Wipe your glosses with what you know.
— James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Indonesian is the national language of the world’s fourth most populous country. Although it has 200 million speakers, it is little known beyond its borders and a narrow circle of area specialists. To reduce its obscurity in the global scheme of things, I will show here how it has developed into an unusually national but ‘un-native’ language. A brief sketch of the language’s history highlights commonsense ideas about language, identity, and nationalism that the Indonesian case does not fit, further reinforcing its uncommon aspects.

**From Pidgin to Language**

Long before it was renamed Indonesian and proclaimed the language of an Indonesia-to-be, Malay (Bahasa Melayu in that language) had been spoken for centuries in different forms and communities around the region. By the turn of the twentieth century, most of its native speakers were colonial subjects of Great Britain’s Federated Malay States, with only a fraction residing in the Netherlands East Indies. Today, Malaysian (Bahasa Malaysia) refers to Malaysia’s national language and related regional dialects, while Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) is a ‘second language’, spoken in essentially the same way by perhaps 80 percent of Indonesian citizens, in addition to 1 of about 500 ‘first’, ‘native’, or ‘ethnic’ languages.

European explorers who first entered this area in the sixteenth century encountered other kinds of ‘trade’, market’, or ‘pidgin’ Malay that had long been in use in ports from the coast of India to as far north, by some accounts, as Japan. No one’s first language, pidgin offered a simple tool for dealing with a restricted set of topics. Another native Malay, spoken by people living on
the Straits of Malacca, was the literate language of a courtly elite. Written in an Arabic-based script, it was likened by the early explorer Tavernier to other “cultured languages” of the world, much like Latin in Europe.

After the Portuguese were ousted from the region in the seventeenth century, Dutch missionaries, traders, and military men found themselves at odds as to which language best suited the overlapping but different purposes of all involved: their own, some kind of Malay, or the languages they came across in the locales and communities where they pursued their various interests. This controversy went unresolved into the eighteenth century, when the Dutch began their sustained engagement with the agrarian societies of Java’s fertile rice plain. Their intensive contact with a small ruling class of Javanese nobles made for a problematic politics of interaction. Failure by the Dutch to use elaborate forms of Javanese politesse with sufficient care and skill could result in offending just those powerful people they sought to co-opt.

To navigate between the threat posed by the constant risk of faux pas in Javanese and (as they imagined it) the danger of natives mastering Dutch, the colonialists improvised another language. Dienst Maleisch (Service Malay) became the ad hoc language bridge across the colonial divide, yet another simple communicative mode that Dutch colonialists nonetheless came to prefer in “inverse ... proportion ... to their knowledge of the language” (Heinrich Kern, quoted in Groeneboer 1998: 142).

This semi-official Malay was to develop rapidly over the nineteenth century, in and with a plural colonial society, particularly in expanding urban settlements such as Batavia (now Jakarta). Outside the small circle of Dutch rulers hailing from the homeland, below and away from the apex of their power, Malay served communication needs in a proliferating range of contexts, not all under colonial surveillance or control. By the 1880s, unruly but useful ‘low’ Malay had become the language of an urban vernacular press and was a public, though unofficial, form of discourse.

By this time also the colonial state recognized an overriding need to assert its proprietorial relation to Malay and began to take steps to establish an official version of what had long been its de facto language of administration. This required in the first place that Malay be reduced to uniform alphabetic writing, a task that fell to a Dutch philologist born in the East Indies whose research led him to conclude that “the best Malay,” the most fitting object of description and instrument of power, was spoken natively in the Johor region of the Malay peninsula, the Riau islands, and the eastern coast of Sumatra. This, he explained in his grammar (Ophuijsen 1910: 2), was the region that had been home to the greater part of an older Malay literature.

