

The Use of Repetitive Structures among Malaysians

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities of using English in a bilingual context. It looks at some common forms of repetitions and reduplications that exist among speakers of the Malay and Tamil languages in Malaysia which is easily transferred into their English discourse. While most proficient speakers of English generally recognize it as awkward and inaccurate word use, the message is generally understood and accepted due to the cross cultural mix of the society. Less proficient speakers are either unaware of the awkward structure or ambivalent to its usage. The first part of the article sets out to investigate the various forms of reduplications that exist in Malay and Tamil and how such forms are used in the learners' discourse. The second part explains the semantic and syntactical organization that enables such forms to be repeated meaningfully. It further explores the reasons for people wanting to retain such repetitive structures despite realizing its inaccuracy and calls for some level of flexibility in the way English should be used in second language environments. The article has implications for both bilingual education and socio cultural identities.

Keywords: Reduplication, repetition, cultural identity, code mixing, language transfer

Introduction

In Malaysia, it is common to come across speakers who begin a conversation in one language and then switch to a number of other vernaculars before reverting to the initial language again. Such conversations can go on for a while, with speakers introducing word forms in the form of reduplications and repetitive structures that often make little sense to the outsider or monolingual speaker. To an unaccustomed listener, the situation can be awkward because it often leaves the listener wondering whether the repetition was the result of a slip of the tongue, or meant to serve as a vital piece of information, which the listener had actually missed. Such are the intricacies and complexities of language transfer and code mixing in places where a number of languages are spoken by the community and boundaries between languages are blurred. This situation can be quite pronounced in Malaysia where a number of languages (e.g. Malay and Tamil) which use repetitive structures at both the semantic and syntactical level coexist. Speakers in their zest to get on with the conversation, often find it necessary to use both words and concepts from their first language to explain terms in English. Nevertheless, this behavior is acceptable in informal conditions, because this is a nation where there are more bilinguals compared to monolinguals and people rarely keep their languages separate. Even within the monolingual mode, there is evidence of occasional codemixing and repetition regardless of the context of use. While codeswitching and codemixing are generally acknowledged (Gill, 2002), the widespread application of reduplication and repetitive structures in English discourse by Malaysians is rarely discussed and often overlooked as a transitional phase which speakers overcome as they become proficient in the language. This level of complacency can be related to the socio cultural mix of the population, where interjections, codemixing and borrowings are common features of language use and society has developed a level of tolerance over such intrusions. Nevertheless, the rampant use of repetitive structures in English has become problematic, where policy makers and language instructors see it necessary for speakers to use native speaker conventions that include accurate and appropriate language forms and structures. With the region's emphasis on using English as the language for Science and Technology and Business, there is increasing concern that Malaysians must exercise greater control over the way they speak and communicate in English (Gill, 2002). Current consensus being that code switching, codemixing, borrowing and cross linguistic transfers reflect deficits in the learners' linguistic

performance and sloppiness. As a result, language teachers in their earnestness to improve learner performance seem overly concerned with making students use language accurately and appropriately. This has contributed to a general reluctance among learners to communicate in English. In order to get learners to communicate effectively and appropriately, instructors and policy makers must first identify the specific linguistic structures that effect performance, examine the role of these structures in the first language (L1) and its effect on the second language (L2) and finally look at ways to get learners to understand the differences between the different languages. This article aims to look at the ways society uses repetitions and reduplications to think and communicate and how its application can expend and curtail the functions of the second language. It also looks at language as a means of expression, where undue restrictions can inhibit speakers from communicating in the language altogether.

