CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

English, as any other language, is subject to change and diversity. As an established international language which is used in various domains, English is globally spoken by people of various origins, resulting in what is called Varieties of English. One of the varieties of English is known as Malaysian English (ME, henceforth). The fact that Malaysia consists of a multi-racial and multi-lingual society contributes to the localization of certain lexical items which are not used in the same way or not used at all in Standard British English (SBE, henceforth) and other varieties. Besides lexical items, the uniqueness of ME can also be seen in terms of its syntax, both of which are the main foci of discussion in this paper.

Many attempts have been made by linguists as well as non-linguists in exemplifying and/or describing the features of ME. A search through the Internet for 'Malaysian English' in the Yahoo search engine (at the point of writing) resulted in 32,600,000 entries, and Google 532,000 entries, not to mention the amount of scholarly literature, some of which are reviewed in Chapter 2. Previous studies of ME mostly include sources from classrooms, courtrooms, Internet chat-rooms, radio and TV advertisements, newspapers, cartoon strips, TV talk shows, and sitcoms. To name a few, some recent studies include Tan Chee Chieng's (2006) examination of ME and Singapore English features in the sitcoms "Kopitiam" and "Phua Chu Kang", Su Hoon Lian's (2006) quantitative study of the use of non-standard lexis 'handphone', Tharam Kaur's (2006), Rabiah Bibi's (2006) and Sumathi Krishnan's (2005) analysis of chat-room language, and Leong Yoke Lin's (2004) study of ME used in radio

advertisements. Little, if any, work has been done on local movies. Due to this apparent absence, this study attempts to look at locally produced English movies as another source of ME in this field of study. The data for the study is therefore gathered from a locally produced English movie, "Ah Lok Café", based on the view that using movies as a language data is an alternative that should be potentially developed in linguistics.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As one of the varieties of English that is acknowledged within the notion of World Englishes[1], ME warrants some in-depth linguistic investigation in order to distinguish the elements that constitute its identity. The description of ME is most commonly done at the level of lexis: categorizing the ME words into different parts of speech, and labeling them into different types of lexis. This is reflected in Baskaran's (2005) *A Malaysian English Primer: Aspects of Malaysian English Features*. She states that "after almost two centuries of nurturing and over four decades of nursing, the English language in Malaysia has developed

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[1] The concept 'World Englishes' encompasses a wide range of variables. First, the 'political': English fulfils a variety of roles worldwide: it can be national language, official language, administrative language, language of communication, second language, or third (or even fourth) language. The forms taken by English worldwide range between Standard English at the one end of the spectrum and pidgin English at the other. Many varieties fall somewhere between the two extremes. The position held by English may be unassailable, as in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, or Australia, or it may be challenged by other languages, as in Quebec (Canada), South Africa, and (increasingly) the United States. While English may be important as the language of commerce, education, and government, it is not always the first language of the majority of citizens of a country. This sometimes leads to a reaction against English as an elitist 'colonial' language—or to demands that the local variety of English be recognized as 'standard'. Reactions to English can be ambivalent: it can be aspired to and yet resented. Secondly, the 'linguistic': Some English words originated in a regional variety, but are now assimilated into the wider vocabulary of English, with their regional origins no longer recognized—as *budgerigar* (Australia), *bungalow* (South Asia), and *trek* (South Africa). Other words (for example *bluey*, *chotapeg*, *donga*, from the same three regions), while important in their own variety, are rarely used or understood elsewhere. Some English words, now archaic or dialectal in Britain, survive in general use only in one of the former British possessions. Some regional words are general English words to which new meanings have been assigned.

(Source:http://www.askoxford.com/globalenglish/worldenglish/summary/?view=uk)

to become a typical progeny of New Englishes: a distinct variety in its own right" (p.18). However, previous works on ME, as she gathers, "have not given full impetus on the structural features although it is in this very sphere that the most significant differences make ME what it actually is" (p.23).

