

DEVELOPMENT OF MALAYSIAN SIGN LANGUAGE IN MALAYSIA

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This paper provides an insightful description of the development of Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) in Malaysia. BIM began its journey from the establishment of a deaf school in Penang, which was known as Federation School for the Deaf (FSD) in 1954. Early preliminary findings found that indigenous sign words emerged through gestural communication between deaf students at the FSD outside their classroom. For the sake of educating deaf students, American Sign Language (ASL) was brought into Johor in 1964 and Manually Coded Malay (KTBM) started to settle in Penang in 1978 after Total Communication was introduced into the education for deaf students. Most of the time, KTBM has been dominating the education system for deaf students. A group of deaf persons founded an organization, Malaysia Federation of the Deaf (MFD) in 1997. The MFD started an initiative of BIM sign words collection from the deaf community. BIM sign words were compiled and published in 2000. The term “BIM” was officiated through this publication. The sign words in BIM books are scrutinized for their characteristics and influence, as in how they were formed.

Keywords: BIM, Malaysian sign language, manually coded Malay, sign word, deaf

INTRODUCTION

Sign languages were never thought as genuine or minority languages until William Stokoe found out that the sign language used in the United States has its own grammatical structure through his observation in deaf students' conversation at Gallaudet College in 1960 (Stokoe, 2005). The sign language is known as American Sign Language or ASL. Since then, research on ASL has been conducted very extensively from linguistics to neuroscience, in seeking its language status to be equal with spoken languages. Sign languages, through constant social interactions, evolve into complex languages. Trovato (2013) found that deaf communities in most countries have their own sign language. Trovato claimed that deaf people should have full legal rights to sign languages as the languages would guarantee proper linguistic development and cognitive potentialities among deaf children. About thirty-one (31) sign languages are recognized through national recognition, by means of a sign language law, by general language legislation or other forms (DeMeulder, 2015).

BIM History and Origin

BIM started its course since the establishment of the Federation School for the Deaf (FSD) in Penang, Malaysia, in April 1954 with enrolment of seven deaf students. The FSD now is known as *SMK Pendidikan Khas Persekutuan*. Deaf students were prohibited from using any gestures or signs at the school (Chong, 2014; Hulburt, 2003). To avoid being caught and punished, deaf students secretly communicated with each other using gestures at their dorm or when teachers were not around (Nakamura, 2000). The repeated gestures over time become sign words. The number of sign words was increased as a result of their frequent social interaction (Hulburt, 2003). In the same year, about ten (10) deaf persons from Kuala Lumpur and other states went to Singapore for their education. Peng Tsu Ying taught them to write Chinese and communicate in Shanghainese Sign Language at the Singapore Chinese School for the Deaf (Low, personal communication, 3 June 2012).

In 1964, Tan Yap attended a sign language interpreting course at Gallaudet College, Washington D.C. in the USA. He then brought some sign words of American Sign Language (ASL). He provided education through ASL to deaf persons who did not complete school education in Johor. In 1968, he opened a deaf school in Kuala Lumpur to provide education to deaf students. He also started a Deaf Club at YMCA Kuala Lumpur in 1973 so that deaf adults could gather for social interaction (Lim et al., 2006).

In 1976, Frances Parsons, on her tour promoting a philosophy of Total Communication from the USA, arrived in Malaysia on Saleena's invitation (Saleena Yahaya-Isa, 2004). Parsons introduced the philosophy to the FSD teachers and provided them with a 6-week intensive course on Total Communication. Parsons, with the help of Saleena, sought a meeting with Dr. Mahathir, who at that time was the Minister of Education. Parsons convinced him to inject the philosophy of Total Communication in the education for deaf students (Saleena Yahaya-Isa, 2004). The philosophy was officially implemented in 1978 along with a book of Total Communication with an estimated 3500 sign words assigned literally to Malay base words as well as Malay affixes for teaching purposes.

The sign words in the Total Communication book were adopted from 500 ASL sign words (Bell et al., 2015) where appropriate, based on the purview of the Total Communication National Committee, which was established on 4 March 1978 (Asmah Haji Omar, 1978). The manually coded Malay was known as BMKT and then renamed in 1994 as KTBM due to grammatical error (KTBM, 1994). The introduction of Total Communication put an end to natural invention of sign words by deaf students. Some invented sign words at the FSD were replaced with the KTBM sign words (Chong, 2014; Hulburt, 2003).