Language Use in Malaysia

Repetitions and reduplication are two particular linguistic features that are specific to both the Tamil and Malay language in Malaysia. Thus, it comes as no surprise when a large percentage of the population uses these forms in their daily communication. However, when these structures get transferred into English usage, Malaysians appear either apologetic or defensive about this cross linguistic influence, often attributing it to laziness or sloppy habits of the speaker. Little is made of the fact that the average Malaysian is probably unaware of the inaccurate linguistic form or least concerned about the inappropriateness of the awkward structure. After all, the message is easily understood by the immediate society. In addition, since repetitions happen to be a part of the local culture, it is generally acceptable in everyday conversation. Also, it can be argued that Malaysians are capable of differentiating between accurate and appropriate word use. Unfortunately, the last assumption is not always true especially in the rural areas. In a nation, where English is merely a legacy of the colonial past the language classroom happens to be only place where the learners gets to use English. Teachers often do not serve as the best models for language use. In addition, with the limited amount of time given to face to face interaction and insufficient knowledge of the target language, an increasing number of learners are relying on coping strategies such as borrowing, codemixing, word transfer to perform in English. Then again, anyone familiar with the second language acquisition process would recognize that codeswitching, codemixing and transfer of word forms such repetition and reduplications do not occur at random. Instructors must first realize that a learner constructs a sentence such as in (1), because the structures exists in their first language at both word and sentence level and learners are unable to tell the difference between literal meaning and peripheral meaning.

(1)

Student 1: * You cannot *play play* with this serious matter.

Student 2: *Why? Got eye-eye nearby, huh?

or

Student 1: You should not take matters lightly. This is a serious.

Student 2: Why? Is the police nearby?

The repetition of the word play (play-play) in (1) is intended as a progressive noun. The speaker wants the listener to reconsider his current preoccupation because of the gravity of the situation. It comes from the Malay phrase "*Jungian main-main*" (do not play-play). However, student 2's reply "eye-eye" is a direct translation from the Malay noun "mata-mata" (policeman), demonstrating that repetitions occur at both word and phrasal levels.

Language is a system of representation and the way individuals think is related to their language (Thomas & Wareing, 2001). According to the theory of linguistic relativity, different cultures interpret the world in different ways and their languages encode these differences. Similarly, repetitive structures are more widely used among speakers of Malay and Tamil, because it is an important linguistic feature of both languages. Since people often articulate the way they see the world, when speakers are forced to use their L1 knowledge to make meanings in their L2, such structures stand out, because the L2 does not recognize the features in the same way. Currently, for most L2 learners,

their first language provides the framework for their thoughts. As stated by Sapir Whorf, "... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choice of interpretation (cited in Thomas and Wareing, 2001, p. 24). In other words, once a linguistic system is in place, it goes on to influence the way in which members of that speech community talk about and interpret their world. Of course, as the learners gain greater fluency and competency in the L2, the learner begins to notice the differences and gradually begins to think in the L2 and use the L2 structures. Thus, instructors who consistently notice their learners using repetitive structures in both spoken and written discourse must first understand the reasons for the learners need to use repetitive structures. They must first understand that there can be a number of reasons for the learner wanting to use a specific repetitive structure and then decide how it affects the learners' discourse. This does not imply that teachers must attend to every repetitive structure, but understanding how different cultural groups use a specific linguistic form can help teachers come up with a more systematic and organized explanation for why specific words are used in such a manner, and why learners think in a particular manner. Instructors must also recognize that repetitions and reduplications are a distinct aspects of both the Malay and Tamil language and reflective of the culture, its views and acts. Thus, teachers can highlight the differences and help learners understand from one another cultural experience.

In learning a second language, some learners go on to become fluent speakers within a shorter time, while others take a longer time. Much of this has to do with individual differences. Learners will continue to rely on their first language knowledge to construct new words, meanings and concepts in the L2 when they do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge about the L2. The current interactionist view of comprehensible input is insufficient for L2 learners to learn about vocabulary and grammar. In communities where a number of learners share similar linguistic experiences, learners prefer to use the L1 structure because they are unfamiliar with the rules and forms of the L2. Besides, they coexist in a community that speaks a variety of comprehensible languages. Thus, their motivation to use appropriate and accurate forms is not great. Young adolescence in particular find it easier to use repetitive structures rather than look for the exact words, because certain repetitive structures serve as metaphors for the way they think. They can easily use concrete words to describe abstract concepts such as in (2) (e.g. "...disturb-disturb" [... to stir]). While the structure is appropriate in Malay discourse, it is awkward when used with English. Ironically, the society has little trouble in understanding it.

