

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 *Linguistic Creativity*

This study departs from a premise that linguistic creativity is a *positive* term denoting innovations rather than limitations made to a language when functioning outside its native context, resulting in a nativized variety of the language in question – for current purposes, English. Although traditionally regarded as inferior to the perceived norms of English as used in the Inner Circle¹, nativized varieties of English are increasingly regarded as different or innovative rather than deficient. The underlying reason for this enlightened viewpoint is an understanding that in the Outer Circle² English is used to portray a society and mentality which differ greatly from those traditionally associated with the Inner Circle.

This study looks at the innovations resulting from two types of linguistic creativity - ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity – as evident in the literary works of Malaysian writer K. S. Maniam. Ethnolectal creativity appears to arise due to a need to foreground one's own culture and ethnicity when using a second language. The user's other, perhaps more dominant culture influences the English used and an individual can be said to be communicating in a particular ethnolect, which is usually determined by *ethnic* rather than by national boundaries. In multi-cultural societies such as Malaysia, speakers of English may have, to a lesser or greater degree, a Malay, Chinese or Indian ethnolect as dictated by their ethnic origins. Sociolectal creativity is *enabling* in that it is motivated by the necessity to facilitate communication for individuals from different sectors of society, many of whom may be less proficient in English and may use the language for a restricted number of communicative functions. It involves, to a varying degree according to the

user's proficiency in English and the type of communicative situations in which the language is used, the simplification of complex grammatical structures. Where the language is highly simplified, an individual can be said to using *basilectal* English, where it is less simplified *mesolectal* English, and finally, where the structure of the language varies little or not at all from perceived Inner Circle norms, *acrolectal* English. Many speakers are able to choose from a range of sociolects depending on the type of communicative situation and the characteristics of their addressee(s).

Broadly speaking, ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity give rise to the following types of linguistic innovation which will be discussed with examples from Maniam's works in Chapters 3, 4 and 5:

- a. *lexical creativity*, including lexical borrowings³, loan translations⁴, the formation and use of new hybrids⁵, and extension of semantic range⁶;
- b. *grammatical creativity*, consisting for the most part of a simplification process (detailed description provided in Chapter 4); and
- c. *stylistic creativity*, which denotes innovations at the overall discursual level rather than innovations of lexicon or grammar (detailed description provided in Chapter 5).

As stated above, linguistic innovations brought about by ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity will be examined within the realm of literature, more specifically as strategies the bilingual⁷ writer may use to portray ethnic identity and authenticate the cultural setting of a particular work while writing in English. For current purposes, Malaysian literature should be understood as literature in English emerging from Malaysia as part of the larger body of post-colonial Non-Native English Literatures (NNELs). Bilingual writers form a

special case for analysis of linguistic creativity. Although many have received an English education and write almost exclusively in English, they nonetheless use the English language to portray a non-native reality, consciously or subconsciously switching ethnolect and sociolect to their creative advantage.

1.2 *The Works of K. S. Maniam*

K. S. Maniam, the Malaysian writer in question, was born in Bedong, Kedah in 1942. Although of Malaysian Indian origin, he received just one year of Tamil education before being transferred to an English school. However this exposure to the Tamil language and culture had a profound effect on Maniam, leading him to state in a 1987 interview⁸:

I had been exposed to an environment and a language that would trail me for the rest of my life.'

His works portray the predicament of the Malaysian Indian from colonial times, employed in rubber plantations, until the present day and have been:

... the exploration of the past, present, psychology, conflicts and ambitions of the Indian community in Malaysia'⁹.

Maniam sees the need for a new or enriched form of language to describe the reality of this community, 'a people for which the usual forms of expression are inadequate'¹⁰ and refers to his use of English as:

...an attempt to bring the precision of the English language to the versatility and depth of Hindu mythology and spirituality'¹¹.

It is this *blend* of language used to foreground ethnicity and social status in the Indian community which is the focus of this study.