Through the Peace Corps program, three American deaf volunteers educated deaf students using ASL in both Tan Yap's school in Kuala Lumpur and the FSD in Penang. One of the volunteers, Marie, was present at the committee

meeting when KTBM sign words were deliberated and developed (Asmah Haji Omar, 1978). Deaf students, through education, were exposed to ASL sign words mainly in both Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The natural sign words, which were invented by deaf students at the FSD, gradually disappeared unnoticeably. Deaf students from different states received different degree of exposure to ASL and KTBM sign words. Through the Deaf Club at YMCA, Tan Yap initiated friendly football games to allow deaf persons from different states to participate or watch the games (Lim et al., 2006). While at the games, they were able to disseminate the sign words through social interaction.

Malaysia Federation of the Deaf (MFD) was established as a result of at least successful establishment of seven (7) state deaf associations in 1997 (Sazali, personal communication, 18 November 2018). MFD started compiling active sign words from the deaf community throughout Malaysia. The sign words collected were used at schools and through social interaction. These sign words were published in a Malaysian Sign Language (BIM) book in 2000. It was the first BIM book, compiled and published by the deaf community. This term BIM was officiated through this publication. The second and third BIM book were published in 2003 and 2016 respectively. MFD advocated recognition of BIM as a language of local deaf people by law. Hence the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 recognizes BIM as the official language for deaf people in Malaysia. Abdullah Yusoff and Che Rabiaah Mohamed (2012, 2017) perceived that BIM is not recognized as the official national sign language and a medium of instruction at schools yet. Bell et al. (2015) also found that BIM is not properly defined in the Act.

APPLICATION OF BIM

KTBM sign words were created based on Malay base words for education purpose. Deaf students were taught Bahasa Malaysia through the KTBM. The philosophy of Total Communication requires deaf students to speak “Bahasa Malaysia” through sign words. Deaf students pick up suitable sign words of Malay base words and its affixes where necessary, to express in sentences according to Bahasa Malaysia grammar. Deaf people progressively became accustomed to this practice. Bahasa Malaysia somehow influenced BIM development for its syntax and lexicon.

Characteristics of BIM sign words

Given BIM’s linguistic history, BIM was a product of the inception of many sign words of KTBM and ASL mainly, as well as a few sign words of Shanghaiese Sign Language in the past for education purpose. Plenty of ASL sign words, such as *FATHER*, *MOTHER*, *SCHOOL*, *PAPER*, and *CHILDREN* are still in use, which can be found in BIM books published by MFD. Shanghaiese

Sign Language did not affect BIM deeply as there were only 10 deaf people from Kuala Lumpur and other states who went to Singapore. These sign words became part of BIM after a long period of usage.

KTBM books were published for use in classrooms with deaf students. Sign words in KTBM books were modified from ASL. The ASL sign words were replicated with different handshape. For example, an ASL sign word, *BEAUTIFUL* with handshape “5”, was modified to handshape “C”, “I” and “M” to reflect the Malay words *cantik*, *indah* and *molek* respectively even though all these Malay words are similar in terms of semantics.

The concept of forming a sign word based on the first letter of Malay word has been plaguing the deaf community. Many deaf persons, after graduating from secondary school, often invented any sign words based on first letter of any spoken words, if the first letter is not reserved for other sign words. There was a situation, when a deaf person approached the author for sign word creation on brand names of online shopping sites. A few proposed sign words were shown and they were created based on first letter of their respective brand names (Eng, personal communication, 11 August 2018). BIM sign words based on letters could be seen in all BIM books, including the latest which was published in 2016.

BIM books published by MFD were examined for the arrangement of headwords. Abdul Rahim Mat Yassim and Ibrahim Ahmad (2012) consider these books as a kind of dictionary as the criteria of dictionary is met. However, all the headwords in these BIM books are arranged according to the Malay alphabet, instead of BIM handshapes. Headwords in any dictionary would be usually arranged according to their own language, i.e. headwords in English dictionary are arranged according to English alphabet and headwords in Chinese dictionary are arranged according to Chinese strokes. These BIM books are seemingly deemed to be translation books for hearing people.

