

Malay Language As A Vehicle of Preaching among Muallaf in Malaysia

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Abstract

In Malaysia context, the term '*muallaf*' is referring to a community that embraces Islam and is not from the Malay race. They also have their own mother tongue which is the language of communication in their families or relatives. Based on the literature, the Malay language is rich with Islamic terms from Arabic such as '*fardu*', '*wajib*', '*halal*', '*haram*' and the like. Therefore, the question of the Malay language as a means of preaching among the *muallaf* community needs to be given special attention and thoroughly studied. This study aims to identify the use of Malay language and the characteristics of Malay language used by new-becoming *muallaf*. The approach of this study is entirely qualitative by using interviews as the data collection method. To determine an inclusivity of the participants, four zones were involved namely the southern zone, west coast zone, northern zone and east coast zone with a total of 20 participants. All participants are from various races such as Chinese, Indians, Ibans, Orang Asli and Filipinos. The interview protocol was developed with a construct containing semi-structured question items that gave the participants the flexibility to understand and provide feedback. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and edited according to themes that could answer the questions and objectives of the study. The findings of the study show that the Malay language is used by *muallafs* with different levels of fluency. Even so, the choice of Malay language is a priority as a medium of oral and written communication. Most participants chose to study Islam by using Malay language such as listening to lectures, reading Islamic-related materials and translation of the Quran although they have the ability to obtain information about Islam in English or their mother tongues such as Mandarin and Tamil. Thus this study has proven the function of national language within *muallaf* community and further research might be carried out to understand sociolinguistic evolution among the community before implementation of any regulation and guidelines based on evident from empirical analysis.

Keywords: Malay Language, Muallaf, Preaching, Communication

Introduction

In general, every population in any country in the world has at least two categories of resident, majority and minority. However, this label is too general when it may include many aspects of definitions. For instance, this category may define the majority and minority based on race, education, age etc. New converts are a minority that exists in Malaysian society. The convert community is made up of many races and ethnicities. It is therefore a fact that these communities have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds even though some are citizens. This community is a group that is privileged in the context of Islam. This is because they are classified as "those who have been tamed" to embrace Islam. Apart from that, they are also eligible for *zakat* (payment made annually under Islamic law on certain kinds of property and used for charitable and religious purposes, one of the Five Pillars of Islam) distribution.

In Malaysia, organizations that manage new converts (then referred as *muallaf* after this) consisted of NGOs such as PERKIM, MACMA and State Religious Departments such as MAIDAM, JAIS, MAIM and others. These bodies manage the affairs of the *muallaf* in terms of education, welfare, security and other appropriate services. As such, these bodies function to provide facilities and be a one-stop center for the community of *muallaf* to meet and obtain information related to their community such as Islamic teachings, assistance, guidance, counseling and the like.

Malay Language as a Vehicle of Preaching

Language as a medium of preaching may no longer be denied. This is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an regarding the function of language in conveying the message in Surah Ibrahim (14: 4) which means: "*And We did not send any Messenger except in the language of his people so that he might explain (the laws of Allah) to them.*" This means that the language understood by a group of people must be well mastered by individuals who convey important teachings and messages. This verse also describes how a race is quicker to accept something in its own language including dialect, accent or wet language.

Munif (2015) has thoroughly discussed the importance of language being studied and explored its needs and use in the field of preaching. The meaning of language here is not limited to the study of pure linguistics or applied linguistics; instead it can be extended further across the disciplines of communication, sociology and psychology.

In the Malaysian context, the language of preaching can be varied, based on the background of the community or group that is the target of preaching. However, legally, the use of the national language, namely the Malay language is seen to have priority in several respects. First, the Malay language is the language of national unity, that is, every Malaysian citizen must have the ability to converse in the Malay language when entering the national education system, whether in national or vernacular schools. Secondly, Malay language is also the official language used in economic, social, and communication affairs at the national level. Thirdly, the Malay language has a close relationship with the Arabic language, especially in relation to vocabulary that leads to Islamic religious knowledge.

In terms of the third point, it is clear that the Malay language has an important function as a vehicle for preaching in Malaysia. It is not only suitable for use among Malay Muslims, but also for other races who want to learn and understand important concepts in the teachings

of Islam. For instance, many Malay terms refer to the teachings of Islam in general and specifically.

