

English in Indonesia: killing or helping?

Abstract

This essay will consider a number of explanations for English as a destructive language and will specifically explore this view in the context of Indonesia. As such, the discussion in this paper will be broken down into some main parts. Addressing the concept of English as a destructive language as a point of departure, this paper proceeds to put forward an overview of the language situation in Indonesia before finally discussing the destructive view of English from two distinct perceptions. Firstly, it will argue that English is not destroying local languages in Indonesia. Secondly, it will show that inequalities between native speakers and non-native speakers of English in Indonesia are still happening.

Keywords: destructive language, local language, inequalities, native speakers.

Introduction

Among the existing world's languages, English is undoubtedly the most frequently discussed language in terms of its position as the global language. Again and again the discussion in this area returns to the question of how English achieved such a worldwide status and what implications English globalisation has for the rest of the world. Although it is widely accepted that English became the global language as a combined result of British colonisation and American capitalism, modern language scholars have expressed different views regarding English relationship with other languages and cultures. One of these views is the concept of English as a destructive language.

The basic argument of this view goes that the spread of English around the world has made it a potential threat to the existence of other languages. However, the claim that language loss occurs due to the emergence of English as the global language has attracted widespread criticism for its generalisation. In the context of Indonesia, for example, this assumption is far from relevant. Notwithstanding the fact that English is gaining more popularity in the Indonesian society, there is little evidence to suggest that the growing use of English has threatened local languages with extinction. In fact, the practice of bilingualism or multilingualism which is guaranteed by Indonesia's law has allowed English to co-exist with and supplement the local languages within their respective roles and functions.

Another issue raised by the supporters of the destructive view is that English has a negative effect on non-native speakers in a way that it puts them in a disadvantageous or dependant position. With globalisation and modernisation, the need to acquire English as a language of international communication has been increasingly demanding. While this condition is enjoyed by the centre speakers of English, this is not always the case with people living in the peripheral countries. In Indonesia, for example, proficiency in English is often used as a gatekeeping mechanism for people seeking jobs or improvements in their career. A person's failure to meet the minimum requirements of English ability such as test score or certificate, for example, often results in his/her disqualification from the expected job or position.

English as a destructive language

English as a destructive language is the notion recently used in the linguistic literature to describe the negative influence of English in relation to its existence as a global

language. The discussion on English as a destructive language would not be complete without reviewing Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism and linguicism. While linguistic imperialism refers to the maintenance of Anglo-American sociocultural control over other countries through the spread of English, linguicism is concerned with any efforts which are directed towards constructing inequities between native speakers and non-native speakers on the basis of language. Following Phillipson's conception, many language scholars have expressed similar ideas regarding the practice of linguistic imperialism and linguicism. Rothkopf (1997, p. 45), for example, describes this global phenomenon as a key dimension of USA empire:

It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable.

As can be seen from the above description, it is clear that the spread of English to the peripheral countries has been basically intended to establish a hierarchy of programmes in the interests of the centre speakers of English and their countries.

Parallel with the continuous discussion on linguistic imperialism and linguicism, the emergence of English as the global language has been increasingly perceived as a hazard to the survival of other languages. MacPherson (2005, p. 40), for example, notes that "of all international languages, English poses the most significant threat to global biolinguistic diversity because of its privileged position as the lingua mundi of global communication". This belief basically stems from the fear that the increasing influence of English in the peripheral countries will force indigenous people to use English instead of their mother tongue as a means of

communication and participation in certain areas where English is required. And, if this continues to happen, English will gradually replace the existing local languages.

However, the notion of language death has been challenged by some other linguists. In this regard, Crystal (2003) offers a useful example and explanation. In Crystal's view, the extinction of local languages bears no relationship to the rise of English on the international stage. Language loss in a particular country is likely to happen due to the local political situation as well as the dominant role of the national language in such a country. Examples include the linguistic phenomenon of Sorbian in Germany and Galician in Spain. Whether these two local languages will survive in the future depends greatly on German and Spanish national language policy rather than the arrival of English as a global language. As a matter of fact, concerns about local language extinction should be addressed to the English-speaking countries themselves, such as in the cases of the Indian languages of Canada and the USA, the Aboriginal languages in Australia, or the Maori in New Zealand.

In the following sections, this essay will discuss the destructive view of English in the context of Indonesia from two different perspectives: language death and social inequality. For this purpose, it will give an initial overview of the language situation in Indonesia.

Languages in Indonesia

Indonesia, a country with a population of more than 200 million people, is a cultural and linguistic mosaic boasting hundreds of distinct native languages. Despite the various languages, language use in Indonesia can be grouped into three major categories: regional languages, national language, and foreign languages (Nababan, 1988, as cited in Nur, 2004). Regional languages, or sometimes called vernaculars,

serve as the language for internal communication within particular ethnic groups (e.g. Javanese, Bugis, Acehnese, etc.) and are usually spoken in such informal situations as conversation with family or friends. National language refers to Bahasa Indonesia, a variety of Malay, which is used to connect people from different language backgrounds throughout Indonesia and has the privilege of being the language in formal domains such as government, education, and publication. In addition to vernaculars and Bahasa Indonesia, there are several foreign languages used in Indonesia which include Arabic, English, German, French and Japanese. These international languages are usually learnt in school settings for a number of specific purposes like religion, education, and employment.

