CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1 the researcher reviewed some of the literature on varieties of English from four Commonwealth countries, namely India, Nigeria, Gambia and Singapore. In this chapter, she will trace the emergence of Malaysian English via research studies on the subject from the sixties till the nineties. She will also describe the lexico-semantic categories on Malaysian English lexis used by earlier researchers in order to clarify the basis on which they have been reorganized and adapted as instruments of analysis for this study.

2.2 The Emergence of Malaysian English

When the British first colonized Peninsular Malaysia, then known as Malaya, the language that they used was Standard British English. A less pure form was being used by a small group of English-educated immigrants from India and English-educated members of the local Malay aristocracy. During the colonial era, English-medium schools and the English language in particular, enjoyed an important status in the immigrant society of pre-independence Malaya. From Independence until 1967 in Peninsular Malaysia, 1973 in Sabah and 1985 in Sarawak, both English and Malay were accorded the status of official languages (Asmah, 1997). During this period, the English language continued to be the official medium of instruction in English-medium schools and institutions of higher learning. After 1967 the National Education Policy was implemented and this meant that all government schools had to systematically phase out English as the
medium of instruction, and to adopt the Malay language as the medium of instruction. All former English-medium schools were converted to government-aided 'national schools'. The vernacular schools were allowed to continue using Mandarin or Tamil as the medium of instruction. These were known as 'national-type' schools, and were only partially government-aided. The Malay language was thus established as a compulsory language in these schools (New Education Policy 1971).

By 1982 all government-aided secondary schools were completely Malay-medium. In fact, by 1972 all applicants applying for a post in the public service were required to have a credit in the Malay language paper at the Malaysian Certificate of Education level. After 1983, all candidates applying to the local universities were also required to have this credit. On the other hand, it became no longer compulsory to obtain a pass in the English language to enter institutions of higher learning. Hence the Ministry of Education had systematically downgraded the status of the English language from that of an official language to a second language.

The emergence of the Malay language as the medium of instruction in government schools, had considerable influence on the local usage of English. Firstly, there was frequent code-switching, as the second generation of Malaysians, namely those who entered school in 1980 and later, are far more familiar with colloquial expressions in Bahasa than they are with English expressions. They often produce Bahasa words and expressions to convey what they mean when speaking English to their fellow Malaysians and even when using their native languages within their own communities. Besides this, they also resort to code-mixing whereby Bahasa
roots are combined with English affixes for example 'cacated', meaning awkward or improper. In addition, Bahasa words are combined with English words to form compounds such as 'kampung house'. In other words, lexico-semantic features of local languages such as Malay have begun to creep into the English language spoken by Malaysians who have received their formal education in the Malay medium.

While this feature is also found in the English language spoken by the first generation of Malaysians who have received their formal education in the English language, there is a distinct difference between the older generation and the younger generation. While the younger generation tends to be also influenced by the syntax and grammar of Bahasa in their Malaysian English, members of the older group have retained the syntax and grammar of Standard British English when writing or speaking the English language. This is because they have a stronger foundation in English grammar compared to the younger generation, having benefited from a system where English was the medium of instruction.

However, like the younger group, in terms of lexis and semantics of spoken English, many have diverged from Standard British English. For example, words and even idiomatic expressions from Bahasa Malaysia, Cantonese, Hokkien, Tamil and other languages have been extensively borrowed, and a range of native English words have acquired new meanings or new connotations.

The English language which has emerged from all these influences has been loosely termed 'Malaysian English' or ME. From the viewpoint of lexis, there may be three viewpoints which account for the emergence of
Malaysian English. The first viewpoint which is that of psycholinguists and language educators, regards Malaysian English to be a result of ‘fossilized errors’ acquired during the language acquisition process. In other words, Malaysian English may be regarded as a permanent sort of ‘interlanguage’ (Selinker, 1972), which consists of a large number of fossilized phonological, semantic and syntactic errors. This is a prescriptive viewpoint which the present researcher does not subscribe to. The second viewpoint which is that of sociolinguists, regards Malaysian English as a result of an acculturation process of language transfer whereby cultural features from the mothertongues of the different ethnic communities have permeated the English language used locally. While certain aspects of Malaysian English may be a result of language transfer, the present researcher believes that this may be only one of the factors leading to the creation of ME. The third viewpoint, namely the researcher’s viewpoint, is that Malaysian English may be the result of a creative process whereby both common cultural features as well as aspects of learner strategies such as creativity and redundancy may have resulted in a variety of English which may be regarded as uniquely Malaysian. While the researcher’s viewpoint is a descriptive one, she does not deny the fact that there may be ‘grey areas’ where examples of Malaysian English may be regarded as errors by language teachers. The next section will review studies on Malaysian English in chronological order.