Table 1

Islamic terms in Malay language

Bil.	Islamic Term	Malay Language	Meaning
1	Aqidah- عقيدة	Akidah	Belief, faith
2	Solat- صلاة	Solat	Pray
3	Qurban- قربان	Korban	Sacrifice
4	Taat- طاعة	Taat	Faithful
5	Taqwa- تقوى	Takwa	Devotion
6	Sadaqah- صدقة	Sedekah	Charity
7	Zakat- زكاة	Zakat	Alms
8	Sah- صح	Sah	Valid, endorsed
9	Halal- حلال	Halal	Permitted
10	Haram- حرام	Haram	Prohibited

Based on the list displayed above, it is clear that the Malay language has its own authority and strength in supporting the meanings found in Arabic. Therefore, the use of the Malay language is an early path to Islamic education at an early stage either for the original Muslims (descendants) or new *muallafs* who are not native speakers of the Malay language. Although the term displayed above refers specifically to Islamic terms, the fact is that in the common usage of the Malay language this term is also used to refer to general matters such as the word 'sah' can refer to acceptable, applicable or true. 'Obedience' refers to loyalty and obedience in general.

The Conceptual Framework of Language of Preaching

It can be stated with confidence that the language of preaching falls into the extra linguistic category. According to Rohaidah (2018) extra linguistics is a linguistic situation outside the linguistic environment. This means that the language of preaching transcends the characteristics of language that are phonetic, morphological, semantic and pragmatic structure. But it is a side element that accompanies the function of language as a whole.

In the field of communication, it covers aspects of language and non-language. Communication in the language environment sees the function of language as a communication tool. Therefore, the appropriateness and accuracy of language use is critical so that the message is supported in the language vehicle. In Islamic teachings, language is an important element in the purpose of interaction and communication between individuals and groups of people (Shehu, 1999). Thus the name of the Qur'an itself describes the linguistic

aspect because the Qur'an is a "recitation" which is an element in language. Nevertheless, language as a tool is also likely to lack its communicative function when it is rarely used by speakers such as in the study conducted by (Zulkornain, et al., 2020).

In the discipline of sociolinguistics (sociology that examines aspects of linguistics) observe the social aspects in the use of language such as cultural and religious elements (Hamid, 2000). Sociolinguists carry out certain studies on language across all types of languages involving speakers of a particular language in a group, the influence of language in society, language change and matters related to the lives of language speakers.

Whereby psycholinguistics is a combination of psychology and language. As Simanjuntak (1987) has inserted, when these two disciplines combine, it can produce a discipline of knowledge that is beneficial to human beings. Indeed the discipline of psycholinguistics has aided the development of language research in the field of language education. Psychological characteristics such as perception, motivation, attitude and emotion are associated with language acquisition and proficiency in using language. The latest study on psycholinguistics is the study of students' attitudes and perceptions toward role-playing activities in Arabic language learning (Mat et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study highlights the conceptual framework of preaching language as shown in Figure 1 below:

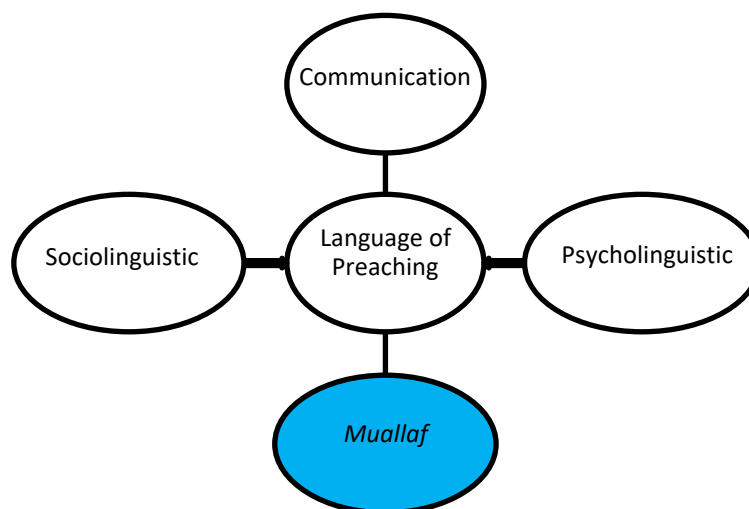


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Language of Preaching

Based on figure 1 above, this study will focus on the linguistic aspects among *muallaf* based on three principles, namely communication, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. This whole aspect is directly related to the effectiveness and acceptance of the language of preaching among the *muallaf*.