According to one member of a panel appointed for a BIM book production, they were asked to recall appropriate existing sign words based on a list of Malay words provided to them (Mak, personal communication, 10 November 2018). If they do not recall any such sign words, they would have to create new sign words accordingly. The formation of new sign word would be according to its meaningfulness based on the meaning of Malay words and its suitability based on deaf culture. This process did not appear to be natural for language development.

Similar to the BIM-English-Malay dictionary published by the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics of University of Malaya in 2014, sign words were recalled based on a list of Malay words as agreed. Their headwords were arranged according to BIM handshapes, instead of the Malay or English alphabet. The arrangement of handshapes is tabled for easy reference. For this reason, this dictionary could be considered as the very first dictionary for the deaf community in Malaysia. The dictionary allows both deaf and hearing people to look up an unfamiliar sign word.

BIM also has certain influences from speaking languages. Certain sign words, which are meant for hearing people, became part of BIM. For example, illustration of sign words, “HEAR”, “WHO-TELL-YOU”, “TALK” and “SPEAK”, are as arranged accordingly in the illustration in Figure 1. These sign words are obviously for hearing people because they can speak and hear. Such sign words are not considered part of deaf culture. It does not seem right when a deaf person uses sign words “NEWS HEAR” (Translation: I heard the news) when communicating in BIM. The question raised here: Is he really deaf? These sign words do not tally with capabilities of deaf people. Better sign words could be “NEWS READ”.



Figure 1. Illustration of sign words.

BIM is differentiated from Bahasa Malaysia

Following Stokoe’s discovery in ASL in the 1960s, a preliminary examination has been done on BIM structure (Bell et al., 2015). The preliminary finding confirmed that BIM has its own grammatical structure despite the fact that deaf people never receive formal BIM learning class, such as Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese or Tamil class at schools.

The deaf community has long history with KTBM, since its inception in 1978. KTBM has a group of sign words assigned to Malay affixes, such as, *ter-*, *men-*, *ke-an*, *ber-*, *per-an*, and *se-*. Generally, a Malay base word with different affix has different meaning. For example, Malay words, such as *jalan*, *menjalankan*, and *perjalanan* have different meaning. The sign words for *jalan*, *menjalankan* and *perjalanan* are different as arranged accordingly as illustrated in Figure 2 (Ainun Rozana Mohd Zaid et al., 2014).



Figure 2. Different meaning of sign words.

When a base word, for this case, “JALAN” is signed together with its affix’s sign word, its meaning would not be able to be retained. Deaf students do not have strong foundation in Bahasa Malaysia, therefore, they would not be able to make any sense when three sign words, i.e. “MEN”, “JALAN” and “KAN” are made up together to refer to “*menjalankan*” or performed. Even after all these Malay words with their affixes are signed together, the deaf person would see one meaning, which is “*jalan*” (Table 1).

Table 1
Meaning of a Malay Base Word with Its Affix’s Sign Word and Its Meaning

Malay words	Signed with affixes	Meaning for deaf students
<i>Jalan</i>	“JALAN”	Walk
<i>Menjalankan</i>	“MEN” + “JALAN” + “KAN”	Walk
<i>Perjalanan</i>	“PER” + “JALAN” + “AN”	Walk

BIM does not include any sign words for affixes. For the three Malay words mentioned in Table 1, i.e. *jalan*, *menjalankan* and *perjalanan* have different sign words appropriately to reflect the actual meaning of Malay words (Table 2).

Table 2
Meaning of a Malay Base Word without Sign Word for Affixes and Its Meaning

Malay words	Signed without affixes	Meaning for deaf students
<i>Jalan</i>	“JALAN”	Walk
<i>Menjalankan</i>	“MENJALANKAN”	Perform
<i>Perjalanan</i>	“PERJALANAN”	Trip

BIM has different sign words for a Malay base word which has more than one meaning, for example, *lambat*, when it means either late or slow, as shown accordingly in the illustration in Figure 3. The different sign words are used appropriately to reflect the Malay words accurately.