2.3 Studies on Malaysian English

The pioneering study done on local English was by Killingley (1965) who attempted to make the first tentative description of the phonology, grammar
and lexis of 'Malayan English', which was definitely the forerunner of Malaysian English. Killingley referred to Malayan English as a new dialect of English and said that its users did not aim at 'correctness' from the standpoint of Standard English because it symbolized a breaking away from colonialism and the establishment of a Malayan identity. Bearing in mind that at the time of her research, the National Language had not been firmly established as yet, Killingley described Malayan English as a 'stand-in' or the lingua franca of the English-educated classes. Killingley was the first researcher to take a descriptive rather than a prescriptive view of Malayan English. Two other researchers in the 1970's, namely Tongue (1974) and Crewe (1977), described the sub-standard varieties of Malaysian English with a prescriptive view towards 'correctness' rather than the view of it being a sub-variety of English in its own right.

With regards to Malaysian English lexis, Killingley observed that two of the most striking features of Malayan English were the constant coinage of words and expressions, and the code-switching. She referred to the result of constant code-switching as 'macaronic speech'. She commented that this type of speech was not used on formal occasions but only when the speaker is relaxed and sure that his interlocutor understands the language(s) other than English which he introduces into his speech.

Later researchers such as Platt and Weber (1980) and Baskaran (1987), have further categorized Malaysian English into a standard variety called an 'Acrolect', and non-standard varieties called 'Mesolect' and 'Basilect'. Killingley identified two influential groups of users of Malayan English who were responsible for this constant coinages, namely University of Malaya
undergraduates and journalists of the main English newspaper at that time: 'The Straits Times'. The colloquial dialect of that first generation of UM undergraduates was considered to be the first model of Malayan English, as in the 1960's UM graduates were considered to be "the cream of the nation". This was because University of Malaya was the only local university that existed at that time and UM graduates were moving into all the higher echelons of the public and private sectors.

The second group was exemplified by writers such as S.H. Tan and later, Adibah Amin as their articles were regarded as being typically Malayan in both content and style. The collective influence of writers like these probably resulted in the influence of the local English media on the English used by the young people of that time.

Using the Oxford English Dictionary as the standard for Standard British English, Killingley collected a corpus of 300 words and expressions from tape-recordings of informal conversations. She then analyzed their semantic and grammatical features. Killingley did not categorize her lexical data unlike later researchers but she had made a pertinent contribution to research as she was the first local researcher to use empirical data and to sub-divide the speakers of Malayan English into lectal sub-groups, though she did not give any terms for these sub-groups. In retrospect, her lectal sub-groups seem to be identical to those of Platt and Weber (1980), and later researchers.

The next significant study was by Tongue (1974) who studied the colloquial English used by English-educated Singaporeans. He referred to this variety of English as the 'English in Malaysia and Singapore' or ESM and regarded
both as being of the same variety of English. He differentiated between two styles of ESM, namely the 'formal style' and the 'informal style'. Tongue said that the formal style is "universally and immediately comprehensible to any native speaker of English" (1974:21) as according to him it resembles Standard British English. However, he regarded the informal style as "clearly unacceptable". He described the informal style as a collocation of "sub-standard and pidginized form of English" which he maintained "must simply be called wrong" and therefore in his view, "need(s) to be corrected if the speaker wishes to speak English which is intelligible and respected on an international scale". In this respect, Tongue was more prescriptive than descriptive in his approach to the colloquial variety of ESM. However, Tongue did observe that the colloquial variety of ESM seems to be the variety which is spoken by all the ESM speakers and that it is used interchangeably with Standard English even by speakers of the formal variety. Thus Tongue was the first writer to comment on the use of lectal code-mixing by users of English in Singapore and Malaysia.