1.3 Research Method

The data for this study were obtained from the following works, which constitute the major part of the literary output of K. S. Maniam: the novels *The Return*¹² and *In A Far Country*¹³, the stories and plays contained in the anthology *Sensuous Horizons*¹⁴, and the short stories contained in the anthology *Haunting the Tiger*¹⁵ (all page numbers for examples given in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 refer to these editions). Initially these works were all read one time in order to obtain a general feel for Maniam's style of writing, attention being given to the apparent extent and types of linguistic creativity in each work. It was then determined which texts appeared to best illustrate the use of localized English, and these works were then subjected to detailed textual analysis in order to 'elicit those features that are perceived to reflect a Southeast Asian linguistic and literary standard'¹⁶. Reference was made throughout to existing research on linguistic creativity in NNELs.

Although ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity are apparent to some extent in all of the above works, those chosen for detailed textual analysis are Maniam's two novels, the play or monologue *Ratnamuni* with its follow-up *The Cord* (found in *Sensuous Horizons*) and the short story *The Third Child* (found in *Haunting the Tiger*). In order to place examples in context, the theme(s) of these works will be given at the end of this chapter, together with an outline of their suitability to illustrate ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity in Malaysian literature. Examples from Maniam's other works are also given in this study and these works will be summarized at the point of citation.

Features of localized English encountered in the selected works were placed into one of the three categories delineated above, i.e. *lexical*, *grammatical*, and *stylistic* creativity. They were then further sorted into subgroups (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5), and analyzed accordingly, the aim of this analysis being to show how the use of localized English enhances the ethnicity and sociolect of Maniam's characters, helping to establish and authenticate the Malaysian setting.

The lexical borrowings found in *The Return*, *In A Far Country*, and *Ratnamuni*, are explained in the glossary for the reader. These were therefore transcribed and categorized (see Appendix 1) in order to look for patterns of use. Due to the large corpus of data for this study, it has not been possible to transcribe every incidence of grammatical or stylistic creativity, and the examples included in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are those which were felt to be most illustrative and interesting. Although this may appear to give rise to a somewhat *subjective* analysis, it nevertheless does afford an overview of the use of localized English in Maniam's works *as a whole*, rather than in a restricted number of texts¹⁷. It should be noted that the perspective in this study is that of a native speaker of English. As the preliminary reading of Maniam's works indicated that the use of localized grammar in dialogue closely matches the description provided by Wong,¹⁸ this was used as a guideline for analysis in Chapter 4. For similar reasons, Kachru's discussion of stylistic creativity¹⁹ is used as a guideline for analysis in Chapter 5.

In addition to conducting textual analysis and review of existing literature, an interview²⁰ was obtained with K. S. Maniam himself. The general purpose of this interview was to determine the author's own views regarding the

bilingual's literary creativity. Maniam's choice of English for creative writing and his perceived audience were also discussed. As the format of this interview was informal and semi-structured, it was not recorded for transcription in appendix; however, quotations will be given where appropriate, particularly in the conclusion of this study.

This introduction will be followed by a review of existing literature in the areas of linguistic creativity in NNELs (Chapter 2). Detailed analysis of the features of localized English evident in the works of K. S. Maniam will then be presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, Chapter 3 covering lexical innovations, Chapter 4 grammatical innovations, and Chapter 5 dealing with stylistic creativity. To conclude this study, Chapter 6 will discuss the general effectiveness of ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity in Maniam's works and implications for the reader or audience.

