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Tracing nativised irregular verbs in Malaysian English

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The alternate use of suffix –t and –ed among Malaysians has become a concern since it can denote conformity towards British English, American English or be deemed as a form of grammatical nativisation. This study aims to reveal the preferred suffix variant used by Malaysians when forming the past tense and past participle. A Malaysian online English newspaper corpus representing acrolectal Malaysian English was built to facilitate this study. Twelve irregular verbs that can take suffix –t and –ed were analysed using WordSmith Tools 5. Findings showed that Malaysians generally prefer to use suffix –ed when forming the past tense but opt for suffix –t when forming the past participle. The integration of morphological elements from both British English and American English into everyday use by Malaysians seems to be contributing towards grammatical nativisation, ultimately a standardised variety if it persists.

Keywords: Suffix; past tense; past participle; variety of English; Malaysian English

Introduction

A recent study of Malaysian English (henceforth, ME) by Tan (2013) prioritised the assimilation of English with local languages commonly used by Malaysians, namely Malay, Chinese and Tamil which alter the English linguistic systems. It shows that the emergence of ME is a result of its multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. English in postcolonial contexts, including ME, also known as New Englishes is different from Standard English (commonly represented by British English) in terms of phonological, lexical and grammatical features (Hajar & Shakila, 2014). Similar to most New Englishes from post-colonial nations in Southeast Asia, ME is en-route from a colloquial language to a standardised variety. It is worth noting that New Englishes have a set of sub-varieties that fall on a continuum where the nearest to Standard English is termed acrolect, followed by mesolect and basilect which are nationally intelligible and increasingly unintelligible sub-varieties respectively (Baskaran, 2005; Lowenberg, 1986; Platt, Weber, & Ho, 1984). This study looks at an acrolectal sub-variety represented by an electronic newspaper corpus. This sub-variety although regarded as "careful/educated usage at all linguistics levels, has been criticised as wrong and deemed unsuitable occasionally even by Malaysians" (Newbrook, 2006, p. 395). Only when the acrolectal forms are similar to Standard English, are they acceptable because countries where English is a native language have been portrayed as the "centres" which non-native varieties follow (Schneider, 2003).

Accepted as the official frame of reference in Malaysia, British English (BrE) has been taken as the pedagogical model since the postcolonial era despite the presence of a local variety with linguistic explicitness (Ooi, 2001). Schneider (2011) echoes this in claiming that postcolonial countries tend to exhibit characteristics similar to their mother

countries However, the incorporation of American English (AmE) linguistic elements by Malaysians seems inevitable, since Hernando Carnicero (2009-2010) asserted that AmE appears to be increasingly dominating English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This phenomenon could be attributed to wide exposure to AmE via mass media where it is extensively used in broadcasting, recording, and the cinematographic industries (Crystal, 2003). The penetration of American movies and songs in Malaysia has led to the use of AmE among Malaysians. This influence can be seen in research on the use of Internet slang and abbreviation among 60 local university students who acknowledge the influence of the Internet and American TV channels as factors contributing to the exposure and use of slang (Namvar & Ibrahim, 2014).

Both AmE and BrE are native varieties of English, but there are obvious differences between them in terms of pronunciation, grammar, spelling and lexis. For instance, the word *lorry* is used in BrE whereas the word *truck* is used in AmE to refer to a road vehicle that transports cargo. There are other, perhaps less obvious, differences between AmE and BrE in the use of suffixes which are one of the smallest yet most meaningful units of English language. Greenbaum and Nelson (2013) define the suffix as a bound morpheme that can be added at the end of a word to form a derivative or to serve as an inflectional ending. The latter, which are the focus of this paper, include verbs with –t ending in the past tense and past participle which can also have a regular –ed ending (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999). For instance, the verb *burn* accepts both –ed and –t suffixes (*burned/ burnt*) when forming the past tense and past participle. Greenbaum and Nelson (2013) and Biber et al. (1999) highlighted that usage of certain suffixes can depict noticeable difference in BrE and AmE where the –t variant is mostly used among British speakers but –ed is preferred by American speakers. Because the influence of AmE is progressing faster than that of BrE there are higher usages of –ed in circumstances when both endings are possible (De Clerck & Vanopstal, 2015).

