

Chapter 2

The Language Situation in Brunei Darussalam

James McLellan, Noor Azam Haji-Othman and David Deterding

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an introduction to Brunei Darussalam for readers, giving essential background information for the other chapters in this volume and also offering a valuable overview of language issues in the country.

Negara Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) is a small Malay Islamic sultanate on the northern coast of the island of Borneo. Apart from the South China Sea to the north, it is entirely surrounded by the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. It is divided into two parts, with the rural district of Temburong separated from the three other districts by the Malaysian district of Limbang. The capital, Bandar Seri Begawan (often referred to as BSB), is located in the smallest district, Brunei-Muara, and most of the rest of the population live in towns along the coast, especially Kuala Belait and Seria in Belait District and Tutong in Tutong District (see Fig. 2.1).

Brunei has a population of about 429,000 (World Population Review 2015), the majority of whom are Malays, though there are also a substantial number of minority groups such as the Kedayan, Dusun and Murut (Lun Bawang), and also about 40,000 Chinese. In addition, there are many expatriate workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Bangladesh, as well as from more distant places such as the UK, USA, and Australia.

Brunei is ruled by a Sultan. His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, the 29th Sultan, has reigned since 1968, and the national philosophy and ideology is called *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB, ‘Malay Islamic Monarchy’) which incorporates the

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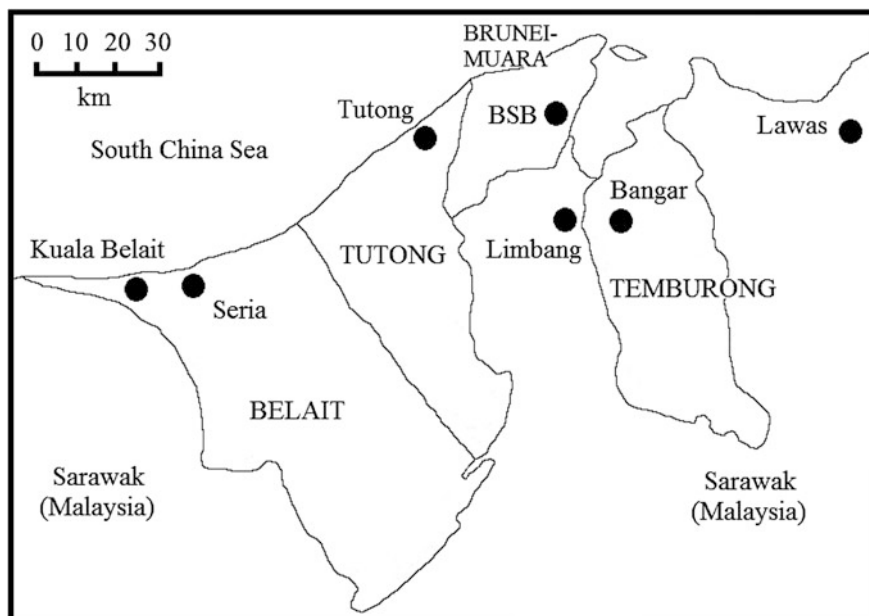


Fig. 2.1 Map of Brunei, showing the four districts and main towns

three core elements central to the identity of Bruneians: the Malay language and culture, respect for the Islamic religion, and loyalty towards His Majesty the Sultan.

Formerly the centre of a large maritime empire, Brunei became a British protectorate in 1888. The previous Sultan, Omar Ali Saifuddin III, oversaw the drafting of a constitution, signed in 1959 (Hussainmiya 1995), which eventually led to the restoration of full independence in 1984, when Brunei became a member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (now known as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation).

Oil and natural gas exports have been the major exports and the main source of Brunei's development and wealth since the mid-20th century. Earnings from these primary products have brought about rapid improvements in the infrastructure of Brunei and the standard of living of its residents, and the development of these industries has contributed to Brunei's global connectedness as well as to an influx of foreign labour.

In this chapter, we offer an overview of the language situation in Brunei. We include a brief look at the history of language usage in Brunei, a description of the range of languages that are spoken, an overview of the domains of usage of Brunei Malay, Standard Malay and English, and a discussion of the status of some of the threatened minority languages. In addition, we consider the education system, including the history of separate English and Malay streams, the rationale for the adoption of the *Dwibahasa* ('Two Language') system in 1985, and the introduction

of SPN21 (*Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad Ke-21*, ‘National Education System for the 21st Century’) in 2009.