Proposing this view, the author believes that ME cannot be impartially treated without any explanation on the syntactic structure within which the utterance occurs. For instance, in the utterance ***"You so terror, you know or not?"***, whilst 'terror' can be described as a semantic extension of lexis (English lexeme with distinctive local usage to mean 'good' 'great', 'brilliant', 'superb' or the like), the rest requires some clause-structural analysis in comparison with SBE [ellipsis of copula 'are', and the use of 'or not' interrogative tag as a device for 'ability confirming', one of the basic meanings of the tag as described by Baskaran (2005: 152)]. A comparison with SBE, a standard form of English, is imperative in an attempt to explain both the structure as well as meaning of the identified ME utterances in order to distinguish their unique characteristics. In the case of this particular utterance, a major re-shuffling in the lexical as well as syntactical arrangement is required to produce the SBE version, "You are so clever/smart/great/, don't you know that?"

SBE is used as a point of reference as it is still the structure of this Standard English that is aimed at at the official level of various domains in the country as well as in the majority of English-speaking countries (due to its universal intelligibility). It is crucial to note, nonetheless, that this comparison is not to prove the deviation of ME from the standard norms of British English, nor to question the accuracy of one over the other. Instead the comparison may be necessary to distinguish the elements that make ME a unique variety of English.

1.2   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the background and statement of the problem, it is the objective of the study to describe the lexical and syntactic features of ME based on the data gathered from a locally produced English movie. This study also seeks to establish the extent to which the data contributes to the defining characteristics of ME (established by previous empirical studies), thus enhancing one's understanding of the nature of ME. In achieving these objectives, the study examines the identified linguistic features in accordance to the categorization of the sub-varieties of ME established in previous studies.

Realizing the fact that the transcribed data is based on spoken language in a movie, it is acknowledged that there is a need for a certain level of phonological explanation in the analysis. Thus, to a lesser extent, phonological elements such as intonation and pitch are taken into account in the interpretation of items like particles and exclamations. Pragmatic functions are also considered in the interpretation of meaning of certain items, such as 'ah' and 'lah'.

The analysis of data is done qualitatively by close reference to the established characteristics of ME, the items' association with the model of lectal continuum, as well as comparison with SBE. This comparison, as stressed earlier, is deemed necessary for the purpose of distinguishing the localization of certain lexical items as compared to their usage (or absence of usage) in SBE. It is also necessary when the syntactic structure deviates significantly from the standard version, such as in the omissions of pronouns, copulas and the operator 'do'. Therefore, in most cases (if not all), such comparison (with a standard form of English as a

point of reference) is essential in an attempt to describe and acknowledge the characteristics of ME as a unique variety of English. In short, the description of each item under its respective category serves to confirm its status as a feature of ME, contributes to the reliability of the data as a source for understanding the nature of ME, thus helping towards achieving the objectives of study.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In relation to the statement of the problem and objectives discussed, the research questions to be answered are:

RQ 1 What are the lexical and syntactic features of Malaysian English used in the data?

RQ 2 To what extent does the data contribute to the defining characteristics of Malaysian English?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Having a movie as a source for data carries a lot of significance. Gaining prominence in the world of broadcasting, movies undoubtedly play a vital role in portraying the norms and cultural values of a society, one of which is the language used. Whilst there has always been a debate over the "right" kind of language that should be used in local movies, movies which portray the language as authentically used by the multi-racial citizens are most appealing to

the audience. If the slogan "Filem Kita, Wajah Kita"[2] (Our Movies, Our Identity) is here to stay, more movies should produce scripts with dialogues as actually spoken by Malaysians in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure and other linguistic features, all of which should be, of course, contextually appropriate.

A Malaysian-produced English movie which illustrates ample utterances of ME, the variety of language that is realistic for the setting and characters it portrays, is therefore selected for the study. The characters use some features of ME which significantly fall into various positions along the line of the lectal continuum, based on the background of the speakers as well as the formality of context. The findings would especially be useful for anyone involved in the study of World Englishes. The source of data (the movie) can be another beneficial tool in studying and understanding the features of ME. In addition, language teachers might find it beneficial in making advanced level students aware of the uniqueness of ME as compared to SBE.

