
Translation in 21st Century Singapore: The Case of Malay-English Translation

Lim Beng Soon
National Institute of Education Singapore

Abstract

This paper discusses the current situations and conditions in Singapore which influence the development of translation in Singapore.

This paper is an attempt to put into perspective the purpose, aims and direction of translation in 21st Century Singapore. I shall not be presumptuous and claim that I have encapsulated the direction and path of translation in Singapore for the next century. However I will attempt to explain how and why current situations and conditions idiosyncratic to Singapore today would probably influence the development of translation in this unique city state.

It might be interesting to reflect whether or not the need for translation would indeed be pressing in Singapore of the future. It is clear to a first time visitor to Singapore that Singaporeans are by and large bilingual. In fact, it may be sagely predicted that Singaporeans will continue to have a better command of languages ranging from English to Malay as shown in the rise of both single language literacy and multi-language literacy in the census of population 2000. The earnest pursuit of constantly promoting the use of Mandarin and also other languages amongst the school going population by Singapore's Ministry of Education has significantly changed the linguistic landscape of Singapore in the last 30 years. The country already has 4 official languages (i.e. English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil). Except English, which cut across ethnic boundaries, the other 3 languages are already entrenched in their respective ethnic groups, namely Mandarin by the Chinese, Malay by the Malays and Tamil by the Tamil Indians. The language that has the single biggest impact on Singaporeans at present is English and "English has emerged as the lingua franca of the Singapore resident population (Census 2000:2)" Does this growth of English obviate the need for translation in a polyglot city comfortable with the English Language now widely acknowledged as a global language?

Translators in Singapore are likely to face certain challenges due to the very nature of the demographic conditions in the city state and more importantly as a result of its language policies. The intensifying sway and influence of the English language means that there will be an increasing number of Singaporeans who will be absolutely comfortable communicating in English. English is already the main medium of instruction in schools and functions as the working language for administration and business. Consequently, the need to translate from English to Mandarin, Malay and Tamil may also steadily decrease over time as the source language (i.e. English) becomes increasingly accessible to a wider spectrum of Singaporeans, in the present and future generations as shown in the steady increase of English literate bilinguals in Singapore that has grown from 62.8% of the population to 70.9 of the population (Census 2000).

Naturally, the fact that the more proficient Singaporeans become in the English Language does not in any way diminish the need for translation from other source languages to either English or one of the other three official languages in Singapore (e.g. the following language pairs: German – English or German – Malay). However translation from and into languages that appear “foreign” or exotic to Singaporeans is not the mainstay of the industry and this paper will not investigate into this facet of the translation industry here.

In this paper, I will only discuss the central issue of the apparent shrinking need of translating from English and one of the other three official languages which seems to be the mainstay of the industry. Surprisingly, this very phenomenon of the currency and predominance of English amongst the younger generation in Singapore has brought about a paradigm shift in the industry here. The reverse of what has been taken as the natural order in the translation industry (i.e. translating from English to one of the three other official languages) is now evident. It seems that the industry has turned a full circle where there is now a growing demand to translate from one of the three official languages (i.e. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) to English. One can surmise that this growing demand could be due to the following factors:

- (i) there is a growing need for standardization of records in the English Language due to the polyglot nature of the readership
- (ii) Singaporean consumers are increasingly becoming uncomfortable in dealing and functioning in the other three official languages apart from English.

I believe that both the reasons above are important. The reason for the saliency of the first factor above has to do with the pressing need of a knowledge based economy where information has to be accessible to all and therefore data previously in languages such as Malay and Mandarin only, have to be

readily available in English for mass consumption for the sake of productivity. The second factor for the paradigm shift results from the linguistic development in Singapore where even officially classified native speakers of the other three languages are becomingly more attuned, literate and prefer English written texts to the written word of their native languages. I shall elaborate on this issue in the following paragraphs.

The premise held by this paper is that both the factors above prevail in Singapore at this present time and that it has a serious and wide ranging pertinence to the translator in Singapore. Let us illustrate the challenges that would probably face the translator of English and one of the three other official languages by discussing the relevance of this paradigm shift to the translator of one of the language pairs in question, such as Malay-English and vice versa. One might be tempted to ask if and how this paradigm shift could affect the translator in a significant way since if the translator is adept at translating from English into Malay, he or she could with some training and adjustments very well translate from Malay to English since the translator is, after all, one who ought to be well versed in two languages. According to Baker (1992) the translator should always have a flair and feel for his or her own language and is best suited to translate into his own language and since English is probably not the native language of many Malay – English translators in Singapore, naturally, in the initial stages, the Malay – English translator who has been asked to translate from Malay into English would face some problems. But this is not where the problem ends for the Malay – English translator.

An illustration of the changing linguistic landscape of Singapore can be best explained in the context of the phenomenal growth of the English Language here. English is entrenched as a major language amongst the four major races and is gaining ground as the language most frequently used in many daily activities (Alsagoff et al. 1998). The growth of English is at the expense of the other three official languages (i.e. Mandarin, Tamil and Malay). A case in point is that the Malay language is increasingly being replaced by English in Malay households. The 1990 census of population shows an increase in the use of English among the Malay community in Singapore. The upward shift in the use of English to communicate with parents is from the 1980 figure of 6.2% to 12.2.% in 1990; to spouse, from 12.7% to 19.5%; to siblings, from 14.7% to 22% and even to grandparents, from 2% to 4.7% (Census 1990). Furthermore, English is now the preferred language in most daily activities among the younger generation of higher educated Malays. It is an established fact that the frequency and predominance in the use of English amongst the Malays rises in tandem with the level of schooling (please see *Multi-lingualism in Singapore. Two Decades of Development. Census of Population 1990* for a more explicit description of language shift and maintenance amongst the

Malays in Singapore). The early release of the census of population 2000 further confirms the increased literacy and use of English amongst the major races in Singapore, particularly those aged 15 and above (Census 2000).

