

# THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF INDONESIA \*

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Before I proceed to the main subject, I would like to say a few words about Indonesia, geographically, ethnologically and culturally. These aspects, to my mind, are inseparably linked to the development of our language.

Indonesia is comprised of so many islands covering a total of about 1,998,762 square miles. There are vast stretches of water between these islands so that communication is rather a big problem. The archipelago is inhabited by about 120 million people. It is understandable therefore that as there are varied ethnic groups so are there varied habits, ways, customs and traditions. Territory-wise, Indonesia is almost seven times bigger than the Philippines. In fact it is considered as the world's largest archipelago, stretching from east to west for about 3,300 miles and north to south for approximately 1,300 miles.

While Indonesia is proud of its indigenous culture, it has not escaped influences of outside culture. Students of history only well know that my country had been subjected to the inroads of such foreign influences, first the Hinduism-Budhism, next Islam, and then Christianity. All of these brought about tremendous impact on the country's culture and left behind lasting impressions that are still noticeable even today. I can safely say that even our language has also been influenced. I understand that in the Philippines there are about 90 different dialects. In Indonesia we have as many as 250 different languages and dialects.

With this as background, perhaps there are people who may still have their doubts as to how we Indonesians have finally evolved a national language of our own. I shall now turn on the main topic.

## THE BAHASA INDONESIA

The Bahasa Indonesia is not a tailored language. Neither was it existing as any other language in the world. But it has a part of a living pattern, adopted, developed and is still developing and growing for a national purpose.

The Bahasa Indonesia is closely allied to Malay, the two languages stemming from a common ancestor, another descendant of which is still spoken in the Riau Islands and in the coastal areas of Northern Sumatra. Another of these variants, called the "Pasar Malay" was also used in port towns and became the **lingua franca** for commerce in the Indonesia-Malay region for some centuries.

With the presence of this **lingua franca**, as an accepted and understood medium of communication, it was not difficult a matter to finally evolve a national language. Indeed it was not so difficult for people to learn a new language within the same family pattern.

Our knowledge of the Malay language dates back to the 17th century A.D. based on the discovery of some old Malay inscriptions from that period in some parts of Indonesia. The

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\* Lecture given before the Association of Professors and Teachers of Filipino in 1972. Reprinted from *Indonesia*, published by the Indonesian Embassy, Manila.

Kedukan Bukit" inscription found in Palembang, South Sumatra shows the characteristics of Old Malay. Another plaque found in Atjeh, North Sumatra dating back around the year 1380 also bore what is now recognized as the oldest preserved specimen of a Malay poem.

In view of the fact that there are more than 250 dialects in Indonesia, it is expected that doubts are to come up in the way the Bahasa Indonesia became a national language.

One leading factor which contributed to the fast spread of the **lingua franca** was that the kingdom of Sriwidjaja flourished in the 7th to the 13th centuries which ruled over regions as wide as the present Southeast Asia. The coastal areas especially became the landing places for merchants' ships and Malacca was the trading port for hundreds of years in the region. When the first Europeans came to Indonesia they found that Malay was already in wide use as far as the easternmost part of Indonesia. Malay being more flexible, readily became the medium of communication.

When the Dutch first came to Indonesia they had to employ Malay in schools as well as in church because they thought it then to be more practical and effective. At the second half of the 19th century, however, the use of the Dutch language was thought to be practical and the shortest vehicle for the Indonesians to learn and to get in touch with western civilization.

During the first decade of the 20th century, nationalism and the revolutionary enthusiasm surged, and this could be accounted for the fact that there was one language being used. Through this vehicle that was common to both the national leaders and the masses, ideas of nationalism and democracy ran faster. In midstream, the Dutch tried to stop this development. In order to mutilate the unifying effect of a rapidly evolving Bahasa Indonesia, the Dutch tried to foster re-

gionalism and sow the seeds of separatism, prejudice and misunderstanding among the people by the colonial policy of divide and rule, and keep the Dutch language as the supreme medium to assert their power and authority. Hence, the policy of the Dutch was to make use of the language as a weapon for further domination. The Dutch were able to make use of two consecutive methods in trying to break up the national unity that was being fostered by a national language. First, the imposition of Dutch to divide the educated elite from the masses; and second, teaching of vernaculars to divide and alienate the many regions from each other.

Soon the Indonesian youth formed political and cultural organizations. The primary and intermediate objective was to attain national independence. For this purpose more and more contacts have to be made with the people. They turned to the use of Malay and so did the big political parties then in existence. Thus, the Malay language found use by even the newspapers and journals.

Guided by the desire to accelerate the national independence movement through a common medium, youth leaders from all parts of Indonesia met in Djakarta on October 28, 1928 for the Second Youth Congress. There they recognized as a principal factor in the nationalist movement the adoption and development of a national language. On that historic Congress, the youth formulated a formal pledge now called the SUMPAH PEMUDA or Youth Pledge as follows:

WE LIVE IN ONE COUNTRY—  
INDONESIA

WE LIVE IN ONE NATION—  
THE INDONESIAN NATION

WE SPEAK ONE LANGUAGE—  
THE INDONESIAN LANGUAGE."

The above declaration was more than a formal declaration of what in fact had been a strong working force in the Indonesian society. The rest was left for them and it remained their duty to cultivate and develop that national language in order that it could serve as modern language for the development of a national culture.