'Saber Ingles' (2009), a Spanish-based website has developed a webpage "Learning English on the Web" and one of the materials used is film scripts. To date, 32 feature films (including

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[2] This is a slogan promoted by FINAS (Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia or National Film Development Corporation Malaysia) in an attempt to enhance the development of the local film industry, bringing Malaysian films to the world. An issue raised in relation to the slogan is how 'Filem Malaysia' is defined. In the talk show 'Fenomena Seni' aired by RTM1 on April 13, 2007, Dr. Abu Hassan Hasbullah, UM Media lecturer argues that in other countries like Germany and Nepal, they have everything in their native language thus concluding that they are more in touch with their culture and identity. Since bahasa Malaysia is the official language of Malaysia, Dr. Abu Hassan believes that all films worthy of the title Filem Malaysia should reflect that statement by being made in the language. On the other side of this argument is Shuhaimi Baba, a reputable local film director. Contrary to Dr. Abu Hassan, Shuhaimi brings up the argument of multiculturalism which Malaysia is heavily marketing throughout the world with its Truly Asia tagline. Why can't the film industry too reflect the multicultural aspect of Malaysia by awarding the title to any film made by Malaysian or is about Malaysia regardless of the language? She argues that limiting their options to express their story is suppressing the creativity of moviemakers.

The Titanic, *Independence Day*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Braveheart*, *Casablanca*, *Shrek*, etc.) have been listed and parts of the scripts have been used for language development activities involving English vocabulary and grammar. If feature films can be utilized as a language learning aid in Spain where English is a foreign language (EFL), and other English medium movies such as novel adaptations (e.g. *The Firm*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, *Phantom of the Opera*) could act as an aid in understanding literary works, then a locally produced English movie should also be used in examining a variety of English such as ME. Without disregarding the value of authentic spoken discourse, the potential of a locally produced English movie as another contributive source of data in this field should not be dismissed.

Creativity is a crucial factor in script writing. Some might argue, however, that creativity allows for 'manipulation' on the part of the scriptwriter to suit the characters as he/she would wish people to perceive them. In other words, the scripts might be thought of as being written and manipulated in such a way to portray how certain types of people speak English. Whilst this could be possible, the author believes that it is not the linguistic element constituting each line of utterance that goes in the minds of the scriptwriter when writing the script. Rather, it is the authenticity of the spoken dialogues that becomes the priority in order to make them appeal to the real audience.

Where spoken discourse is concerned, a scriptwriter's duty is to use his creativity to create dialogues that are realistic and relevant to the characters and contexts involved. Reggie Lee (the producer and original screen play writer of "Ah Lok Café) himself acknowledges this fact in an interview with Kuen (2003) when he says, "I guess this is the country's first English comedy movie. At first we wanted well-spoken English but as they went along,

Manglish started creeping in. So we thought, why not? We use what comes naturally". The terms "well-spoken English" and "Manglish" are layman expressions which suggest that although the writer knows that English as used in the movie is different from the standard version, it is real language nonetheless.

Although the language authenticity of a movie can be questioned as it is scripted, it can be said that 'creatively realistic' dialogues do take place in "Ah Lok Café"; creative in the sense that the dialogues were developed in such a way to suit the plot and setting, and realistic in the sense that they suit the characteristics of the characters. This is supported by Kuen (2003) when he states that "The idea for *Ah Lok Cafe* came to Reggie Lee when he was alone on a beach armed with a pen and paper. The characters just flowed out of him. Now those two-dimensional characters are turning reel-life with the help of flesh-and-blood actors. An eponymous live-action movie based on his cartoon[3] is in the works".

It is undeniable that scripts, no matter how 'creatively realistic' they are, are a fictional text. Fictional texts often display traces of orality to a greater or lesser extent. Whatever the precise characteristics of this representation of orality, verbal interaction in fiction can only be understood and interpreted in relation to the same rules of discourse that govern everyday interaction. Although evidently lacking the spontaneity of spoken oral interaction, and differing in important ways from text types that may record the spoken word more authentically (Schneider 2002:70-77), fictional dialogue is, nonetheless, rooted in ordinary