Since Malaysia was once colonized by the British and has since taken BrE as a form of reference, it is hypothesised that Malaysians are more prone to using the morpheme ending –t than the ending –ed. This is in accordance with frequent debates on whether to conform to BrE or to make way for AmE, especially in the Malaysian education domain. For instance, Botley and Dillah (2007) found that the use of American spelling is considered as erroneous by Malaysians. Alternatively, the mixed use of both BrE and AmE among Malaysians found by Amin (2012) could be deemed a form of linguistic innovation developing a new variety of English. This mirrors Schneider's (2011) explanation of the evolution of New Englishes in which he stated that ME has entered the nativisation stage during which the linguistic transformation is made obvious.

This study aims to ascertain the suffix variation used by Malaysians and to reveal the extent to which the presumption of a strong influence from BrE is valid. This study intends to identify the frequency of irregular verbs with suffix –ed and –t in the past tense and past participle forms in ME, ultimately revealing the preferred suffix variant when forming the past tense and past participle. Although changes in morphology can be very subtle, the use of inflection among Malaysians can still be interpreted as an indication towards achieving grammatical nativisation, which helps strengthen the identity of ME as a new variety of English. Schneider (2003), David and Dumanig (2008), and Tan (2013) claim that ME is undergoing nativisation as shown in its peculiar features of language organisation, but many conservative English speakers remain hesitant in accepting nativised linguistic features as they consider such a move would deteriorate and corrupt the Standard English. This study wishes to contribute to making ME a legitimate new variety which can be a representation of Malaysian identity. Similar to Tan (2013),

this study reiterates the importance of separating nativised features from learner errors and accepting the former.

Malaysian English

The studies on nativised or localised lexical and grammatical features reviewed below are examples of linguistic transfers depicting the restructuring of the English language; they are in accordance with the nativisation phase of Schneider's Dynamic Model. Schneider (2003) asserted that English in Malaysia had fulfilled the criteria of nativisation in terms of socio-political background, identity construction, language attitudes and linguistic developments. Politically, Malaysia retains loose ties with its coloniser; indigenous Malaysians see themselves as Malaysians and members of their own ethnicity; Malaysians are seen debating whether or not linguistic variations should be accepted and; localised forms of English are observed at all linguistics levels especially in vocabulary, phonology and grammar.

Linguistic transfers from local languages have restructured the English language in Malaysia and this reflects the nativisation phase of Schneider's Dynamic Model. Evidence is provided by Azirah and Leitner (2011), David and Dumanig (2008), Hajar (2013), and Tan (2009, 2014) who analysed the written form that distinguishes and reflects the identity of ME. Local loan words, compound blends and loan translations such as *kiasu, koay-teow soup* and *fish ball* were found to be used as attempts to preserve local culture and practices (Tan, 2009). The currency of loan words from local languages and from Arabic, a donor language to ME was analysed by Azirah and Leitner (2011) who revealed that there are many words referring to pan-ethnic ME but low dictionary coverage makes it difficult to draw a conclusion. Hajar (2013) when comparing Malay lexis borrowing in ME and Singapore English, found that ME is more accepting of the borrowing (compared to Singaporean English) indicating, the evolution and reflection of ME speakers' identity. In addition, local terms, English loanwords and lexical creations were found in ME newspapers (David & Dumanig, 2008; Tan, 2014) and Tan (2014) noted that it is the local community which has produced these lexes and they are widely used across different domains. In short, past studies have reaffirmed Schneider's (2003) position that ME, similar to other New Englishes is undergoing nativisation as shown in the abundance of loanwords highlighted. Past researchers attributed the emergence of loanwords in ME to its contact with local languages, namely Malay, Chinese dialects, Indian languages (Azirah & Leitner, 2011; Hajar, 2013; Tan, 2013).