Although the approaches of the national leaders were varied, there was unanimous agreement on one particular point. There was published a cultural periodical the purpose of which was to promote the Indonesian language and literature.

In 1938, the first Congress on the Indonesian language was held in Djakarta. It discussed, among others, the ways to find new terms and spelling to form a better grammar.

The coming of the Japanese in 1942 contributed in no small measure to the development of the Indonesian language. In their desire to boost their war efforts, the Japanese occupational forces prohibited the use of the Dutch language. They adopted a double policy of fostering both the Japanese and Indonesian languages. But because the Japanese language was new and difficult for the Indonesian leaders and likewise the people, they found an excellent opportunity to develop the Indonesian language.

The proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945 finally cleared the way for the Bahasa Indonesia to become the national language. This is embodied in the 1945 Constitution. There were still some minor obstacles to the full adoption of the Bahasa Indonesia. There were those who reasoned out that the Bahasa Indonesia would never be able to give equivalent words for technical terms especially those of the sciences. This was however considered a very flimsy argument since technical terms are the easiest to adopt in any language and that any language can

absorb the name of any new object that appears on the cultural horizon. The so-called purists would have none of borrowing and would rather resort to a roundabout combination of local words. They were unwilling and even refused to accept the reality that even 50% of the English language is borrowed from Greek, Latin, Italian, French and German, etc. There were also those who protested too much and preached in effect that language should not be legislated. They would rather have the sway of colonially-imposed language than have a national language adopted firmly by the people.

Having been adopted as the national language, the Bahasa Indonesia became the official language. It also became the medium of instruction in all school levels, as it is even to these days.

Development of the Bahasa was the more enhanced with the use of the language by the newspapers. Difficulties of day-to-day reporting by the press forced the journalists and writers to coin new words necessary which finally found acceptance by the reading public. Massive translations of foreign materials have been going on so that the Indonesian people carry over the achievements of the world, whether these achievements are of English, American, Italian, French, Chinese, Japanese, or even Russian, origin.

### Language Institute

To assure the full development of the Bahasa Indonesia, the government has created the Panitia Bahasa Indonesia or Institute for the Indonesian Language. It is under the Department of Education and Culture. Perhaps it is similar to your Institute of National Language. The Institute has the main duty of compiling Indonesian equivalents to certain terms, create

new words or terminologies and make final selection of new words as may be suggested. The spread of the new terms is channeled through other media, such as the press, radio, government offices, schools, etc. The Institute has also the job to compile an authoritative dictionary and publishes a linguistic journal and the translations of important foreign words into Indonesia.

### Developing the Language

In order to enrich the vocabulary and to meet modern requirements, the language institute has adopted certain methods to be followed:

Firstly, if a new term has to be used and there are none available in the Bahasa Indonesia, the first step is to look into the regional languages or dialects.

Secondly, if there are no appropriate terms in the regional languages then we have to adopt the new terms as used and understood in the modern way.

In evolving new words or terms used by foreign languages for the Bahasa Indonesia, the following steps are taken:

a) by translating such terms in our own language in one or two words coined together.

b) by temporarily retaining the foreign word and incorporating them as part of the Bahasa if such foreign word is internationally used in their pure form and meaning, and

c) by adopting the foreign word but modifying the structure and spelling of such words based on sound to suit our common taste and facility of the Indonesian tongue. This can be illustrated by such words as intervention to **intervensi**; television to **televisi**, etc.

I have discussed in brief the growth and development of the Bahasa Indonesia. It is a continuing process because language grows and goes with life itself. Fortunately, language is no longer a problem for my country. I am positive that it will also be so in the Philippines in the immediate future.

I say this because the different linguistic groups in Southeast Asia belong to one common group, the so-called Malayo-Polynesian or the Austronesian family. It is not surprising to note that there are many similarities not only in syntax but also in terminology and morphology in the many dialects spoken here and in Indonesia.

Against this background, I am sure that you can also evolve a national language of your own, considering the fact that you have less number of dialects than in my country, and a more compact territory. This of course can be accelerated by the adequate system of communication, transportation and mass media facilities than were existing in my country twenty years ago.

Certainly the need for a national language is a compelling one. As long as textbooks, newspapers, films, magazines, the medium of instruction, political debates and entertainment are in a foreign language, more so in the language of our former colonizers, we would remain captive to their prejudices and distortions about our selves. The virtual dictatorship that a foreign language enjoys in any one nation is oftentimes the key to frustrations in that national culture as well as to the subversion of the national democracy. Because the national language is a decisive instrument to national progress, a domineering foreign language operates as a medium for fostering colonial mentality and at worst pro-

paganda tool that subverts the national goals and ideals. The thought process of the native peoples become conditioned by foreign bias if a national language is subordinated to a foreign language.

The national language that we have developed and will continue to nourish came out from the welter of chaos and confusion left behind by our colonizers. This unity of language has been one of the most cohesive factors in bringing about a sense of unity among the Indonesian people, so that it rightfully can be called a nation. The fact that we have developed a national language out of the more than 250

dialects, more than illustrates the living reality of the motto of our Republic which is BHINNEKA TUNGGAL IKA or UNITY IN DIVERSITY.

As what your national hero Dr. Jose Rizal once said, "a nation without its own language is like a body without a soul."

Prof. Dr. Harry Spitzbardt, a West German linguist who visited Indonesia recently said he had not the slightest doubt that standardization of Bahasa Indonesia would stimulate the development of Indonesia's already high social and culture heritage.