(2) Malay
Pembeli: *Saya minta teh susu.
 Mana susunya?*
Pekedai: *Kacau-kacau sikit.*

English
Customer: I asked for tea with milk.
 Where's the milk?
Waiter: * Disturb disturb a bit. (Stir it a little)

In this matter, language teachers will soon realize that mere correction of the errors and providing explanations for accurate forms will not help learners learn, because such errors happen to be a regular features of the language and difficult to eradicate. Teachers teaching in the Malaysian context will soon realize that repetitions happen to one of the more difficult forms of linguistic transfer that they must be dealt with. To help learners understand the appropriate forms and functions of such structures, teachers need to have a good understanding of the various forms of reduplications and repetitions, their role in concept formation in the first languages, before they can help learners learn the L2.

Defining Reduplication and Repetition

Reduplication is a morphological process in which the root, stem of a word or a part of it is repeated. Repetition of the entire base yields full reduplication (e.g. *gobble gobble*) and repetition of part of the base yields partial reduplication (e.g. *kitkat, hurly burly*). Tannen (1987) describes it as a limitless resource for individual creativity and the central linguistic meaning making strategy. While reduplication exists among wide ranges of language groups, its level of linguistic productivity varies and is sometimes used interchangeably with repetition.

In English, *full reduplication* involves putting together a sound or morpheme to bring forth an entirely new grammatical function or semantic feature to provide emphasis as indicated in (3). However, with

the Malay language, reduplicated nouns help form both singular (4a) and plural nouns (4b), and verb phrases become adverbial phrases as indicated in (5).

(3) English

Are you LEAVING-leaving now? are you 'really' leaving (for good) or merely stepping out for a minute?

(Ghomeshi et.al, 2004)

(4a) Malay (noun)

[*Rama-rama*] moth
 [*mata-mata*] policeman

(4b)

[*murid*] pupil
 [*murid-murid*] pupils
 [*Dia murid sekolah rendah*] S/He is a primary school pupil
 [*Mereka murid –murid sekolah rendah*] They are primary school pupils

(5) Malay (verb)

[*kuat*] loud
 [*kuat-kuat*] to speak / to read loudly
 [*Suaranya kuat*] His voice is loud
 [*Sila bercakap kuat-kuat*] Please speak loudly

As for Tamil, repetitions derive their reciprocal forms from reflexive forms by total as in (6).

(6) Tamil

[*avar*] he /himself
 [*avar-avar*] he (to) himself
 [*avar-avar valkai*] he to his own life

(Nadarajan, 2006)

In sum, it is possible for speakers of Malay or Tamil to use repetitive forms to replace a singular noun (7), a plural noun (8) or an adverbial phrase as in (9).

Malay

[*kisah*] story
 [*cerita*] story, to tell a story
 [*cerita-cerita*] to continuously relate

Sentence

[*Dia mula cerita kisahnya yang sedih*] * he began to **story story** his sad story (or) he began to tell his sad tale.

Tamil

[*kathai*] story

[*kathai-katha*] One story after another
 [*kathaikiran*] telling a story

Sentence

[[*avan kathai-kathaiyai sonnan*] He told story after story

(8) [*Murid-murid sekolah perlu awal*] * school **pupil pupil** must be early (or)
 students need to be present early ...

[*Jangan jerit-jerit pada sebelah pagi*] * do not **shout shout** in the morning (or)
 avoid being too loud in the morning

Partial reduplication involves reduplication of only a part of a word (e.g. *chit-chat, flip-flop*). In Malay, reduplicated forms indicate a continuous process and the progressive form (e.g. *-keep Ving; is Vin; Vs*) and this is done by adding a prefix 'ber' before the base and reduplicating the base; that is (ber) + base + root as in (10) and (11).