Investigations on core English words produced by Malaysians which should be central to legitimising ME have been side-lined (Tan, 2014). One of the earlier studies of core English words (Ooi, 2001) discovered that "*gazetting* and *schooling*" are used as verbs in a newspaper corpus made up of the New Straits Times, besides being nouns in Standard English. Syntactical variation seems to be under-investigated but there are three prominent studies that looked into grammatical features in ME using newspapers as their source of data. Firstly, Newbrook (2006) analysed two main ME newspaper in the early 1990s revealing ten categories of grammatical features which he confirmed are distinctively Malaysian. Secondly, Imran (2010) who semantically analysed the prepositions *at, in, on* in ME, New Zealand English and BrE corpora found the usage of prepositions *at* and *on* with regard to subject and activity (not concrete space) is more frequent while prepositions *at* and *on* indicating time are less frequent in the Malaysian corpus. Thirdly, Tan (2013) who adopted a lexico-grammatical approach to examine four nativised prepositional verbs namely *discuss about*, *discuss on*, *comprise of* and *demand for* in ME with their corresponding more established single-word verbs detected higher

occurrences of the latter compared to the former; which means that avoidance of nativised grammar was observed in acrolectal ME. Most findings of past studies on syntactical variation show little to no difference between ME and BrE. This is probably a result of the prescriptive view advocated by the non-native users of English themselves in conforming to Standard English norms. Attention should now be shifted to investigation of morpholgical variation in ME to find out whether or not nativisation occurs at the morphological level.

Method

A corpus-based methodology was adopted to understand trends in the selection of suffixes –t and –ed amongst Malaysians when forming the past tense and past participle. The corpus constructed consisted of news articles from a ME electronic news portal, i.e. *The Star Online* (known as e-MEN henceforth). Produced and maintained by journalists and editors, local English newspapers are understood by Malaysians (Tan, 2014). *The Star Online* was launched in 1995 and is an electronic version of *The Star* newspaper printed edition which is one of the oldest English newspapers in Malaysia (founded in 1971). However, due to the limited availability of news stored in *The Star Online* archive, the data compiled from the news portal comprised only news articles from 2006 to 2012. Newspapers were chosen for this study because the language used is rather diverse as a result of the presence of various text types, genres, topics, styles, and levels of formality, thus, offering insights into language variation used by the community (Tan, 2014, p. 168). To ensure that the data is reflective of linguistic patterns among Malaysian writers, the data included news reports of various types namely nation, business, and sports which were written by local writers. The details of e-MEN can be seen in Table 1. It is evident that the distribution of genre is unbalanced because national news made up 41% of the total number of words while business and sports news made up 37% and 22% respectively. The relatively high number of words in the national news category is caused by the inclusion of hard news that is made up of different types comprising, among others, politics, crime, court, agricultural and community. The differing text lengths coincides with (Meyer, as cited in Clancy, 2010) who supported the inclusion of different kinds of text in corpora instead of using only longer texts.

Table 1. Details of e-MEN

Genre	Number of texts	Number of words (token)
National news	90, 836	36, 037, 196
Business	68, 676	32, 465, 394
Sports	51, 972	20, 163, 579
Total	211, 484	88, 666, 169

Before the data was collected, 12 predetermined irregular verbs which can take both suffix variant –t and –ed in forming the past tense and past participle (*leap, kneel, bless, spell, spoil, smell, spill, lean, dwell, dream, learn* and *burn*) were adopted from De Clerck and Vanopstal's (2015) research. These words were checked against the Oxford English

Dictionary online to confirm that they are capable of taking both suffix variants when forming the past tense and past participle.