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[3] "Ah Lok Café" is originally derived from a cartoon strip. This cartoon is a spoof of Hard Rock Café's lifestyle – which, as stated by Kuen (2003), "houses the whole of Malaysia, where you can get all the races in one place". Its creator, Reggie Lee, is a talented Malaysian cartoonist. Perhaps he is not as famous as Lat, but the man is recognized in his own right. He is also the man behind the cartoons in the Microsoft website, *msn.com.my*, *The Sun*, and prior to that, *The Malay Mail*.

discourse and everyday situations. While they are certainly invented and hypothetical in Schneider's typology, as Fowler (1989) points out, fictional dialogues are built upon models of language use which tend to occur in 'non fictional' texts (conversation, meetings, political speeches, news reports, etc.) and they are, in a sense, transcripts of naturally occurring speech:

> "Ordinary, conventional language has its rules of structure: e.g. dialect and accent are recognizable through regular features of a person's speech; and in conversation, different people's contributions are linked to each other, by various cohesive devices, into an integrated communicative whole. These conventional regularities of structure, non-literary in origin, may be as it were 'transcribed' out of real life into written fiction".
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> (Fowler, 1989:114)

Thus, proposing Fowler's view, there is no exaggeration to say that fictional dialogues of a movie could be a 'transcription' of real life communication (naturally occurring speech) that is put into written fiction. In short, whilst real life speech data is invaluably useful, especially for quantitative studies of corpus linguistics, the data gathered from local English films too could be of significance for qualitative and descriptive linguistics.

1.5   SCOPE OF STUDY

Due to the author's particular interest in the field of Varieties of English, the scope of study revolves around the description of lexical and syntactic features of ME as a variety of English. A review of literature is carried out in areas relevant to the study. This includes the

role and growth of English in the country, issues, concepts and models concerning 'standard' English and World Englishes, as well as the features of ME itself.

The ME continuum model is used as a model (among others) to describe the characteristics of items in terms of contexts of use and level of formality, thus further contributing to the defining features of ME. Acknowledging the fact that ME lexical items may switch from one sub-type to another based on contexts and respondents, labeling each item as exclusively basilectal, mesolectal or acrolectal is not the objective of the study. Thus, for the purpose of this study, not all lexical items are placed within the continuum, but only those that can be closely associated with the defined characteristics of the ME continuum model. This is based on the background of characters as well as the author's own interpretation, while using previous findings, when appropriate, as the basis of the analysis.

The analysis is to focus on the lexical and syntactic aspects of the data. Thus, in most parts, the description is within the boundary of these two features. As stated in the Objectives of Study, the description of data is to be done with reference to ME lexical and syntactic features established in previous works, comparison with SBE, models of ME continuum, and to a lesser extent, pragmatic and phonological functions. Pragmatic/discourse functions are crucial in the interpretation of meaning of certain lexical items such as 'ah' and 'lah', thus these are included in the analysis. The study does not look into phonological variables in detail, except for certain lexical features such as particles and exclamations that warrant such explanation. These specifications can be considered as the scope of the study, instead of limitations.

1.6   LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The fact that this is a qualitative study suggests that the analysis of data could be interpretative, and thus not conclusive. This limitation is minimized by a close reference to previous works and framework used in the field.

As this is a very detailed qualitative study of the linguistic features of ME, the analysis is to focus merely on one movie. This may seem unreliable if the aim is to represent the vast majority of Malaysian-produced English movies. A greater corpus is indeed necessary in that case. With this in mind, the movie studied is not chosen to portray the kind of language that is used in all local English movies. Nonetheless, the data gathered can be sufficiently utilized in describing the stable features of ME established in previous works, thus creating an understanding of the forms and functions of these features.

Another limitation is in the nature of movies themselves. One may argue that movies are scripted reality, thus not as valuable as real life speech data in the study of ME. Indeed, movies are scripted, so are most radio and TV ads, talk shows, cartoon strips and sitcoms. A movie, as stressed earlier, is just another potentially useful source of data in this field. What matters most is the reliability of the data it carries. A scriptwriter normally writes based on his real life observations, experiences and intuitions of the kinds of characters he wishes to portray as relevant to the setting and contexts involved. Hence, whilst the scripted nature of a movie cannot be changed, a good script should represent real language as closely as possible in order to make the characters 'alive' and appealing to the real audience.