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Language and Tourism in Sabah, Malaysia and Edinburgh, Scotland

Alan A. Lew¹, Lauren Hall-Lew² & Amie Fairs²

1Northern Arizona University

2University of Edinburgh

alan.lew@nau.edu

lauren.hall-lew@ed.ac.uk

a.l.fairs@sms.ed.ac.uk

One of the newest areas of study in applied linguistics is within the tourism industry. Despite the centrality of language to tours (Cohen 1982, 1985; Coupland et al. 2005), tourism commodities (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2001, Heller 2010), and place promotion (Coupland et al. 2005; Heller 2003), insights from linguistics have not had great impact on tourism research, practice, or policy (see Hall-Lew & Lew, 2014). This study presents a comparative analysis of language attitudes in two very different tourism contexts: Sabah, Malaysia and Edinburgh, Scotland. Both sites feature a thriving tourism industry, attracting large numbers of domestic and international visitors annually. The question for both locations is to what extent spoken linguistic variation might be considered a ‘heritage commodity’ (MacCannell 1999[1976]).

In 2012, we conducted qualitative and quantitative interviews and surveys with tourists and tourism providers in Malaysia and Scotland in an effort to ascertain the role of language in a tourist’s travel experience. We found that language – specifically, the exposure of a tourist to local linguistic variation – is an important and overall positive element of a tourist’s experience.

Data Collection

The Malaysian state of Sabah provides an informative case example of this: due to the complexity of its language situation, located on the island of Borneo, it has over 50 linguistic varieties (cf. www.ethnologue.com), 32 officially recognized ethnic groups, documented and undocumented migrants, and large numbers of Asian and non-Asian tourists. Of the nearly three million tourists that arrive in Sabah yearly, two-thirds are domestic, mostly from the much more populated Peninsula (or East) Malaysia. Of the international visitors, approximately 40% are from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, about 33% are from Australia, and 18% are from Japan. (These figures largely reflect international airline connections.) Bahasa Malaysian

is widely spoken to varying degrees by all Malaysians, though it is more likely to be a second language for Sabahans. Hakka and Cantonese are spoken by many Chinese Sabahans, with Mandarin being a popular third language for many school children. English is common in cities, but is far less spoken in rural areas where local languages are dominant. In addition, about 25% of Sabah's population of four million are undocumented migrants, including so called "sea gypsies", mostly traced back to the southern Philippines, with some from Indonesia.

The first author conducted 20 formal interviews with members of the tourism industry in Sabah, Malaysia, in March to April 2012, to assess their views of language use in tourism and the broader Sabahan society. Respondents included local Sabahans, and non-Sabahans. The interviews covered the political economy of the local linguistic landscape as it creates a context to the tourism industry and tourist activities, and the degree and form of expressed interests in local languages and dialects by different types of tourists. The tourism professionals were asked about language endangerment and preservation effects and their perceptions of tourists' linguistic preferences with respect to tour guides and travel experiences (e.g., whether they were interested in learning local varieties).

The second and third authors conducted data collection in Edinburgh, Scotland, in August-September 2012 and June-September 2013. Scotland might be considered, in a very general sense, to stand in linguistic contrast with England in a similar way that Malaysian Borneo stands in contrast with Peninsular Malaysia. In both instances there is a broader 'national' (although that idea is complicated in both the Scotland/UK and Sabah/Malaysia cases) linguistic standard that contrasts very saliently with the local linguistic variety (Scottish English or Sabahan Malaysian).

In contrast to Sabah, only three linguistic varieties characterize Scotland: English, Scots, and Scottish Gaelic. The vast majority of inhabitants speak English and/or Scots, with very few proficient in Gaelic. The linguistic background of tourists to Edinburgh has some parallels with the Sabahan context, in that the majority are domestic: 42% from England and 16% from other parts of Scotland¹⁵. Less than 4% come from Wales or Northern Ireland, Resulting in almost two-thirds of visitors being from a domestic market. Less

15 Edinburgh by Numbers, p21:
https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/file/4130/edinburgh_by_numbers_201112 (Date accessed 22 December 2013)

than 20% of tourists come from other parts of Europe ('regional' tourists), and 6% come from the United States ('international' tourists).

Data collection in Edinburgh in 2013 paralleled that in Sabah, consisting of interviews with 38 tour guides from a range of tour types and sociolinguistic backgrounds. Guides were asked the same sorts of questions as were asked in Sabah, with less emphasis on language preservation. We found that Edinburgh tour guides, while often quite outspoken about the positive and important role of Scots and Scottish English in their tours, had little to say about the role of Scottish Gaelic.

Also in contrast to the Sabah fieldwork, in Edinburgh data collection included a study of tourists' language attitudes using a written survey and word clouds (Figs. 1, 2). In total, 49 tourists responded to the survey, from a range of sociolinguistic backgrounds. More details are provided in Hall-Lew, Fairs and Lew (to appear 2014).