Spyder (software) was used to extract and convert all newspaper articles from *The Star Online* archives into text documents (*.txt). Upon completion, these saved texts were transferred to WordSmith Tools version 5.0 (WST5), a program that helps generate wordlists, identify keywords and display concordances (Scott, 2016). However, only the concordance feature was used in this study. Concordances of the 12 irregular verbs were generated. Instances where the 12 verbs were used as past tense or past participle were determined based on the accompanying words within the concordance lines. Occurrences of these 12 words in other word classes were eliminated. All occurrences of the verbs used as either past tense or past participle with either of the two suffixes in ME (represented by e-MEN) were recorded. A comparison between the frequency of suffix –ed and –t in both forms was made.

Findings

The total frequency in the ME corpus of the 12 verbs was 11,684 of which (regardless of their suffix), 3,289 were in past tense and 8,395 were past participles (Table 2). Of the total, 3,588 occurrences take the –ed suffix and 8,096 the –t suffix. Table 3 shows a breakdown by tense and suffix form. It is clear from Table 2 that the –t suffix is considerably more frequent than the –ed suffix in e-MEN, more than double. With the exception of the words *lean, spill* and *bles*s, all other words show preference for the –t suffix.

Table 2. Total occurrences of verbs taking suffix –ed and –t in e-MEN

Words	-ed	-t	Total	
	N	N	N	%
Bless	408	0	408	3.49
Burn	364	751	1,115	9.55
Dream	159	164	323	2.76
Dwell	12	14	26	0.22
Kneel	11	36	47	0.40
Lean	57	7	64	0.55
Leap	97	208	305	2.62
Learn	1,846	6,434	8,280	70.87
Smell	59	73	132	1.13
Spell	145	209	354	3.03
Spill	287	22	309	2.64
Spoil	143	178	321	2.74
Total	3,588	8,096	11,684	100.0

Table 3. Frequency of verbs with suffix –ed and –t in past tense and past participle forms

Words	Past Tense		Past Participle	
	-ed	-t	-ed	-t
Bless	11	0	397	0
Burn	170	107	194	644
Dream	79	91	80	73
Dwell	8	12	4	2
Kneel	10	31	1	5
Lean	44	7	13	0
Leap	82	182	15	26
Learn	938	966	908	5468
Smell	55	70	4	3
Spell	64	46	81	163
Spill	185	7	102	15
Spoil	105	19	38	159
Total	1751	1538	1837	6558

At first glance, Table 3 indicates that the –ed suffix seems to be more popular in the formation of the past tense, as its total frequency (1751) is somewhat higher than for the –t suffix (1,538). However, the two suffix variants are relatively equally preferred for forming past tense with user preference favouring the –ed suffix for *bless, spell, spoil, spill, lean* and *burn* but the–t suffix for *leap, kneel, smell, dwell, dream* and *learn*. Suffix preferences in forming the past participle are, conversely, unbalanced. In this case the occurrences for the –t ending are almost four times greater than for the –ed ending. Nevertheless, Malaysians do use both suffix variants. They prefer using the –ed ending to form the past participle for *bless, smell, spill, lean, dwell and dream* and the –t ending for *leap, kneel, spell, spoil, learn* and *burn*.

Table 4 shows some example concordance lines of five frequently occurring verbs (*learn, spill, burn, spoil*, and *leap*) taking the –ed suffix in the past tense. These examples represent a range of preferences because whereas *bless* conforms fully to the –ed ending, *burn, spill* and *spoil* use both suffixes but lean heavily towards the –ed suffix (see Table 3). Table 5 shows concordance lines of *learn, leap, burn, dream*, and *smell* taking the –t suffix to form the past tense. Equally, these examples represent a range of user preferences. The preference for the –t suffix is more than twice as high as for the –ed suffix for *leap*, whereas *kneel, smell, dream* and *learn* exhibit only a moderate to weak preference for the –t suffix.