2.2 History of Language Use

As noted above, *Melayu* (Malay) is one of the three core elements of Bruneian identity, referring to both Malay ethnicity and the Malay language. Traditionally, the majority of the Bruneian people spoke Brunei Malay, a conservative variety of Malay that is substantially different from Standard Malay, which is the official language of the country and the lingua franca of Malaysia (Clynes and Deterding 2011). Officially, seven subgroups of indigenous people are recognised in Brunei, each with their own distinctive language: Brunei Malay, Kedayan, Dusun, Bisaya, Tutong, Belait and Murut. In addition, there are a number of Iban people, especially in the enclave of Temburong, who are not recognised as natives of Brunei. They constitute the largest group in neighbouring Sarawak (Asmah 1983, p. 483; Coluzzi 2011), and most of the Iban people in Brunei migrated into the country from elsewhere in Borneo in the past century.

The use of English in Brunei gradually expanded during the period of the British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 (Gunn 1997; Hussainmiya 2005), especially after the introduction of the bilingual system of education in 1985 (Jones 1996; see also Chap. 16, by Noor Azam, and Chap. 17, by Gary Jones, in this volume). Brunei Malay remains the most widely occurring lingua franca, but English is frequently spoken, especially among the educated elite (Ozóg 1996), and there is substantial code-switching even in the most formal of contexts (McLellan 2010). Some of the minority languages are now no longer used, and others are threatened with extinction, something we will discuss further in the next section.

2.3 Range of Languages Spoken

Martin and Poedjosoedarmo (1996) provide an overview of the languages spoken in Brunei, and the situation is similar today. Brunei Malay (Clynes 2014) is spoken by about two thirds of the population, many of whom traditionally lived in *Kampung Air*, the Water Village that is at the heart of the capital of Brunei. Brunei Malay is closely related to Kedayan (Soderberg 2014), the language of the land-dwellers who traditionally planted rice and tended orchards, whilst the Brunei Malays were seafarers and fisherfolk. Nothofer (1991) reports that the level of lexical cognates between Brunei Malay and Kedayan is 94 %, while that between Brunei Malay and Standard Malay is 84 %.

Of the other Austronesian minority languages, Dusun and Bisaya are similar, some people describing them as varieties of the same language (Nothofer 1991), and Belait and Tutong are also closely related (Martin and Poedjosoedarmo 1996).

The other language recognised as an indigenous language of Brunei, Murut, is mostly spoken in the Temburong District. It is also known as Lun Bawang, and it is a major indigenous language in Lawas District in neighbouring Sarawak (Martin 1996). Lun Bawang is also closely related to the Kelabit language that is spoken by people living in Bario in the mountains south of Brunei and close to the border of Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo.

Iban is spoken by a few thousand people especially in Temburong, but also in Tutong and Belait districts. It is quite closely related to Malay (Asmah 1983, p. 483; Nothofer 1991, pp. 157–158), and serves as a lingua franca in rural upriver areas of the Belait, Tutong and Temburong Rivers where Iban people live alongside other ethnic groups.

The Chinese residents of Brunei traditionally spoke a range of dialects, including Hokkien, Cantonese and Hakka, but most of the young people now speak Mandarin, as well as Malay and English, and nowadays they may have only a limited knowledge of their heritage languages (Dunseath 1996).

There are a large number of foreign workers from the Philippines, so Tagalog is also heard. Many are domestic helpers (*amahs*), but there are also about 200 teachers from the Philippines in Brunei schools, many of them teaching English. Some foreign workers come from Bangladesh, southern India, Pakistan and Thailand, so Bangla, Tamil, Urdu and Thai are also spoken.

English is widely spoken, both by educated Bruneians and also by the large expatriate community of teachers, university lecturers, and professionals working in the industry. In the past, there have been generous scholarships for Bruneians to study abroad, both as undergraduates and for postgraduate degrees, in the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, so many well-educated Bruneians have an excellent command of English.

Finally, there is a small community of Penan people, the traditional forest people of Borneo, also considered as non-Brunei indigenous people. They are based in a longhouse in the village of Sukang on the Belait River (Martin and Sercombe 1996; Sercombe 2007) and number less than 50.

2.4 Domains of Use of Malay and English

The domains of use of Standard Malay and Brunei Malay may be described using the concept of diglossia (Ferguson 1959): Standard Malay is the H(igh) variety, as it is used in formal contexts such as government speeches, newspapers, and television broadcasts; Brunei Malay is the L(ow) variety, as it occurs in informal situations, in conversations in the home, family and friendship domains. In fact, although everyone learns Standard Malay in school and all can understand it, almost nobody uses it on a regular basis.