With a spelling system and description in place, institutional forces were set in motion to create the political symbology of language that would render other varieties marginal or worthless. This involved a series of part-for-whole substitutions: of silent but unitary letters for pluralities of voicings; of a distant literary past for blooming, buzzing confusions of everyday talk; of writable norms and official use for contextually embedded interactional practices. In the absence of a focal, normative reference point, though, this could be accom-
plished in the Netherlands East Indies only by means of an “extraordinary symbiosis of scholarship with the metropolitan politics of a colonizing state” (Hoffman 1973: 22), whose new state-backed Malay some preferred to call Bahasa Belanda (literally, Dutch language) rather than Bahasa Melayu (Maier 1993: 57).

What the Dutch called “general, cultured Malay” (algemeen beschaafd Maleis) spread in use among their native subaltern elite, members of a “new class of potential readers, with different living and reading habits, with different expectations with regard to books, based on their school experiences” (Teeuw 1973: 112). But once possessed by others, knowledge of a language, a bit like money or information, falls beyond the control of the giver. The Dutch could not prevent ‘their’ Malay from being pirated as a vehicle of nationalist thought and communication across lines of ethno-linguistic difference among these native elites. So Malay came to embody a common irony of colonial history: what had been devised as a language of colonial power became an instrument and symbol of anti-colonial, nationalist sentiment. Young proto-nationalists, who baptized it Indonesian proleptically in 1928, used it as a second or third language, as have most of its speakers ever since.

Departure of ‘the Native’

Indonesian gained official status as a national language in 1945, but it achieved practical success—entering the mouths and minds of significant numbers of Indonesians—only beginning in the late 1960s. Suharto’s authoritarian New Order, adopting a frankly proprietorial stance toward the national language, set in motion a state-dominated educational campaign that ‘spread’ knowledge of oral and literate Indonesian down the social hierarchies and away from urban centers into rural communities.

Languages, Johannes Fabian (1986) observes, never spread like a liquid, a rumor, or a disease. In many regions of the country, the dissemination of Indonesian required zones of contact, created by and for the New Order, in which people learned how to be subjects of an authoritarian state and citizens of a nation. This makes it hard to avoid state-centered accounts of the transition from Malay to Indonesian as part of a larger project of national development (in Indonesian, pembangunan). But it was relatively easy for Suharto’s New Order regime to avoid imposing social and linguistic hierarchies like those so commonly found in other ‘developing’ nations, where knowledge of a European language of state, inherited from a colonial regime (usually English or French), separates some citizens from others who speak only one or more of a plurality of local ‘ethnic’ or ‘native’ languages.

To call Indonesian a second language, like English or French, is misleading, then, because it obscures its place in the nation and society, even if it is learned outside domestic and communal spheres of life, usually in association with literacy. In this respect, it resembles more closely Latin in Medieval Europe or English in much of the globalizing world, although these parallels obscure
the interplay between ‘linguistic sameness’ among speakers of any language, on the one hand, and senses of ‘social sharedness’ among members of community, on the other. The creation of linguistic sameness through Indonesian was very much a top-down, state-dominated project, but it has also given rise to ideas of cultural sharedness (Heryanto 1995), which Anderson (1991) links to nationally “imagined communities.”

But nationalist projects have been theorized, from Johann Gottfried von Herder to Samuel Huntington (2004), in ways that key strongly to a monoglot ideal, and given Indonesia’s enormous linguistic diversity, Indonesian’s ‘un-nativeness’ might be taken as evidence of what Partha Chatterjee (1986) calls a “derivative discourse” of nationalism. While Chatterjee (ibid.: 7) is able to develop an alternate account of Bengali nationalism in which Bengali is a resource in an “inner domain of cultural identity,” it is unclear how such a ‘domain’ could be created in and for a language not ‘native’ to those who occupy it.

It might be better to describe Indonesian as ‘non-native’ rather than a second language, but this label is misleading as a negative designation, which presupposes a normative sense of what it lacks: the authenticity of a ‘mother tongue’, whose native speakers both ‘own’ it and count as reference points for an understanding of its qualities. To say that someone speaks a language ‘non-natively’ implies that they are at best emulating native speakers, whose usage is the self-evident metric for evaluating their success.