Table 4. Concordance list for five frequently occurring irregular verbs taking suffix –ed to form past tense

N	Concordance
1	and Keegan Bradley. Rosaforte said he **learned** of the gathering from Snedeker
3	lesson. The 64-year-old instructor, who **learned** the art from a master in China
6	government." FirstGroup said that it **learned** of the reversal late on Tuesday

N	Concordance
3	ran aground on the same reef and **spilled** nearly 11 million gallons (41
17	of the staff came to help us after he **spilled** tom yam on my son, who was
19	after an employee of his restaurant **spilled** soup on a boy. Technical

N	Concordance
1	, was executed Tuesday. The fire there **burned** more than 6,700 acres (2,700 ha)
3	December 29, 2009 Title: Man who **burned** CM *fs* photo attached
20	the absence of star striker Adriano, who **burned** his foot in a household accident

N	Concordance
3	a 3-3 draw at Hamburg, Bonussia again **spoiled** Hamburgs party as Canada
4	21, 2004 issue which defamed her and **spoiled** her reputation. In a statement of
5	the 12th fastest time in the heats and **spoiled** an anticipated showdown with

N	Concordance
9	-The number of troubled U.S. banks **leaped** to the highest level in about five
10	was ended by Panesar when Anderson **leaped** high at mid-on to catch the latter
11	away to the ground, Giants players **leaped** with joy and purple confetti fell

Table 5. Concordance list for five most occurring irregular verbs taking suffix –t to form past tense

N	Concordance
1	today. The Malaysian team only **learnt** on Monday morning that the
24	house since 3pm on Monday when he **learnt** that the couple had returned to
26	experience, *f* she said, adding that she **learnt** everything about photography

N	Concordance
1	to Juan Manuel Diaz and Mauro Boselli **leapt** between defenders Carles Puyol
3	Monday. In currencies, the yen dollar **leapt** to 87.40 from 86.30. The euro fell
4	. Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes **leapt** to tip Francisco Chica's swerving

N	Concordance
1	10-day-old chicks perished in a fire that **burnt** down a barn in a chicken farm
39	About 50 Perak Umno Youth members **burnt** the American and Israeli flags in
151	body to a nearby cemetery where he **burnt** the body using kerosene. After

N	Concordance
3	in a ringside interview. Its amazing, I **dreamt** of this now its reality, its real…
9	was unable to open. In the second, he **dreamt** his son came home and sat on
10	of his son*fs* being taken captive, Jusoh **dreamt** of him knocking on a locked door

N	Concordance
6	tightened, *f* he said, adding that if they **smelt** gas, they should immediately
7	incident came to light when neighbours **smelt** a stench from the house and
8	on top in front of his door. He said he **smelt** kerosene and felt suspicious *f* 1

Concordance examples of suffix preferences for forming the past participle are shown in Table 6 (–t suffix) and Table 7 (–ed suffix). With the verb *bless*, preferences are similar in forming the past participle as in forming the past tense. That is, preference is entirely for the –ed ending. *Lean* also is only used with the –ed suffix for past participle formation. Some other words display a strong preference for the –t ending (*spell, spoil, burn and learn*). *Kneel* has a low total frequency but is preferred with the –t ending for forming the past participle. *Dwell, smell, dream* and *leap* exhibit relatively balanced preferences for both suffix variants.

Table 6. Concordance list for three frequently occurring irregular verbs taking suffix –t to form past participle

N	Concordance
7	A low 16ₒC and a high 30ₒC. *f*We have **learnt** that the weather there is a bit
10	To quit was for personal reasons. It is **learnt** that Sulaiman, who is Parti
11	A racial one. *f*The DAP leadership has **learnt** from the mistake, *f* he said. In a

N	Concordance
28	BATU PAHAT: Two teenagers were **burnt** to death when their car rammed
30	fire was believed to have started, were **burnt** to the ground. The drinks stall
31	threatened, shot at and their vehicles **burnt** by smugglers. He said the recent

N	Concordance
6	with unscrupulous taxi drivers had **spoilt** their vacation, f she said. A
7	on Saturday, telling how he had **spoilt** another pair of shoes. Dozens of
34	. Although the afternoon session was **spoilt** by rain, Stoner said he learned

Table 7. Concordance list for ~~top~~ three frequently occurring irregular verbs taking suffix –ed to form past participle