1.4 *Texts used for Analysis*

Maniam's first novel, *The Return* (1981) deals with the personal conflict of the protagonist Ravi, a Malaysian Indian who pays the price for social progress through English education in that he becomes alienated from his family and community. He trains as a teacher in the hope of escaping from the oppressive environment of his youth - a hospital compound in Kedah in pre-Independence Malaya - but is posted, ironically, to a secondary school in Sungai Petani after completing teacher training college in England. This 'return' to Kedah means that he is obliged to help with the increasing financial and emotional problems of his family. The end of the novel sees Ravi 'lost for words' (p173) at his

father's funeral: although he cannot fully identify with the Western culture, in whose language he was educated, he no longer feels part of his own community's Tamil culture. This novel may also be seen as dealing with intercultural relations in Malaysia, more specifically with the immigrant's struggle to forge an identity in a rapidly progressing society. According to Yong:

The novel employs the time lapse of three generations in order to examine (the) theme of cross-cultural encounter between the immigrant culture and the culture of the 'reception' country (in this case Malaya/Malaysia).²¹

The Return will be used here to illustrate both ethnolectal creativity in the Tamil community to which Ravi belongs, and sociolectal creativity in the community as a whole. Narrated by the protagonist himself, the novel contains large sections of dialogue throughout, occurring in symmetrical situations between uneducated members of the Tamil community (who would *not* normally communicate in English in their everyday lives), and in asymmetrical situations, e.g. between educated and uneducated Tamils. There are also several examples of cross-cultural communication, e.g. between Tamils and Chinese, and between Tamils and colonial British, allowing some examples of ethnolects other than Tamil to be given. In *The Return*, therefore, the reader is able to observe both the different ethnolects and sociolects found in Malaysian English and the role and power of English in society at that particular time.

In A Far Country (1993) is set in Malaysia during the time of the 1980's-1990's economic boom. It not only deals with the alienation of the Malaysian Indian in society, but also with loss of cultural identity for Malaysians in general brought about by rapid modernization. Here the protagonist is a

Malaysian Indian, Rajan, a 'successful' land developer, who is undergoing an emotional crisis. He looks back on the various stages of his life in an effort to understand the reasons for his current alienation. It becomes clear to both protagonist and reader that he has made the mistake of forsaking the traditional values of his Tamil culture for economic success. Like *The Return*, this novel illustrates ethnolectal and sociolectal creativity, in that sections of dialogue occur symmetrically, asymmetrically, in-group and cross-culturally, and both lexical and grammatical innovations are frequent. However, as the central section of this novel contains large amounts of speech from one Tamil and one Malay character, Sivasurian and Zulkifli respectively, it will be used to illustrate stylistic or discoursal features of Malaysian English.

Ratnamuni (1976), Maniam's first play, deals with 'the arrival of the Indian in Malaysia and his degeneration in a society that is gradually losing its cultural strength'²². It is a monologue in which the protagonist, Muniandy, explains to a policeman how he killed a man, Muthiah, to avenge his late wife on the discovery that the child he raised as his son, Ratnam, is not his own. This play is a perfect illustration of sociolectal creativity in Malaysian literature as it is told *entirely* in the basilectal English of Muniandy. It contrasts sharply with the Standard English narration of *In A Far Country* or the 'something off standard English'²³ narration of *The Return*, and shows the versatility of the bilingual writer. According to Fernando, this play 'convincingly uses an original variant of English to present the consciousness of a poor Indian soothsayer'²⁴. According to Ooi Boi Eng, writing in 1982, it has the merit of being:

... perhaps to date the only Malaysian story entirely articulated in a non-standard variant of English – or rather a specifically fashioned compound of some kind of Malaysian Indian English.²⁵

The reader or audience is confronted with the generation gap in modern Malaysia and the question is raised as to whether it is possible to adhere to one's own cultural traditions in a rapidly developing society. The play, *The Cord* (1983), is a later adaptation of *Ratnamuni*: the plot remains the same but a voice is also given to other members of the Tamil community, resulting in the emergence of more mesolectal dialogue.