English as a foreign language in Indonesia

The current position of English as the most important foreign language in Indonesia can be traced back to the era of Indonesian independence (Smith, 1991; Lowenberg, 1991). Following the Dutch withdrawal from Indonesia, the use of Dutch among Indonesian people started to decline and eventually diminished. In response to this linguistic vacuum, Indonesian nationalists proclaimed Bahasa Indonesia as the official language of the country while acknowledging the importance of English as a language of economic and political value in many international domains. The increasing awareness to acquire English at that time was not only based on its utility as a world language but also prompted by the fact that English was the language of the United States, a superpower country which had extensively provided material, financial, and educational support for Indonesia since the day of its independence.

In recognition of the important position of English in the world combined with the remarkable influence of America on Indonesia's economic and political domains,

the Indonesian Ministry of Education issued a national decree in 1967 concerning the adoption of English as a compulsory foreign language in Indonesian high schools' curriculum. Since then, English has been given a special status as the first foreign language to be used for such specific purposes as a means of international communication, a way of acquiring science and technology, and a source for developing and modernising the lexical items of the Indonesian language (Renandya, 2004).

English in Indonesia and language death

Recent years have reflected a growing awareness of the issue of language death. While the exact number of endangered or extinct languages in the world is not exactly known, Krauss (1992, as cited in Graddol, 2000) has brought the attention of many linguists to the possible loss of 90% of the world's languages by the end of the nineteenth century as a result of linguistic globalisation. Along this line, the opponents of English globalisation frequently associates language extinction in the world with the emergence of English as a global language. However, this is not the view that I share. The claim that English is destroying local languages has not been supported by enough evidence to allow for any generalisation. As such, I argue that in the context of Indonesia, the destructive view of English is irrelevant. My arguments regarding this matter will be explained in relation to the language situation and practice in Indonesia.

As discussed earlier, Indonesia is a country with three main types of language functions: regional, national, and foreign languages, all co-existing with one another within their own respective roles. However, although many Indonesians are bilingual or multilingual in terms of speakers of their own regional languages and Bahasa

Indonesia, it is important to note that the level of bilingualism in foreign languages, especially English, is still low. In this sense, many language scholars (Smith, 1991; Aziz, 2003; Sadtono, 2004) contend that while social interactions in English occur only among a small percentage of the total Indonesian population, such as elite families, businessmen and educated members of the society, the limited use of English in Indonesia is also attributed to the dominant role of Bahasa Indonesia in the public domain which minimises the opportunity to speak English in daily conversation. As such, instead of code-switching from Bahasa Indonesia to English, the current use of English among Indonesian people can be described in terms of „transference“ (Sadtono, p. 641) or the trend of incorporating one or two English loan words into the whole Indonesian utterance in a written text or a conversation.

Along this line, some critics say that linguistic influence of English on local languages is a first step towards extinction (Hamel, 2005). In my view, this claim represents a simplistic understanding of language nature. When a language comes into contact with another language, it is natural for both languages to influence each other (Aitchison, 2001). The most common pattern of language influence occurs in the borrowing of words. In this process, loan words are assimilated to the lexical patterns of the borrowing language to meet communicative needs and goals. Thus, while word importation extends the vocabulary of the borrowing language through time, there are also good social and cultural advantages in borrowing words (Wardhaugh, 1992). Knowing scientific words and specialist terminologies, for example, would enable speakers of a language to keep up with the world’s science and technology.

As such, the argument that lexical importation will ruin the native language is poorly constructed and denies the linguistic fact that “English itself, over the centuries, has borrowed thousands of words, and constructed thousands more from the

elements of other languages” (Crystal, 2003, p. 23). Word borrowings do not cause a language to become damaged or even extinct, instead they allow a language to develop to suit the changing situations and needs of its speakers in both progressive and innovative manners.

Therefore, rather than endangering local languages, the spread of English has potentially enriched the vocabulary of other languages. This is particularly true in the context of Indonesia where English, as mandated by the national language policy, functions as a productive source for the development and modernisation of Bahasa Indonesia (Smith, 1991; McArthur, 2002; Renandya, 2004; Sadtono, 2004). For that purpose, the Indonesia’s Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa (National Centre for Language Development), have worked closely with local experts from a variety of disciplines, such as law, economics, education, and engineering to adopt or adapt new terminology from English into the Indonesian lexicon. These planned borrowings are prioritised in areas where contact is most intense and where there is no exact equivalent in Bahasa Indonesia. Examples include words like printer (printer), komputer (computer), universitas (university), etc. (Lowenberg, 1991; Aziz, 2003; Sadtono, 2004).