Figure 3. Different sign words for a Malay base word.

Attitude toward BIM

Sign languages around the world have their own unique abbreviation, such as French Sign Language (LSF), Australian Sign Language (Auslan), Brazilian Sign Language (Libras), Singapore Sign Language (SgSL) and the like. The sign language used in Malaysia is known as Malaysian Sign Language (BIM). The term “BIM” can be used in any language context, in the same way these terms “HIV/AIDS”, “UNESCO”, “ASEAN” and the like are used in all language contexts. These abbreviations were already made well known around the world. However, it was an unforeseeable situation when it was thought that the term “BIM” should be used only in the Bahasa Malaysia context, and therefore, the term “MySL” and “MSL” should be used only in the English context. This phenomenon could be seen on social media, such as Facebook and YouTube when deaf persons posted their status or signed in a video.

The term “sign language” or “*bahasa isyarat*” is still used at large. There are 142 sign languages used around the world, according to Ethnologue by the time this paper is published. The term “sign language” is general, in the same sense when “language” is mentioned. In any daily conversation, there would always be this question, “Do you know sign language? (*Adakah anda tahu bahasa isyarat?*)”, yet the question of which one sign language was never raised, in the same sense, for this question “Can you speak language? (*Boleh kamu cakap bahasa?*)”. The appropriate questions, “Do you know Malaysian Sign Language?” or “Do you know BIM?” are proposed to address the confusion; the same with other phrases, such as “BIM class” and “BIM interpreter” instead of “sign language class” and “sign language interpreter” respectively. The term “sign language class” is often used to get attention from the general public who wish to learn BIM because the general public does not know what BIM is (Ng, personal communication, 9 November 2018).

The deaf community started with some ingenious sign words, as a result of gestural communication in the early years of the FSD establishment. The arrival of ASL sign words in 1964 and creation of KTBM sign words in 1978 stirred up communication in the deaf community through school education. Sign words from ASL and KTBM replaced each other from time to time. Certain sign words, which were created based on Malay words (for example, *TETAP*, *ELEKTRIK*, *LATIH*, and *KENAL*) and English words (for example, *VERY*, *WITHOUT*, *CLASS*, and *JEALOUS*), are still in use. In some cases, BIM has two (2) separate sign words for the same thing, for example, Monday is referred with a sign word by its first letter “M” and *Isnin* is referred with a sign word by its first letter “I”. These sign words became part of BIM along with both old and new indigenous sign words.

As a result, deaf persons have different perspective on the nature of BIM. An example sentence is extracted from the BIM-English-Malay dictionary for easy clarification, as shown in Figure 4 (Ainun Rozana Mohd Zaid et al., 2014).



Figure 4. Each sign word's translation: CLASS LATE WARNING
Translation: I was warned for being late to class.

This is a BIM sentence. Each sign word is arranged according to BIM's grammatical structure. BIM grammar is different from that of Bahasa Malaysia and English. The sign words "CLASS" and "WARNING" were originally from ASL, "LATE" was from KTBM as in *lambat*. Deaf people often distinguish the language by the use of sign words, instead of the whole sentence, by saying "this is BIM and that is ASL". BIM should be distinguished from ASL and KTBM based on the way a set of sign words is expressed in full sentence as languages are arbitrary. In other words, if a sign word is just performed, it may have different meaning across sign languages.

CONCLUSION

Although BIM has been evolving into a complex language since the founding of the FSD, the deaf community has not yet reached an understanding that BIM is a separate and independent language. BIM usage is limited to social interactions in private or public. Social interactions in public can be seen in deaf-related organizations, a few cafés or restaurants, i.e. Starbucks Signing Store and KFC where majority of the staff are deaf. Deaf people live scattered across Malaysia and do not often have chance to meet up for social interaction. It is difficult to maintain BIM through social interactions only. Mass and social media are critical for this reason.

The deaf community's access to BIM through mass and social media is very limited. BIM is not used in both mass and social media widely in Malaysia like other spoken languages. The deaf community never receives any breaking news in BIM. Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) 1 may have provided BIM interpreting services for daily news; however, the main language is not BIM. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a language planning to standardize, uphold and advance BIM.

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