The impact of this language shift to English by the younger generation of better educated Malays (see census 2000 for further details) means that there is concomitant general decline in the proficiency in Malay amongst this generation in question. In fact Kamsiah & Bibi 1994 note that "With the exception of Malay school teachers, media personnel, journalists and those who use Malay on their jobs, for most Malays, Malay is used more for social and cultural purposes. The domain of the Malay language, therefore, has been relegated and restricted to the family, neighbourhood and religious domains only (Kamsiah and Bibi 1994: 185-186)." The concomitant of the propensity to use English over Malay is that Malay speakers become less proficient in the Malay language and its related skills for that matter (e.g. writing or speaking skills). The effect of this is that highly educated Malay Singaporeans are reluctant to write in Malay or when Malay is written by this group in question it is written in a pseudo-English style reflective of the influence of English amongst educated Malays. On the other end of the continuum of the spectrum of Malay, written Malay texts by Malays who have had basic education reflect spoken Malay

It is not the former that is complex for the translator but the latter. To have to translate a text that has been written like spoken discourse is to place the translator at a serious disadvantage. This is because spoken language is inherently different from written language. Firstly, the spoken language lacks precision as it relies heavily on the context of a situation. Hence the translator who has to translate spoken discourse in the written form is placed in an awkward situation of trying to relate to a text postured as spoken discourse without the ancilliary support of the context which spoken discourse relies on. This problem results from the fact that the translator does not enjoy the privilege of being there at the time the text was formulated unlike the interpreter. Furthermore even if the translator is able to unravel the context of the text and is able to render it, the target audience of the translator is not guaranteed to be able to perceive the same meaning as they are far removed from the time, place or situation in which the text was formulated and are hence susceptible to misunderstanding the whole translation. For example, how is one suppose to translate Malay speech which relies a lot on shared experiences and ellipsis into written English which relies on precision.

The problem above does not stem from the fact that the translator is not skilled or that translation is impossible since everything said in one language can be expressed in another **but** the impact of the translation may not be the same as that intended by the original or it may be totally misconstrued. For example a complaint written in the style of spoken Malay relies on "sindiran"

which is a form of general rebuke with no agent or subject indicated. For example, in a source text which is a questionnaire on worker satisfaction in an electronics factory in Singapore, the respondent wrote:

"Dia tidak sepatutnya suka pada yang cantik saja. Jangan cakap kasar-kasar dengan kami. Kami sudah dewasa, bukan kanak-kanak lagi. Jagalah perasaan kami."

Back translation.

He/she should not just pay attention to those who are good looking. Our feelings should be respected as we are no longer children. Do be concerned for our feelings.

The discourse above is clearly oral discourse with a liberal use of deixis (underlined). The translator might be able to provide a translation of the comment but would certainly not be able to render its meaning. This is because the comment written in the questionnaire relies on the fact that the subject of the rebuke is apparent from the context and that the audience will perceive this from shared information similar to the English adage "If the cap fits put it on"

To translate this form of discourse into written English will be a challenge for the Singaporean translator as he or she will have to comply with English written discourse that demands precision. Furthermore the audience of the translation is probably drawn from a multitude of cultures, as English is accessible to many, but many may not immediately be attuned to the culture of the source language (i.e. Malay).

Malay politeness strategies usually prominently featured in speech adds to the difficulty of translating Malay texts written as spoken discourse. A case in point is the tendency of using suggestions and insinuations in Malay complaints, the Malay adage for this form of indirectness is "Pukul anak sindir menantu" literally meaning 'one scolds one's son to tick off one's in law' Such insinuations are very ambiguous and are difficult to pin down in written language unless one makes them explicit which would then destroy the intent of the original. The result is that the translator is faced with either conveying the meaning (i.e. the content of the message) or to preserve the form of the message. No doubt this is an age old problem but this problem takes on heightened importance in the Malay community as language is not seen as merely informational but it serves as a social lubricant which enables its participants to present information and also to maintain social harmony. In short the form in which a message is presented is as important if not more important than just its content. Malay places a premium on indirection in speech – "people don't like to say what is on their minds" (H. Geertz 1961:244-245). Bluntness is not a virtue and by the time one comes to the point in a "halus" conversation everyone should be quite aware of what one is going to say (which is linked to preparing one's listeners to adopt the appropriate facework) However as

mentioned by H. Geertz "often it is not necessary to come to the point at all, which is a great relief to everyone" (H. Geertz 1961:245).

In Singapore, the Malay – English translator is painfully aware of the problem of translating spoken discourse into written discourse but not its remedy. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the Malay – English translator has to translate into a language which is not his mother tongue (i.e. English) and for an audience in a multi-cultural society which has no choice but to rely on a language that is not indigenous to any one of its major component ethnic group (i.e. English). Within this framework the translator can no longer count on a fairly homogeneous audience that understands the nuances of the target language much less the source language.

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