Based on this explanation, it is clear that English bears no relevance to the extinction of other languages in Indonesia. In fact, concerns about local language endangerment in Indonesia are increasingly directed towards the growing and dominant use of Bahasa Indonesia in the public domain. In response to this phenomenon, the Indonesian government has issued a policy which guarantees linguistic diversity through the maintenance and preservation of vernaculars (Noss, 1984, as cited in Renandya, 2004). This national policy again supports the concept of English as an irrelevant language which means that in the context of Indonesia, it is

the national language that is more likely to have destructive effects on regional languages rather than English.

English in Indonesia and social inequality

English in Indonesia has been an interesting phenomenon in terms of its educational and social practices. On the one hand, it is widely criticised that English teaching in Indonesia have failed to produce competently users of English. A study by Dardjowijojo (1996; as cited in Nur, 2004) reveals that most Indonesian high school graduates could not even understand simple English textbooks, let alone communicate orally in the language. While it is not easy to identify the real cause for ELT's lack of success in Indonesia, many language researchers point to some major constraining factors like teacher expertise, student participation, class size, teaching time, teaching methodology, and testing device (Nur, 2004; Renandya, 2004; Sadtono, 2004).

Despite the criticism directed toward ELT in Indonesia, on the other hand, it is increasingly evident that English language has become a priority in the Indonesian global market. A job seeker with English fluency, for example, will have more chance in winning a vacancy than those who can not demonstrate an English ability. This condition is aptly described by Sadtono (2004, p. 650) as follows:

Advertisements for vacancy in English in Indonesian national newspapers are growing steadily. Most of them are from companies, national as well as transnational, which are looking for prospective employees who are proficient in English. An advertisement in English is actually one of the first screening instruments to select employees, that is those whose English is poor will be discouraged to apply.

In a similar vein, Aziz (2003) argues that the use of English as a screening tool does not only take place in areas of employment but is also noticeable in many other contexts which include further education, job promotion, scientific journals, etc. So

pervasive is the gatekeeping practice of English in Indonesia that Aziz (2003, p. 141) calls it as „new forms of English colonialisation“.

Another issue of social inequality related to the role of English in Indonesia can be observed through the practice of native speaker fallacy. The fact that proficiency in English is highly demanded by many employers and institutions has led parents to send their children to English private classes, particularly because they realise that school instruction is inadequate to enable their children to compete in areas where English mastery is an absolute requirement. As a result, the number of English private centres has recently mushroomed in many parts of Indonesia (Sadtono, 2004). For many parents, furthermore, private English centres with native speaker teachers are usually chosen as a place for their children to study in preference to those which merely employ local teachers. The reason is simple: native speakers make better teachers than non-native speakers and therefore can make greater progress to their children’s English competence. This perception towards native speaker teachers of English indicates that in Indonesia, the native speaker norm has gained a growing acceptance from the society.

Although the desire to acquire better English education through additional courses can be viewed as a positive social response to English globalisation (Sadtono, 2004), the practice of native speaker fallacy in Indonesia has put both local English school owners and non-native teachers of English in an unfavourable position. In some cases, for example, foreign-franchised English centres frequently use native speaker availability as a selling point to increase enrolment. This has consequently endangered the existence of local English schools, which in terms of quantity, are more numerous than foreign-owned English centres. In other cases, local teachers, no matter how excellent their English and teaching qualities are, are often discriminated

against native speaker teachers in terms of employment, position, and payment. These inequalities in the Indonesian ELT market represent what Canagarajah (1999) describes as the global manifestation of native speaker fallacy, the fallacy which is basically intended to protect the interests of centre speakers of English through creating a global demand for native speaker teachers.

Conclusion

One view on the role of English in the world and its relationship with other languages and cultures is English as a destructive language. According to this view, English is harmful to the survival of other languages and serves as a global instrument for constructing disparities between native speakers and non-native speakers. In the context of Indonesia, the destructive view of English can be examined from two different perspectives. While it is true that English is increasingly used as a gatekeeping mechanism in many important spheres of life, the claim that English is endangering local languages does not have relevance.

The concept of language death in Indonesia is not relevant because of its limited use among Indonesian people. Instead of endangering local languages, English in Indonesia has become an important part of language diversity in Indonesia, particularly as a constructive source for the development and modernisation of Bahasa Indonesia, the most dominantly used national language. In the context of Indonesia, therefore, it is the national language that has more relevance to language loss rather than English.

While the benefits of English are widely accepted by many people, English is often criticised for creating social inequalities in Indonesia. In some cases, proficiency of English has been used to determine access to certain areas of business and

education. In other cases, the native speaker fallacy has denied the participation of local Indonesian teachers in the ELT profession on equal terms.

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