(10) [*ketuk*] peck
 [*berketuk*] to peck
 [*berketuk-ketuk*] keeps pecking / is pecking / pecks

(11) [*sorak*] cheer
 [*bersorak*] to cheer
 [*bersorak-sorak*] keep cheering / is cheering/ cheers

Thus, a typical English sentence would take the form of (12) and (13).

*The chicken peck at the soil.

*All the people *cheering* when they scored a goal.

Given the nature of the above sentence forms, it has to be noted that concepts that govern learner thoughts are not mere matters of intellect and fluency in the language, rather ingrained in their worldviews. Individuals are governed by their conceptual system and they rely on it to move their conversation forward (Lakoff, 1980). This is obvious in Malay, where time is represented through the adverb of time (e.g. *yesterday, a week ago*) and tenses are absent. Therefore, learners often ignore the tenses, since the adverbs of time are already there to indicate time (e.g. **Yesterday I walk walk to school/ *Today I walk walk to school*). While, most learners do learn to notice the differences through instruction and informal exposure, a teacher should not be surprised if students continue to construct sentences that do not include the correct tense (e.g. **Today, I go to school; *Yesterday, I go to school and *Tomorrow I go to school*).

Reduplication at the Syntactical Level

In addition to the word level, both Malay and Tamil make allowances for a number of inflectional and derivational forms to be attached to their nouns and verbs. These forms help change the meanings and functions of the verbs and nouns in countless ways as illustrated in (14) and (15). In (14) the suffix adds emphasis while in (15) it serves to introduce multiple meanings.

(14) **Tamil-suffix**

[ithu] (root)- 'this'	[atthu] (root) - 'that'
[ithu + -vum] > [ithuvum] – 'this too'	[atthuvum] – 'that too'
[ithu + -an] > [ithuthan] - 'only this'	[atthuthan] – 'only that'

(15) **Malay- prefix and suffix**

[Ikat] (root) - 'tie '	[Ikat +kan] >[ikatkan] – 'to tie'
[Ikat-ikat] – 'tie several times'	[Mengikat- ikat] > 'continue tying'
[Ter-ikat]- 'attached'	[Terikat-ikat]– 'continuously attached'
[Terikat-ikatkan]- 'intentionally attach'	[Ikat-ikatan]- 'bundles that are tied up'

Learners who literally translate a sentence from the L1 to the L2 would end up constructing a phrase such as (16).

(16)

* I only want this book and this book I want (to provide emphasis)

* After tying and tying the sticks for a while, he (Continuity)

Similarly with reduplication of interrogative pronouns, they specify different kinds of objects or links to different objects as indicated in (17) and (18). Learners find this useful when they need to cover a broad spectrum of issues.

(17) Tamil	English
a. <i>Enna + enna -> enn-enna</i>	What kinds of things (are there)?
b. <i>Enna + enna -> enn-ennavo</i>	Many kinds of things.
c. <i>Enge +enge -> enge-enge</i>	Where , in what different places?
d. <i>Enge+ enge -> engengo</i>	Many different places.
(18) Malay	English
apa + apa → apa apa yang kamu hendak	Whatever you want/desire...
di mana+ mana → dimana mana sahaja ...	Wherever ...
bila + bilapun → bila-bila	Whenever needed ...

The words 'enna' (what) and 'enge' (where) in Tamil are repeated to demonstrate plurality. However, the inflection (-a) at the end of the words, can turn it into an interrogative pronoun while adding an (-o) will give it distributive qualities. Similarly with Malay, 'mana' (where) can be repeated to indicate plurality and provide distributive quality. The prefix (*di*) at the beginning of the word however places a restriction (*eg. where in*) while adding the suffix (*pun*) will give it restrictive qualities. These forms often involve simple repetitions, where different speakers repeat each other's words to push their topic forward (McCarthy, 1998) as made evident through the conversation in (19).

