Inggris," <http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/25935-indonesia-inggris>, accessed on 23 April 2011.

<sup>10</sup> S. H. Alatas, "The Captive Mind and Creative Development," *International Social Science Journal* (1974), 26: 4, 691-700.

indigenous language, but the cultural system of local societies. Since it is becoming daily practice in Indonesia, linguists have been very alerted by this phenomenon and led them to be engaged in attempts to cope this situation, for example, through publication.<sup>11</sup>

However, there has not been any clarity as to what factors leading to this phenomenon. One common answer is that English is perceived as symbol of pride and prestige among certain Indonesian circles. Saut Situmorang, a leading Indonesian literary figure believes that one of the reasons of using mixed language has to do with prestige.<sup>12</sup> This means that the more people present English phrases or expressions in their conversations, speech, address, talk or writing, the more they feel respected and educated. It is also strikingly important to highlight that even among academia the situation is also equally common. In other words, speaking mixed language of English and *Bahasa* is a medium for Indonesians to show their social and intellectual class. From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon is one contemporary manifestation of what Frantz Fanon satirically described in his *Black Skin White Masks*, an early work on post-colonialism that discussed the situation of split personality common among Black people as heritage of French colonial power. Fannon interestingly uncovered, despite the fact that the Negroes are black, they subscribe to the way white people behave.

Moreover, Fannon identified language as one of mediums where split personality starts to emerge. He assert: "A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language... there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language."<sup>13</sup> The possession of a language implicitly forces people to embrace basic values and cultures entail in the language. As a result, speaking certain languages in unreasonably and irresponsibly manners will potentially lead to a kind of split personality. Furthermore, I am inclined to assert that what Fannon identified as power of language could actually refer to positive as well as negative meanings. However, scrutinizing the context in which his assertion was situated, Fannon

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<sup>11</sup> As an example see Alif Danya Munsyi, *Bahasa Menunjukkan Bangsa* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gremedia, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> See footnote number 9.

<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), p. 18.

tended to refer power of language in a pejorative way. Language, especially foreign language, has the power to ruin the originality of identities, since through language the cultural imperialism begins. The close relationship of language and ethnic as well as cultural identity cannot also be denied. Schlee pointed out: "The language we speak is believed to influence our thinking in a subtle way, giving language a much deeper cultural implication than that of a mere boundary marker between different cultural ethnic units."<sup>14</sup> Again, at this point we can see how language is a very fundamental aspect of culture and how language and culture are intertwined.

In this relation, if we take Fannon's formulation into account, Indonesian case of using mixed language would exactly fit this theoretical formulation. Therefore, I have no doubt to describe this phenomenon as language imperialism that basically constitutes only the tip of an iceberg of cultural imperialism. Theoretically speaking, cultural imperialism is often associated with the territorial colonialism. Although what so-called territorial imperialism has long been over, it still leaves several serious problems, one of them is related to the cultures.

Edward Said, for example, saw that close affinity by arguing that colonial rules did not only impose their domination on economic and political affairs but also in cultural aspect. In Said's theoretical framework, culture can be understood in two meanings: first, it can include "practices like the art of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms..." Secondly, culture can also mean "a concept that includes a refining and elevating element."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, E. B. Taylor, a renowned British anthropologist, as quoted by John Tomlinson defined culture as: "complex whole which include knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society."<sup>16</sup>

Implicitly, those two definitions of culture place language in a very fundamental position. In Said's word, culture is described, among others, as practice of communication that places language as its major medium. This implies

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<sup>14</sup> G. Schlee. "Language and Ethnicity," *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (New York and Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), p. 8287

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Book, 1993), p. xii-xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by John Tomlinson, in *Cultural Imperialism: A Cultural Introduction* (London:

that through the colonial power; cultural, including lingual, imperialism became possible. Similarly, E.B. Taylor listed several things, including knowledge that is impossible to achieve without the involvement of language. My interpretation of Taylor's definition of culture is that language becomes the basic part of culture and the formation of culture cannot leave the role of language. Theoretically, the discourse of cultural imperialism is subject to heated debate. However, John Tomlinson described four ways in which cultural imperialism is discussed, namely, "cultural imperialism as media imperialism," "cultural imperialism as a discourse of nationality," "cultural imperialism as the critique of global capitalism," and "cultural imperialism as the critique of modernity."<sup>17</sup> Two first contexts are particularly relevant for our current context. Language as a manifestation of cultural imperialism cannot be separated from the role that media play. In Indonesian context, according to Alif Danya Munsyi, media has contributed a great part in the employment of irregular mixed language of *Bahasa* and English.<sup>18</sup> The implication of the use of those weird phrases and expressions in formal and non-formal Indonesian writings has gradually paved the way for public's assumption that those languages has replaced the *Bahasa*, and its further consequence is that the indigenous phrases will certainly disappear.

If for the sake of clarity we have to take a definition, one important definition of cultural imperialism is that of J Tunstall's definition. According to him, "the cultural imperialism thesis claims that authentic, traditional and local culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States."<sup>19</sup> Tunstall's definition is not an exaggeration. Cultural imperialism has endangered indigenous cultures by imposing foreign value, one of the forms is English language. Referring back to Indonesian case, the arbitrary and irresponsible incorporation of English into

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<sup>17</sup> John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Cultural Introduction* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), p. 19-28

<sup>18</sup> See Alif Danya Munsyi, *Bahasa Menunjukkan Bangsa*, p. 19. Munsyi give a number of examples of Indonesian newspapers that use English phrases and expressions without any translation into *Bahasa*, while in fact the newspaper is in *Bahasa*.

<sup>19</sup> See John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Cultural Introduction* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1991), p. 8.

colloquial, formal and academic fields has gradually created distance Indonesian young generation from the authenticity of their language.

Having said all this does not mean that I particularly oppose the assimilation of languages and cultures. As long as human history is concerned, assimilation, contact and interaction between cultures and languages are unavoidable. However, when the interactions involved sort of domination, marginalization and stereotyping of certain participating cultures and languages, at that point cultural imperialism occur; and as has been proven, language is a vulnerable field of imperialism.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, in this paper I argue that although political imperialism no longer exist in our contemporary world, another form of imperialism is taking place, namely cultural imperialism through the medium of language, especially English. Indonesian experience can be pointed as a case in point. It is true that the use of English is inevitable in nowadays global world. However, the way Indonesians use English in colloquial context is not part of global need, but is more motivated by the feeling that using English is part of social class. Consequently, the use of mix language of English and Indonesian language or *Bahasa* is becoming more irresponsibly and in the long run it is able to potentially undermine the originality of *Bahasa* as well as the pride of Indonesians, especially those young people in using their own national language. More importantly, using English irresponsibly in colloquial context is a clear indication of captive mind and culturally colonized mentality.

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