N	Concordance
9	to Gigi Lai-Ka Yee in the hopes of being **blessed** with a baby with her
23	got an alternative out there that's been **blessed** by the government," said Mark
26	and the rakyat. Those who have been **blessed** by God should offer their

N	Concordance
14	Muar at that time, was believed to have **leaned** over the tank to watch the fish
19	even in bad times. To do it, IBM has **leaned** on its ability to cut its own costs
20	demonstrated to the court how he had **leaned** out of the patrol car in a

N	Concordance
2	said an estimate on how much fuel was **spilled** would have to wait until the
5	it wasn't clear yet how much fuel had **spilled** but there was a fuel sheen about
7	in production in manufacturing has **spilled** into electricity production, *f* said

To summarise, the –ed form is slightly more preferred when forming the past tense but, in contrast, there is a strong preference for the –t suffix when forming the past participle (see totals in Table 3 for details).

Acceptability of a local variety

The findings of this study contradict the hypothesis of Greenbaum and Nelson (2013) that the use of suffixes –ed and –t interchangeably could suggest conformity towards either BrE or AmE. They show that Malaysians are more likely to incorporate both varieties of English because both suffixes are used when forming the past tense and past participle. This does not contradict Hernando Carnicero's (2009-2010) suggestion that AmE has a big influence on the English as a Second Language (ESL) setting, nor Ooi's (2001) claim that BrE is the standard pedagogical model in Malaysia. While Biber et al. (1999) pointed that a preference in selecting between suffix variants –t and –ed is usually clear, the incorporation of both suffix variants by Malaysians can nevertheless be viewed as a form of initiative towards attaining an original, new variety of English. Although Malaysians exhibit a greater preference for suffix –t in this study, which supports the stand by Schneider (2011) that Malaysia, being a colonised country is still exhibiting a variety similar to BrE, and that conservative journalists will submit to the traditional pattern that is using suffix –t as a way to conform to BrE, it is nevertheless a matter of time to see whether the acceptance of both suffix –t and suffix –ed can be a part of the new variety, readily accepted and adopted by the majority. This is because, as Schneider (2003) mentioned, the grammatical patterns of a specific word class may firstly spread to another word class among the indigenous group (in this case the older, more conservative journalists) before it becomes ingrained and enriched in a new variety of English with extra structural possibilities that gradually change some of the grammatical makeup.

While the status and identity of ME have always been associated and reflected in the borrowing and use of localised lexical, compound blends (David & Dumanig, 2008; Tan, 2009, 2014), the use of grammatical features influenced by both BrE and AmE as reflected by the alternate use of both suffix variants in this study among Malaysians (without objections from their editors) could possibly suggest that they have been accepted in the Malaysian context. Although these grammatical features have yet to create a mutual and better understanding amongst the community; in due time, it is hoped that such grammatical divergence will aid in narrowing the exonormative view of the community (i.e. glorifying only the Queen's English and therefore restricting use to only the suffix –t) and bring acceptance of the uniqueness of a local variety. After all, both suffix variants are now used interchangeably in one of the oldest local newspapers, and that has received no objections from the readers or from the media stakeholders.

Conclusion

Incorporating corpus-based methodology, this study centred on the preferred suffix variant among Malaysians in forming the past tense and past participle verbs. Findings of this research showed that there is indeed an obvious preference exhibited by local journalists with regard to the use of suffix –t and suffix –ed. Those journalists generally prefer to use suffix –ed when forming the past tense but opt for suffix –t when forming the past participle.

Although the use of suffixes under grammatical variation differs the least when compared to phonological and lexical variation in different varieties of English (Trudgill & Hannah, 2002), the integration of morphological element from both BrE and AmE into everyday use by Malaysian journalists can be seen as part of an effort towards achieving grammatical nativisation, a process indicating that ME is currently on its way to creating and strengthening its identity. The use of either suffix to form the tense or the past participle remains a choice in ME.

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