(19) Malay

S1: *Bas akan mengambil siapa siapa yang hendak pergi*
S2: *Tetapi saya perlu senarai mengenai apa apa barang yang perlu dibawa.*
S1: *Kalau awak boleh beritahu kemana-mana awak hendak pergi jalan jalan...*

English

S1: The bus will take *who who* wants to come.
S2: But I want to know *what what* things we have to bring along.
S1: Well, if you tell me *where where* you want to go *walk walk*...

(Or)

S1: The bus will take whoever is interested
S2: But I need to know what we need to bring along
S1: Well, if you would be willing to tell me where you want to go...

Within a broader context, the use of repetitions and inflections provide a degree of flexibility for both Malay and Tamil language speakers, since it enables users to construct lexical chains of connected words in running discourse that moves the conversation forward. Here content is reiterated in paraphrase forms or alternative lexical forms, thus making it possible for meanings to become fixed in context under the circumstances created by the speakers. The repeated words then, take on specific roles in the negotiation of meaning among its speakers. The English language however, makes little allowance for echoic repetition except within poetry and advertising language. This results in L2 learners being discredited for using repetitive forms and structures by instructors, proficient speakers and public at large. While, it is not wrong for the dominant public to expect accuracy and appropriacy during language use, it is equally important to recognize the role such structures play in helping learners understand concepts and use it to interact. By demanding that learners avoid repetitive structure and use specific language forms, the society runs the risk of preventing learners from using the language for fear of being ridiculed, criticized and punished. It is important to realize that in a society where members speak a number of languages, learners do not need to stick to one language to interact. Policy makers and language teachers will only have themselves to blame, if less and less speakers want to use the English language, because they are not motivated to use English and prefer to interact in the L1. This can become problematic in higher learning institutions, because learners no longer find it comfortable to read, write and speak in English. When lectures are conducted in English, these learners will find it necessary to spend their time decoding unfamiliar words, while other students are using their mental space to interact and comprehend discourse. It is therefore, the responsibility of language teachers to ensure that learners are first comfortable with the language and before ensuring that use it like native speakers.

Rationale for the Use of Repetitions in Discourse

Language teachers who persistently insist that learners use language in a specific manner run the risk of making their students become less confident in their language ability. Adult learners must be explicitly taught about the differences between repetitive word use and usage in the L1 and L2. Also, learners must know the high frequency words in the language. Knowing a large number of words will help learners identify appropriate word and concepts without having to revert to L1 concepts and word forms. As vocabulary researchers (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2001; Laufer, 1997) state, teaching L2 learners the first 3000 word families or the first 5000 words would enable them to comprehend most words used in authentic conversation and text. While lack of words can be one of the main reasons for learners falling back on their L1 when making form meaning links in the L2, teachers must also understand that learners can also use repetitive structures to express their creativity as well as identity. Teachers need to understand their learners' needs and difference before taking appropriate measures to help them with their L2 performance.



A learner, who is unable to find a word or phrase in the target language, automatically falls back on his existing L1 knowledge to make the form meaning association. The missing word could be in the form of a technical term, a jargon/ register that the learner is unable produce and therefore forced to substitute. By repeating the word that precedes the difficult word, the speaker will be able to get the audience to notice, attend and comprehend (e.g. *look, looks ... a tiny, tiny bug*). In addition, these words may contain concepts which have no equivalent in the target language and the speaker is forced to use the structure as it exists in the L1 (e.g. you have to *watch watch* that house tonight). Repetition may be used to reinforce a request (e.g. *Don't *play play* with that knife). Repetition and reduplication can also be used to clarify a point (e.g. *cut, cut here*). It projects the conversation forward. There is also a socio cultural dimension to this behavior. Repetition is used to demonstrate a common identity. Speakers deliberately use repetitive structures that are language specific to indicate solidarity and to gain acceptance into the inner group or to intentionally keep an individual out. Learners (especially adolescents) with limited proficiency tend to use such structures as a demonstration of their adherence to their grassroot values. Others use it to buy time, repeating specific words, while they think of the next word. Some speakers contribute to the conversation with additional repetitions to identify with the topic or to be accepted but this is dependent on the social status of the first speaker. Repetition are also be used to inject humor (e.g. *don't play play ... or my wife will start to shout shout...*) or to break into an existing conversation, by introducing a different point (e.g. *come, come surely you do not believe that tale...*). Repetition can also indicate a change of attitude where speakers of a common majority language resist the widespread use of the target language. Using the L1 structures may be a demonstration of a social distance. Then again, these speakers may have a change of heart and switch to a more formal mannerism when required. However, the last few actions can have negative implications as well, because the marginalized speakers and less fluent speakers will avoid speaking altogether for fear of speaking out of place and being corrected or ridiculed.