Without such a reference point, Indonesian in the colonial past or nationalist present stands over and against ‘native’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘national’ languages as something else. It lacks the diffuse but self-evident qualities that are bound up in the ‘native’, whether it is applied to an individual or a collectivity (community, tribe, ethnic group, etc.), and does not possess a sameness of ways of speaking grounded in the transcendent sharedness of identity. These connotations can be read from resonances, for instance, with phrases such as ‘Native American’, the more old-fashioned ‘aboriginal’ (i.e., ‘from the beginning’), and the newer increasingly salient ‘First Nations’. All invoke a sense of the past’s claims on the present, which, as Anderson (1991) argues, ground nationalist projects and ideologies.

I call Indonesian ‘un-native’ to foreground its qualitatively different place in Indonesian political culture and as a marker of identity. As an ‘un-native’ language, it is unusual but not unique in a globalizing world. On the one hand, its history and use parallel that of the Tok Pisin language of the neighboring nation of Papua New Guinea; on the other hand, less obvious comparisons can be made with ‘New World’ forms of English (Manglish, Hinglish, Taglish, Singlish) that are emerging in dynamic urban communities around the globe. To be sure, these hybrids count as ‘non-native’ in that they are normatively inferior to native English, but this should not obscure their value as means of communication and embodiments of shared experiences among members of linguistically diverse urban communities. These urban fusions are emerging in and helping to define flexible social spaces between ‘native’ vernaculars and ‘standard’ English. They may never achieve the official status of Indonesian but nonetheless are emergent linguistic reflections of ‘un-native’, interstitial communities.
'Un-native' languages such as Indonesian seem peculiar when viewed through the lens of the commonsense ideas I have sketched above. They can easily be construed as socially marginal, unstable, and susceptible to rapid change. It seems plausible that such languages are fated to 'die' in the face of pressure from 'stronger' languages unless they can acquire enough native speakers to achieve the status of 'real' languages. I can briefly rebut this argument here, using the ironies of Indonesian’s post-colonial afterlife in East Timor to demonstrate the durability and power that seem to derive precisely from its 'un-native' qualities there, as in Indonesia.

In 1975, this former Portuguese colony, now the nation of Timor Leste, was invaded, annexed, and brutally occupied by Indonesia. There and then, the New Order set into motion its own colonial project, carried out in the image of its successful project of national development elsewhere on Indonesian territory. On the face of things, the New Order’s educational program was similarly successful: young Timorese, who were native speakers of a dozen or so local languages, learned to be fluent but ‘un-native’ speakers of Indonesian—like their teachers, their occupiers, and the citizens of Indonesia. But the Timorese had other uses for that language. It offered a bridge for communication and collaboration across lines of ethnic and linguistic difference that Portuguese colonialists had never tried to eradicate over the course of four centuries of colonial rule. Young Timorese made it their language of resistance to the Indonesian occupation, and while history did not exactly repeat itself, the ‘un-nativeness’ that allowed a subaltern to use colonial Malay as a weapon against the Dutch likewise helped younger Timorese to pirate Indonesian as a means to resist the New Order.

Since 2002, when their struggle succeeded against all odds, Indonesian has begun to take on new political and cultural valences in a complex, unstable situation. A repatriated Lusophone elite finds itself engaged with Timorese freedom fighters whose language of collective action they regard with distrust and disdain as the language of their former occupiers. Portuguese was never spoken widely beyond colonial elite circles, but these elites have moved to (re)establish that language’s official dominance, now as a national language, and, in doing so, to marginalize Indonesian, along with the ‘lost generation’ of freedom fighters who speak it.

The post-colonial afterlife of Indonesian in Timor is less clear than its future in Indonesia, but nonetheless helps to corroborate the argument that ‘un-nativeness’ needs to be recognized as an endowment of languages that gives them values and uses different from, but no less real than, those of their more typical native counterparts.

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References