The short story *The Third Child* tells the moralistic tale of a husband and wife, Velu and Vasanthi, who are proprietors of a coffee-shop on Langkawi island. Vasanthi is pregnant with her 3rd child and, desiring a daughter, she carries out religious rituals to strengthen her wish. She is disappointed to deliver another boy, particularly as the child has an ugly red birthmark on his face. When Vasanthi's milk will not flow, she conducts prayers, all of which fail. However, when Velu puts aside hard feelings for a particular group of his customers – teachers banished to Langkawi from the mainland due to minor 'offences' - and treats them with more generosity, the 'miracle' occurs and Vasanthi's milk flows. This story lends itself to illustrations of linguistic creativity of all three types as it is narrated from the viewpoint of the two main characters, Velu and Vasanthi and the English used has a strong Tamil ethnolect. The reader also perceives a wide range of sociolects, from the basilectal English used for Velu and Vasanthi, characters who would *not* normally use English for all communicative situations, to the mesolectal-acrolectal English spoken by the teachers. A section of Standard English narration appears halfway through this story and contrasts sharply with the

English used to portray the speech patterns of the various characters, marking it as nativized.

NOTES

¹ Inner Circle = countries in which English is used as a first or native language, e.g. U.K. and U.S.A. (From Braj B. Kachru, *World Englishes and Applied Linguistics*, *World Englishes*, Vol. 9, No. 1)

² Outer Circle = countries in which English is used as a second language; list includes Malaysia. Source *ibid*.

³ The term 'lexical borrowings' is used here to refer to both lexical *transfer* (i.e. use of native term where no English equivalent exists), and lexical *shift* (i.e. preferred use of native term instead of English equivalent in order to foreground ethnicity and/or show in-groupness).

⁴ Direct translation of a non-English collocation or phrase into English; although the surface meaning of such lexical items is English, their underlying meaning should be sought in the culture of the second, perhaps more dominant, language or code.

⁵ This type of lexical innovation contains one English word and one word from another language or code.

⁶ This entails the extension of the meaning of an English word (of any class) in a non-native language variety.

⁷ 'Bilingual' to be understood in this context as bilingual or multilingual.

⁸ *Fiction into Fact, Fact into Fiction: a Personal Reflection. Essays on Southeast Asian and Australasian Literature, The Writer's Sense of the Past*, edited by Kirpal Singh, Singapore University Press, 1987.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *The Return*, K. S. Maniam, Skoob Pacifica edition, 1996.

¹³ *In A Far Country*, K. S. Maniam, Skoob Pacifica edition, 1994.

¹⁴ *Sensuous Horizons, The Stories and the Plays*, K. S. Maniam, Skoob Pacifica edition, 1994.

¹⁵ *Haunting the Tiger, Contemporary Stories from Malaysia*, K. S. Maniam, Skoob Pacifica edition, 1996.

¹⁶ *Some pertinent features of the new literatures in English in Southeast Asia*, Peter G. Sercombe, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

¹⁷ Sercombe, for example, in the article mentioned in note 12 above, lists every feature of lexical, grammatical and stylistic creativity. However, his textual analysis is restricted to 3 short stories.

¹⁸ *Simplification Features in Colloquial Malaysian English*, Irene F. H. Wong, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1983.

¹⁹ *The Bilingual's Creativity and Contact Literatures in The Alchemy of English, The spread, functions and models of non-native Englishes*, Braj B. Kachru, Pergamon Press, 1986.

²⁰ Date of interview, 20 January 1999.

²¹ *Ring of Cosmic Fire: Temporal Strategies and Narrative Consciousness in 'The Return'*, Margaret Yong, *Southeast Asian Review of English*, No. 23, December 1991.

²² *Cultures in Conflict, Essays on Literature and the English Language in South East Asia*, Lloyd Fernando, Graham Brash, Singapore, 1986.

²³ *The Case of English in Malaysian Fiction: A Look at K. S. Maniam's 'The Return'*, Irene F. H. Wong and Margaret Yong, in *Southeast Asian Review of English*, Vol 6/7, December 1988.

²⁴ *The Malaysian and Singaporean Novel in English, 1952-1981: A Critical Survey*, Karamjit Kaur Bhatha, M.A. Dissertation, Universiti Malaya, 1984.

²⁵ Ibid.