Problem Statement

The background of *muallaf* who have a mother tongue that is not the national language (Malay) especially, having difficulty absorbing any information and knowledge in Malay resources. In addition, there is also a problem if English is used as a medium of instruction because not all *muallaf* have a good English background. Moreover, the variation of language dialects is also a factor in disrupting the flow of information from the service provider

organization with the *muallaf* community. In the case of most states in Malaysia, *muallaf* community consisted of several races such as Chinese, Indians, and ethnicities from Sarawak & Sabah and from non-citizens who have converted to religion in these states (Mat et al., 2019). The challenge of the language of preaching to this group is of course challenging from both sides. The media that is the language of preaching to the *muallaf* community occurs in three categories, namely oral, printed and visual documents. Thus, the extent to which the language used is appropriate and meets the needs of *muallaf* can still be investigated and given specific attention. The thing to worry about is that the content of the message conveyed cannot be fully digested by the target group. If this is the case, then it is appropriate to conduct a preliminary research to identify the constraints of preaching language including the use of existing language, acceptance of the target group, attitudes and perceptions of the language used and their expectations of the language they use to learn and deepen Islamic teaching.

Research Questions

This study departs from two basic questions, namely:

- a) Can the Malay (national) language be the main medium among *muallaf*?
- b) What are the characteristics of language needed to smooth communication between the *muallaf* community with the local organization and community?

Research Objective

- a) Identify the authority of the Malay language (national) among *muallaf* as a preaching vehicle.
- b) Identify the characteristics of preaching language that can help language communities in communication with local organizations and communities.

Research Methodology

The research is carried out through descriptive data of qualitative purposeful sampling method that refers to a group that has the characteristics of the sample desired by the researcher (Sunawari, 2009). According to Mokhtar (2011) qualitative study design can be used to describe the current status of a phenomenon that occurs. Therefore, studies that use such a design can provide an overview, information, explanation, perception and in-depth understanding to answer the research questions that have been formed. The study participants were five (5) teachers (preachers) who were directly involved in imparting Islamic Education to *muallaf*. Apart from that, interviews were also conducted with 20 *muallafs* who have converted to Islam in several states in Malaysia. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants and facilitate the analysis, the authors used the codes Part#1 to Part#20 in place of the names of study participants as suggested by (Nurulhuda and Ramlee, 2009). The number of participants in this study is a total of 20 participants, which is considered sufficient for the purpose of this qualitative case study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a focused interview method so that there is a sharing of experiences between researchers and participants (Sunawari, 2009). In this regard, the questions are constructed based on the themes that have been identified with this list of questions as a guide during the interview process. The interview guide can be used as a checklist so that no information is missed and data collection will be stopped when the data has reached saturation (Creswell, 2005). The rationale for this method is as stated by Idris (2009) that although the focus in this semi-structured interview is on the uniformity of questions, the answers from the desired

information need to be refined such as the use of expressions, terms or words used in explaining something. This qualitative case study with a small sample size ($n = 20$) is not intended to generalize the findings of the study to any population. A pilot study on five (5) new *muallaf* was conducted with the expectation in November 2020.

Findings

Based on the interview sessions conducted on 20 participants, the study found that the use of Malay language was commonly good among the *muallaf* during the interview session. Out of the twenty (20) participants, only one cannot speak Malay because he is not a Malaysian citizen and has just settled in Malaysia. While the rest, participants can use Malay during the interview session. The following are the findings from the interviews related to the medium language to deepen the knowledge of Islam among the *muallaf*. The study found that Malay language is more dominant than other languages even though it is not the mother tongue of the participants.

