

**The Indonesian Language:
Its History and Role in Modern Society**

James N Sneddon

UNSW Press 2003

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2013 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Indonesian is the official language of the world's fourth most populous state, but has little international prominence and is relatively poorly studied. *The Indonesian Language* is the only book length study of it aimed at non-specialists.

An introduction corrects some common misconceptions about the language. Indonesian had its origins not as a lingua franca or pidgin, but in the literary tradition of the Malay courts of Johor-Riau. It is diglossic, with a formal language used in government and education, and taught to foreigners, existing alongside a varied colloquial Indonesian used in everyday life — and increasingly as a mother tongue, though for a majority of Indonesians that remains a regional language such as Javanese. And Indonesian is not simple in any fundamental sense, even if its use of Latin script and regular orthography make it relatively approachable for English-speaking learners.

The Indonesian Language then proceeds chronologically. Malay is a member of the Western Malayo-Polynesian sub-branch of the Austronesian language family (which originated in Taiwan but now stretches from Madagascar to Easter Island). Its homeland was probably in western Borneo, from where sea-faring proto-Malay speakers settled in Sumatra. There, subject to Indian influences and well-placed to control the Straits of Malacca, Srivijaya arose as the leading power in western Indonesia. Only a few inscriptions survive as evidence for the Old Malay of the period, but Sneddon presents some examples of vocabulary derived from Sanskrit around then.

For early Classical Malay, dating roughly from the 14th century, we have inscriptions and letters and literature; as well as describing the earliest of these in detail, Sneddon looks at the influence of Islam and Arabic (and

Tamil and Hindi). The power of Malacca and then the Riau-Johor Sultanate contributed to the use of Malay as a broader lingua franca, which in eastern Indonesia "developed into the post-creole forms of Malay spoken today in places like Ambon, Ternate, Manado and Kupang".

Portuguese and creoles derived from it were widely used, leaving a legacy of several hundred words in Malay vocabulary, but it was the Dutch who became the dominant colonial power in the archipelago, especially after the 1824 treaty with the British which fixed what are now the borders between Malaysia and Indonesia. The Dutch debated the use of High or Low Malay; one key figure was CA van Ophuijsen, who "ensured that the Classical Malay tradition became the basis for School Malay, the type of Malay both taught and used as the medium of instruction in the education system".

From around 1900 the Dutch increasingly encouraged the learning of Dutch, but School Malay continued to dominate the lower civil service and education. When Indonesian nationalists came to choose a national language, there were no real alternatives, Dutch being the language of a narrow elite and Javanese being too localised, but Sneddon describes the key events: the Second Indonesian Youth Congress, the Sumpah Pemuda or "youth pledge", the role of Alisjahbana and the magazine *Pujangga Baru*, and so forth. In the brief period of Japanese rule during the Second World War, the prohibition of Dutch from public life led to Indonesian's instantaneous elevation as a language of government.

Four chapters cover the last half of the 20th century. A history of language planning covers spelling reform, the education system, the role of (regularly renamed) government departments, key thinkers, the "advice industry" and so forth, but Sneddon emphasizes the limitations of planning, both in limited success with its projects and in failing to engage at all with colloquial Indonesian.

Other influences on the language included Sukarno's personal style, acronyms and abbreviations, Jakartan Malay and informal Indonesian, and Javanese, Dutch, and Sanskrit (the latter still a source of status words, often via Old Javanese). A separate chapter covers the influence of English,

which as well as a huge amount of vocabulary, more or less assimilated, has brought affixes, loan translations, and some grammatical innovations.

Unfortunately the most recent figures Sneddon presents in the final chapter are from the 1990 census, but they show the vast majority of those under fifty at the time "spoke" Indonesian, ranging from 85% of rural females to 99% of urban males. Sneddon also touches on other Indonesian languages here, looking at the rise of regional lingua francas such as Banjarese, Manado Malay and Ambon Malay and the way Javanese speakers can switch to Indonesian to avoid having to decide between familiar *ngoko* or respectful *krama*. The future of Indonesian, he suggests, is tied up with the future of Indonesia as a unitary state.

The obvious audience of *The Indonesian Language* is students who want some background on where the language they are learning came from and how it is used. But all the Indonesian quotations and words are translated or glossed and there is an emphasis on vocabulary, with only occasional forays into topics such as *-kan* suffixation. So the result is accessible to those with little or even no knowledge of the language and should appeal to general readers with a broader curiosity about Indonesia or linguistics.

April 2013

External links:

- buy from Amazon.com or Amazon.co.uk

Related reviews:

- books about [Indonesia + Indonesian history](#)
- books about [the Indonesian language](#)
- books about [linguistics](#)

%T The Indonesian Language
%S Its History and Role in Modern Society
%A Sneddon, James N
%I UNSW Press
%D 2003
%O paperback, notes, references, index
%G ISBN 0868405981
%P 240pp