Though linguists of the 1970's such as Tongue have described colloquial ESM as needing to be "corrected" later linguists of the 1980's argued for the acceptability of local varieties of English as a form of communication by non-native speech communities. The first argument was that English can no longer be considered the sole possession of native speakers. This argument was presented by linguists such as Strevens (1980) and Smith(1981). Strevens says that the native speaker of English must
acknowledge that English is no longer his possession alone and that it belongs to the world and new forms of English, born of new countries with new communicative needs should be accepted. Smith adds that English belongs to the world and every nation which uses it does so with different tone, colour and quality.

Kachru (1983) maintains that the new varieties of English are necessary in communication within non-native communities as they are the most suitable means to convey aspects of socio-cultural experiences and local settings which could not otherwise be expressed in the culturally foreign native speaker English.

Notwithstanding his prescriptive stand, Tongue's observations placed the English of Singapore and Malaysia on the linguistic map at a time when the 'new Englishes' (Kachru, 1983) were being given due recognition by linguists of the Western countries. Tongue divided all the lexical items in his data into single words and groups of words. The single words were categorized according to parts of speech, namely nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. The groups of words were categorized according to common phrases and expressions, idioms and slang.

It was observed by later researchers that there were two shortcomings in Tongue's work. Firstly, as observed by later researchers such as Baskaran (1987) his description is only relevant for Singapore English and is not very appropriate for the later developments in the growth of ME as his data was only derived from the English used by Singaporeans. Tongue himself admits to this possible shortcoming.
Reversal'. She has also contributed new categories, such as 'Formalization', 'Informalization' and 'Campus Coinages'.

Like Wong, Baskaran postulates that certain features in the syntax of Malaysian English are the result of English adjusted to meet the needs of Malaysians for the local and indigenized uses among Malaysians themselves. Baskaran (1987) analyzed and categorized both Malaysian English syntax as well as lexis.

Another researcher, Yen(1990) also made a study of Malaysian English lexis. She divided her corpus into two main divisions: 'Vernacular-origin words'(VOW) and 'English-origin words' (EOW). She sub-divided the second division into three sub-divisions, namely: 'EOW as a result of Semantic Change', 'Derivation of New Words from Existing English words' and 'Unconventional Collocation of English words'.

She then organized her categories under these three sub-divisions. She has reorganized Platt and Weber's 'Meaning Changes' into Semantic Extension, Semantic Shift and Semantic Restriction. She has explained Semantic Shift as a later stage of Semantic Extension. She has also used Platt and Weber's 'Locally Coined Words and Expression' and has termed loan translations of idiomatic and cultural expressions as 'Unconventional Collocations of English Words'.

A more recent researcher, Anthonysamy(1997), has used the categories developed by Adegjiba(1989) such as 'Lexical Transfer' and 'Coinages', as well as Baskaran(1987) such as 'Semantic Restriction' and 'Polysemic Variation' to analyze Malaysian English lexis. Yen (1990) and Anthonysamy
(1997) used different terminology for Malaysian English lexis. Yen used the expression 'Malaysian English lexicon' and Anthonysamy used the expression 'lexico-semantic variation in Malaysian English'.

2.4 Sub-varieties or Sociolects

In order to analyze the lexis of Malaysian English, we need to consider the three lectal sub-varieties of English. As mentioned earlier, the three main levels by which the non-native variety of speech has been categorized are:

2.4.1 the Acrolect or formal variety
2.4.2 the Mesolects or informal varieties and
2.4.3 the Basilect or 'patois' street variety

It has to be noted here that this division has been challenged by Benson(1990) as flawed, as he says there is no analogy between Malaysia and a 'post-creole society'. Nair-Venugopal(1994) who subscribes to Benson's views, has suggested that ME sub-varieties be referred to as `an educated subvariety' or 'fairly standard usage', `a colloquial subvariety' and `a pidgin or substandard subvariety'.