Participants Profile

Participants involved in this study had diverse backgrounds according to gender, age, education, marital status and income. The table below is the profile information of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1

Participants Profile

Bil.	Part#	Gender	Race	Education	Marital status	Career
1	Part#01	F	Chinese	High School	Married	Housewife
2	Part#02	F	Philippine	-	Unmarried	Unemployed
3	Part#03	M	Chinese	Elementary School	Unmarried	Driver
4	Part#04	P	Ibanese	Diploma	Married	Self-employed
5	Part#05	M	Chinese	High School	Married	NGO activist
6	Part#06	M	Chinese	High School	Married	Electrical technician (Self-employed)
7	Part#07	M	Chinese	High School	Unmarried	Factory worker
8	Part#08	F	Indian	High School	Married	Housewife
9	Part#09	F	Indian	High School	Married	Housewife and small businneses
10	Part#10	F	Philippine	-	Married	Housewife

11	Part#11	F	Chinese	High School	Married	NGO activist
12	Part#12	M	Mix Indian/Chinese	Studying for diploma level	Bachelor	PERKIM's staff
13	Part#13	F	Dusunese	Diploma	Married	Business
14	Part#14	F	Chinese	Degree	Married	Employee
15	Part#15	M	Chinese	Diploma	Married	Self-employee
16	Part#16	F	Orang Asli	Elementary School	Bachelor	Unemployed
17	Part#17	F	Indian	-	Bachelor	Start to school
18	Part#18	F	Ibanese	Elementary School	Divorce	Unemployed
19	Part#19	M	Indian	High School	Divorce	Mechanic
20	Part#20	M	Indian	High School	Bachelor	Unemployed

Based on the profile of the study participants, it is clear that most of the participants have and use their mother tongues are Chinese, Tamil, Iban, Asli and Tagalog. Therefore, it is very appropriate to select participants who have a background in the national language as a second or third language. Even in the interview session, the language used was Malay except for one participant who has not mastered the Malay language. Therefore, in order to achieve the first objective of the study on the authority of the Malay language as a language of preaching, the above profile has given an explicit answer. In addition, based on the observations in the interview session, most participants can speak in Malay quite well. Even so, their level of fluency varies according to the level of education. This can be explained as follows:

Level of Malay Language Fluency (a)
(b)

i. Less fluent

Part#16, Part#17 and Part#19 are participants with primary education, therefore they are less able to give an explanation of the questions asked in Malay. Similarly with Part#19, despite having a secondary education, the conversation in Malay is still less fluent even though it can be understood. Apart from that, the background of the participants' placement location also affects their Malay language ability as Part#16 mentioned during school, association with Malays is limited because the dormitory blocks for Malay and Orang Asli students are segregated.

"He [The school] has two hostels... one for Orang Asli, one for Malay... no one can join once ...segregated .." Part#16

Similarly, in relation to the literacy of the participants, the language ability is weak as the following confession:

"... the translation is a little readable, a little unreadable" Part#17

Meanwhile, *muallaf* who is rarely associated with Malays has affected his/her Malay language ability. This is explained by the participant himself about his social interaction:

"I converted to Islam while working in Bertam...many are also Muslim Indian workers .. Then I came here..." Part#19

Clearly, the factors of education, living environment and socialization are the main reasons why participants have a low ability to interact in Malay. The experience of participants showed that the lack of association with Malay friends, caused their ability to communicate in Malay to be lower.

ii. Moderately Fluent

Part#3, Part#5, Part#7, Part#8 and Part#9 have a moderate level of fluency, which is able to answer the questions asked well even though the pronunciation and grammar are still having errors. Nonetheless, the level of confidence shown during the interview session explained the background of the participants. For example, Part#3 works as a driver and has experience in socializing with the Malay community which makes him confident in speaking. Apart from that, the factor of marriage with a Malay couple is also a factor in the participant's language ability as happened to Part#5, Part#8 and Part#9.

iii. Fluent

Although Malay is not the mother tongue, there are also new relatives who have a good fluency in Malay. This may be due to the good social and academic status among the new Brothers such as Part#1, Part#2, Part#4, Part#11, Part#14 and Part#15. Factors that help them acquire a good Malay language because of mixing with Malays such as Part#1, having special teachers to teach religion such as Part#2, good academic level such as Part#4, Part#11, Part#12, Part#13, Part#14, Part#15 who at the same time have long been associated with the Muslim community for work or study and some are also married to Malay couples.