Discussion

Enforcing existing assumptions about how and when language should be used and ridiculing those who do not speak accurately is another form of denial by the dominant society. There is a cultural dimension to the use of repetitive words in Malaysia, and teachers and policy makers must first acknowledge this. Then again, when speakers from a similar community continuously use the wrong form, teachers need to understand the underlying reasons for the learner's preference. This knowledge is useful for providing a more organized and systematic mode of instruction. Care must be taken to ensure that repetitive structures do not interfere with the overall meaning of the language. Young learners in particular must be given the confidence to use the language and express their creativity. Teachers must also make sure that learners do not learn the wrong things due to the wrong links and connections. In other words, teachers must understand that the strength of the connection between the form and its meaning often determines how readily the learner is able to retrieve the meaning when seeing or hearing the word form. Teachers addressing multiracial classes should be able to estimate the learning burden of words for each language community and what is involved in knowing a word. This knowledge will help teachers direct their teaching towards aspects that will need attention and towards aspects that will reveal underlying patterns so that later learning is easier (Nation, 2001, p. 24). It must also be acknowledged that the use of reduplication for expressive and aesthetic effect in English is more extensive than previously thought possible and new studies are constantly coming up with instances that show its usage to be much more widespread than originally believed. Thus, teachers need to be more flexible when it comes to use repetitive structures in English use and usage.

Overall, it might appear that examining the role of repetition and reduplication in the maintenance of English is trivial and perhaps misplaced, especially when there are other factors to consider. However, it must be noted that issues of language are particularly significant, especially when the majority of the population does not speak the assumed standard variety be it English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil etc. In addition, in most parts of the country, there is really no total immersion context and most learners depend on the teacher for comprehensible input. Unfortunately, the teachers themselves happen to be learners of English and thus unsure of the parameters. Most of all, as Ore (2006) states, "one of the significant functions of language is to serve the purpose of cultural transmission" (p. 218). Through language, children and adolescents in a multiracial nation learn about their cultural heritage and develop a sense of personal identity in relation to their group. Language is



ideological, and contains thoughts and symbols that serve as tools for learners to interpret their environment. In this situation, repetitions serve as tools that help define the speakers' perceptions of their world view. It helps them organize their experiences, perceptions, and concerns through word forms and repetitive chains. By allowing learners to express through their L1 experiences, teachers are helping to provide the scaffolding that will help learners gain confidence in using the language to think. When learners stop worrying over words, rules and forms, they begin to use their mind for other higher skills.

Conclusion

In a world where there appear to be greater emphasis on polarity (good-bad, wrong-right, appropriate-inappropriate), it is necessary to think of repetition and reduplication as little flights of imagination that makes individuals stop to think. It is the crutch that helps learners across difficult patches of linguistic gaps. As a form, reduplication is partly predictable and regular, corresponding to expected sound alternation patterns. However, as stated by Jakobson and Waugh, (1987) "it is not possible to predict that each pattern will undergo the same alternation for all languages and variations are not deterministic and the formulated rules should be modified based on different individual cases." The power of words like repetitions and reduplications lies in the fact that the members of a culture willingly share their meanings and values. Without that window, the world will never understand why a particular community thinks and act the way it does. Finally, every language and its contribution to English should be treated as a useful device that enables more people to communicate and understand one another, and acknowledging this makes for order in society (Ore, 2006)

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