All educated people become proficient in English, as it is the medium of education for most subjects from the primary school onwards. However, many people who do not do well at school may end up with just a rudimentary knowledge of

English. For educated people, especially students and academics at *Universiti Brunei Darussalam* (UBD), the main university in the country, the English spoken is developing its own distinct identity as it is spoken competently and fluently but at the same time contributes to world-wide trends in the global evolution of English (Deterding 2014).

Ožóg (1996, p. 159) observes that, for Bruneians, English is the language of knowledge, but Malay is the language of the soul. In fact it is very common for most well-educated Bruneians to code-switch regularly between English and Malay (McLellan 2005, 2010; McLellan and Noor Azam 2012).

2.5 Minority Languages in Brunei

Of the seven indigenous language which are officially designated ‘dialects’ or varieties of Malay, Brunei Malay is dominant, whilst all the others are threatened to a greater or lesser extent (Noor Azam and Siti Ajeerah, this volume, Chap. 3), partly because they are squeezed out by the domination of Malay and English (Noor Azam 2012). Belait is almost completely extinct, and Tutong is also threatened, though there are now university classes offered in the language by UBD in an effort to preserve it.

Dusun and Bisaya are also severely threatened. Of the minority languages, Kedayan has the largest number of speakers, but extensive intermarriage and the high level of similarity between Kedayan and Brunei Malay has resulted in Kedayan also being under threat.

Coluzzi (2011) reports that Murut is in a healthier state, partly because it receives some support from across the border in Malaysia. And he similarly reports that the survival of Iban is more assured, again because of the large number of Iban speakers in Sarawak, where there is some institutional support for the language, including radio programmes and some newspapers.

2.6 The Education System of Brunei

The Bilingual Education System was introduced in 1985 (Jones 1996), with Malay-medium education for the first three years of primary school, and then a shift to English-medium education for most subjects from the fourth year of primary school onwards. One problem with this system was that children started to learn vocabulary for subjects in Malay and then had to relearn the same vocabulary in English in the fourth year of primary school. In 2009, a new system of education was introduced, called *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* (SPN21, ‘National System of Education for the 21st century’), and from then on mathematics and science have been taught in English from the start of primary school (Jones 2012). This eliminates the sudden switch in medium for these two subjects, though it

remains to be seen if the new system helps improve the overall performance of Brunei children.

The national university, *Universiti Brunei Darussalam* (UBD), was established in 1985 as a bilingual institution, with some programmes in English and others in Malay, and some such as History in a mixture of English and Malay. Although a few programmes such as Malay Language and Malay Literature continue to be taught in Malay-medium, the overwhelming majority of programmes are now English-medium. Originally, programmes in Islamic Studies were mainly in Malay, though Arabic was also offered as a subject and sometimes courses were taught in Arabic. However, in 2007 the *Institut Pengajian Islam Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddin* (IPISHOAS) at UBD separated to become *Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali* (UNISSA), Brunei's second national university. There is also a university dedicated to training Islamic teachers, *Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan* (KUPU-SB), from which about 230 students obtain a degree or diploma each year.

There has recently been considerable expansion and development in technical and vocational education. This is driven by concerns over the employability of school leavers, by the need to replace foreign skilled workers with skilled and qualified Bruneians, and by a desire on the part of educational planners to supplant traditional notions of the superiority of so-called academic over technical subjects and qualifications. The *Institut Teknologi Brunei* (ITB) offers English-medium degree-level programmes in fields such as Computer Science and Electrical and Electronic Engineering; other secondary and tertiary-level technical and vocational providers are under the collective Institute of Brunei Technical Education and use both English and Malay as mediums of education.

2.7 Language Use in Schools and Society

There is a substantial linguistic divide in Brunei, between those who attend good schools and become proficient in English and those who go to less fashionable schools and only develop a rudimentary knowledge of English (Deterding and Salbrina 2013, p. 19). In fact, Wood et al. (2011) have shown that pupils in a good secondary school in the capital have a reasonable command of English in year 3 and then they improve by year 5, while similar students in a rural school in Temburong District have much poorer English in year 3 and show little or no improvement at all by year 5. A popular perception, yet to be fully supported or challenged by research, is that the private schools, including Chinese schools, mission schools and international schools, achieve better results in both English Language and English-medium subjects than most government schools.

Although well-educated Bruneians are all proficient in English, Brunei Malay continues to be the language of choice in society, often exhibiting substantial code-switching with English. And even on the UBD campus, Brunei Malay is

generally the lingua franca among students and also among most local staff, even though nearly all students and staff are highly competent in English.

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