In short, it can be concluded that the use of Malay as the language of communication among the new converts is greatly helped by the factors of education obtained formally and also the association with the Malays themselves. In this regard, it can be emphasized that the Malay language has the authority to be a medium of communication among new converts. Therefore, Malay language education in the national education system should be given priority by taking into account its function as a language of unity and at the same time as a language of preaching and discourse to explain the teachings of Islam which is universal and across time, race, ethnicity and geography.

b) Characteristics of the Use of Malay Language

To achieve the second objective of this study, the findings below are discussed to elaborate on the questions that can meet the second objective. The second objective of the study is: To characterize the characteristics of preaching language that can help language communities in communication with local organizations and communities. To meet this need, three main themes have been identified to unravel the characteristics of the *dakwah* language among the new converts, namely the factors of Malay language orally and in writing, bilingualism, local dialects and foreign languages as follows:

i. Oral Malay

Oral language is the main character in communication among the muallaf because of the factor of associating with Malays who use the Malay language. This means that most new converts start communicating orally with Malays in Malay. The following statements are indications that they have interacted with the Malay language:

“... so the Chinese in Terengganu are used to befriend (making friends) with the Malays ...” Part#03

Part#03's explanation shows that mixing with Malays has made him able to speak in Malay. The Malay population factor in the place where he lives also allows him to be able to communicate in Malay due to environmental factors. The use of certain dialects by the Malay community, such as in the state of Terengganu shows that the relationship between Chinese and Malays is at a high level.

Meanwhile, Part#13, at first did not mix with the Malay race. However, only after embracing Islam did he start making friends with the Malays. In the opinion of the researcher, the Malay language of Part#13 is good because he has a higher education. In other words, after embracing Islam, these participants increasingly use oral Malay to socialize with friends from the Malay race. According to participants:

“Before embracing Islam, I didn't make many friends with Malays ... I made many friends with people of my race as well.” Part#13

Apart from that, new relatives also get information through talks delivered orally in Malay as stated below:

“And in Malay we can follow but we better hear what is meant in the description... that I can understand...” Part#08

Through explanations and descriptions, Part#08 can understand the message conveyed in oral talks in Malay. This shows that the delivery of preaching in Malay helps new converts to learn Islam. Even for new relatives who are not good at reading, just listening to lectures in Malay is quite helpful as acknowledged by Part#18:

“We can't read .. Yes, I can understand if I listen to the talk, that talk .. haah Malay language .. can I understand ..” Part#18

In fact, there are new relatives who admit that by using the Malay language, he feels more able to appreciate and embody Islam as the following statement:

“Although, I can write and speak English very well. But I appreciate and appreciate Islam more by using Bahasa Malaysia, especially among the Malays.” Part#15

Apart from that, participants also stated that they use Malay for questioning sessions and their family backgrounds who use Malay such as Part #19 and Part #17.

“...but again .. I don't understand, I asked back... they use Malay, all Malay...” Part#19

“Mother talked to Ustaz Ubai, I want to send her here.. Mother speaks Malay... She has passed away” Part#17

It is clear from the statements of the study participants, in the context of Malaysia, the Malay language is a language that can channel information about Islam. Although the new relatives are fluent in other languages such as English and mother tongue, but information about Islam is quite difficult to obtain and even if there is it is not local in nature in accordance with the cultural context and environment of the surrounding community.

ii. Reading in Malay Language

Apart from the spoken language, some new relatives also use the Malay language to obtain information and knowledge through the written language, that is, by reading. This is explained in the participant's statement as follows:

“First, I learn from the Malay language because we got a book from MAIDAM for...and try to do it for a long time...” Part#03

"Usually I take from sources in Malay .." Part#07

"Until one day I talked to him, teacher, if I want to borrow the Quran in Malay, can I?" Part#12

"Probably because, I got my basic Islamic education in Bahasa Malaysia and more than 95% of my Islamic reference books are in Bahasa Malaysia as well." Part#15

"If we look at the translation, God willing, we can .. learn in Malay .. never in the native language .." Part#16