The researcher perceives no difference between this classification and the earlier classification into Acrolect, Mesolect and Basilect sub-varieties subscribed to by Platt and Weber(1980) and other earlier researchers. Benson has merely substituted one set of terms for another. Hence we still subscribe to the earlier terms used by Platt and Weber(1980).

2.4.1 The Acrolect

At the Acrolectal level, Malaysian English resembles Standard British English in terms of syntax with the occasional divergence in phonology, semantics and lexis. This is the sub-variety taught in schools, institutions of
higher learning, private schools and colleges in Malaysia, though some of the teachers still insist that they are using Standard British English. It is basically the variety of English spoken in formal genres such as news reports, academic lectures, debates, speeches and board meetings, especially those held by the corporate sector and NGOs or non-governmental organizations. It is used exclusively by speakers with higher levels of formal education such as tertiary education because of its grammatical accuracy in resembling Standard British English. While it has limited usage within Malaysian society, in its spoken form it is the variety of Malaysian English used by newsreaders, talk show hosts and journalists. In its written form, the Acrolect maintains an academic or formal style and is found in business magazines, editorials of newspapers and scientific or academic journals.

About half of the data collected for this study was from this sub-variety of ME. This was the data recorded from Business news articles, Masters theses, newsletters of NGOs, Toastmasters' meetings, seminars, international conferences and academic staff meetings at the university, among other sources. These sources uphold a higher standard of English which is internationally intelligible and cannot be termed 'Manglish' as some people in the teaching profession like to describe ME. On the other hand, educated people in Malaysia who believe they are using native English are actually using ME of an Acrolectal sub-variety - one which has distinctive lexical features of its own. A smaller percentage of the data could also be as mesolectal ME, and this is described in the next section.
2.4.2 The Mesolect

The Mesolect typifies Malaysian English, as it reflects an 'informal communicative style' (Richards, 1979) that is used by educated Malaysians. The pronunciation of Malaysian English at this level is clearly different from Received Pronunciation (R.P.) and is influenced by the intonation or pronunciation of the local languages or dialects. While traces of R.P. will be accepted and even encouraged at the Acrolectal level, any attempts to use R.P. at the Mesolectal level is considered to be a sign of affectation. It may even be considered a pathetic attempt to assume social superiority by attempting to imitate the 'orang putih' or 'white man', who symbolises the colonial master in the mind of the average Malaysian.

While, the Mesolect varies from Standard British English in terms of syntax and grammar, the greatest divergence is in the area of lexis. There are often repetitions or other forms of redundancy as well as substitutions, omissions and coinage of new words and expressions. There may even be creation of new meanings for Standard British English words.

There is liberal use of loanwords from Bahasa Malaysia, Cantonese, Hokkien, Tamil or any other language which used to be the original mothertongue of the speakers. For example, Bahasa affixes such as 'lah', have been absorbed into the Mesolect, thus adding a tone of informality to speech. In addition to being used colloquially, the Mesolect is also used in informal writing such as interactive journals or letters conveyed via electronic or e-mail.

About half the data collected for this study can be considered to belong to the Mesolectal sub-variety. This data was collected from the class assignments.
and discussions by undergraduates, interactive journals of undergraduates as well as their examination scripts.

2.4.3 The Basilect

The Basilect is spoken by those who have little or no formal education and who are quite illiterate. The little English which they have acquired is through contact with Mesolectal or Acrolectal speakers. This level of Malaysian English is based on a rudimentary knowledge of survival vocabulary and speakers have little or no knowledge of proper grammar, syntax or phonology. The speakers of the Basilect also lack the proficiency to properly understand and respond to speakers who use the Mesolectal and Acrolectal varieties of English. There may be frequent misunderstandings when an Acrolectal speaker tries to communicate with the user of the Basilect. The popular expression for this level of Malaysian English is 'Broken English' (Baskaran, 1987). This variety of pidgin English is used extensively by tradesmen such as hawkers and taxi-drivers when communicating with foreigners. In the researcher's opinion, it is the only variety of ME which can be termed 'Manglish', the derogatory blanket term which many members of the teaching profession like to use for ME. This variety is beyond the focus of this present study.

In the next chapter the researcher will describe the various aspects of research methodology used for this study.