"...in Malay .. Tamil I don't know how to read... because the school used to be small, it used to be National High School ... close to home with my parents in Tamil but I can't read .." Part#20

Locally materials that contain information about Islam are mostly written in Malay. This is in accordance with the status of Islam as a federal religion and the majority of its followers are Malays. Therefore, the role of Malay as a source language to deepen Islam among new converts is very significant based on the participants' confession.

iii. Bilingual

In addition, there are also among the new *muallaf* who use bilingualism to deepen Islam or communicate. Participants explained the bilingual approach taken by the teachers/preachers at the school. The use of bilingualism is Malay and English. This can be explained through the following statements:

"I study here in Malay, but if someone can't speak Malay, he speaks English ..." Part#09

Similarly, individually, there are new *muallafs* who use bilingualism between Malay and their own mother tongue to improve their understanding of the information learned or practiced:

"I read the Quran I use a language that I can understand... which has been translated into Chinese and Malay... I use two languages for me to refer to so that I understand better," Part#11

"Near me there is an al-Quran in Indian [Tamil language]... I also read the translation in Malay..." Part#09

"For the understanding of the Quran, I look for the Quran [translation] in Tamil... Alhamdulillah I can ...sometimes we read in Tamil and in Malay" Part#08

The use of bilingualism is also occurred due to family background factors that actually use more than one language as acknowledged by this participant:

"And my family's mother tongue speaks a lot of Hokkien, Mandarin and also Malay." Part#12

In fact, there are participants who think that the use of bilingualism is not satisfactory, especially when it involves inappropriate translation. Therefore, the use of the mother tongue by the teacher or preacher is very important as experienced by this participant:

"If in Mandarin, many people when I translate the meaning is different... So that's a misunderstanding... if there are Chinese ustaz-ustaz then he understands then he speaks..." Part#07

In addition, there are also participants who have a good command of Malay and English making them able to refer to and read in sources from these two languages as stated by Part#14:

"Malay and English" Part#14

Based on the researcher's observation, there are already initiatives from NGO preacher bodies that provide translations of the Quran in various languages to help *muallaf* understand the contents of the Quran.

iv. Foreign Language

The results of interviews with these participants also found that some of *muallafs* have not mastered the Malay language. Therefore, the alternative that has been done by the management of the affairs of *muallafs* should be to use English or even appoint *muallaf* who have the same language knowledge as mentors to overcome this problem.

This can be gleaned in an interview session with Part#10 who acknowledged the ability to speak his mother tongue and English only. Even during the interview session, the researcher had to use English to obtain the required information.

"The most language I used to learn Islam is in English and Tagalog language... Malay I cannot..." Part#10

Apart from that, the participants said that their friends who came from foreign countries were not able to speak Malay.

"So there are also those from Thailand, and Cambodia does not understand Bahasa Malaysia..." Part#03

Obviously, *muallafs* who are not Malaysian citizens have problems with the ability to speak Malay. This is a common phenomenon that happens to foreigners who have just arrived in Malaysia. This matter has been given attention by the department in charge by providing mentors who have foreign language skills to assist in learning and deepening Islam.

Conclusion

In general, this study has obtained important findings in the context of the use of Malay as a language of communication among new converts. These diverse profiles of new relatives play a major role in determining the strengthening of the identity of new relatives with the religion of Islam. Language as a tool to channel knowledge and information should be given attention by institutions that manage new relatives.

The Malay language in Malaysia should be inclusive for all races and ethnicities in Malaysia as well as from abroad. The new brother management center should offer Malay language courses in the nature of oral and written communication to help new *muallaf* be able to obtain information from local sources in line with government policies and customs in a state in Malaysia.

Knowledge of languages other than Malay should also be mastered by some staff at the new relative management center. However, the researchers believe that the relevant parties have taken proactive action to ensure that religious teachings to new converts can be conveyed effectively.

The existence of a handful of new relatives who do not speak Malay and English, such as foreigners from abroad, need special attention. This is important to ensure that communication between them and the local Muslim community (especially Malay Muslims) can take place in harmony. Therefore, foster family programs can be planned to help them acquire the Malay language quickly and naturally. A special module can be planned by the management of new relatives for new relatives who do not have a basic Malay language and need guidance from social aspects as well as mental support.

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