Figure 1: Scottish Tourism Language Attitudes Word Cloud

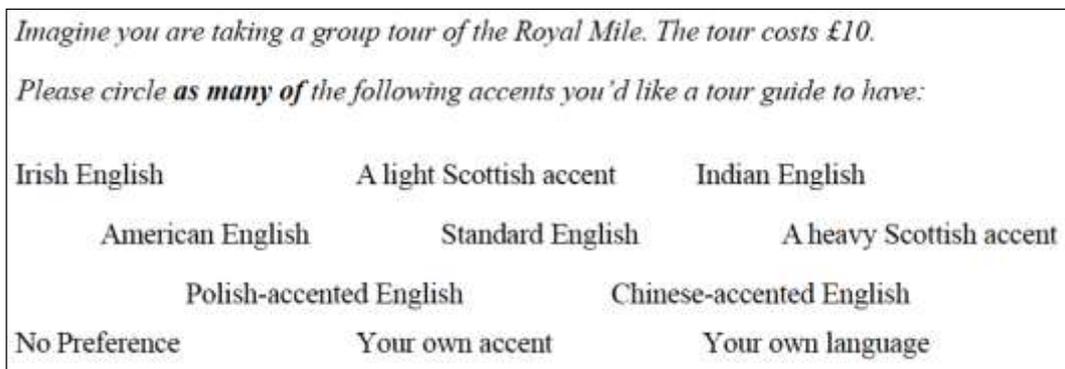


Figure 2: Scottish Tourism Linguistic Commodity Word Cloud

Analysis

A content analysis of the Sabah interviews revealed four types of tourists in terms of the way they relate linguistically to Sabah as a destination (Table 1). Local Sabahans (indigenous to Sabah), which may also include others from the former British North Borneo region, have a high awareness and sensitivity to the state's linguistic varieties, but do not have a significant interest in this as a motivation for tourist travel. At the other end of the scale, international tourists (from beyond Malaysia's immediate regional neighbours who share its linguistic heritage) usually know little at all about Sabah's tremendous linguistic diversity, though they will often express great interest in this as they come to know and experience the ethnic diversity of the state. In terms of the tourism marketing potential of Sabah's language variation, this appeared to be highest among domestic tourists from Peninsular Malaysia, for whom Sabah is seen as exotically different, yet also familiar (similar to Hawai'i for mainland Americans).

LANGUAGE VARIATION	Local Tourist	Domestic Tourists	Regional Tourists	International Tourists
Tourist Awareness	High	Moderate	Low	Minimal
Tourist Interest	Minimal	Low	Moderate*	High*
Marketing Potential	Low	High	Moderate	Minimal

Table 1: Tourist Types and their Engagement with Language Variation in Sabah, Malaysia. (Note: * = can vary considerably by market)

Because Peninsular Malaysia is the most important tourism market for Sabah, the social, political and economic relationship between these two geographically disparate places underlies the linguistic marketing of the state. In particular, there is a fine political line between being different in an exotic way and being different with irredentist or separatist overtones. "Borneo", as a distinct cultural and linguistic place, is emphasized to the degree that Sabah competes for Peninsular Malaysian travel interests with destinations such as Bali in Indonesia. On the other hand, one guide interviewee pointed out that government promotional literature will also emphasize that Sabah is "Malaysian Borneo" to ease the sometimes underlying tensions that exist between the country's center and its periphery. For the greater Chinese market (China, Hong Kong and Taiwan), on the other hand, language issues are centred more on basic communication, with Mandarin skills, in particular, being a form of cultural capital for employment purposes.

Given the similar domination of Edinburgh’s tourism market by domestic tourists, we found parallel results to those in Sabah, in that most tourists surveyed in Edinburgh valued hearing local linguistic variation. Among the 49 tourists surveyed, 27 were English (24 of whom self-described as British, possibly expressing a political or social identification with Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland). In contrast to the Sabah context, however, there were fewer marked differences between local (within Scotland), domestic (within the UK), regional (European), and international tourists (outside of Europe). One possible reason for this was a skew in the representation of each group in our study sample (N=3 local, N=8 or 7 regional, depending on the definition, and N=1 international).

Further research is necessary to see if the regional differences for tourists in Malaysia do hold for tourists in Scotland, particularly with an emphasis on exploring the diversity within the ‘international’ category of tourists. Malaysian is not widely circulated internationally, but English is the exemplar of a globalised linguistic variety. Attitudes towards English (and other linguistic) variation in Scotland are expected to vary with respect to an international visitors’ relationship to the English language. For example, drawing on Kachru’s (1988) ‘circle’ model of English, we expect the language attitudes towards local linguistic variation in Edinburgh to vary according to whether the tourist is from the Inner Circle (e.g., Canada, New Zealand), the Outer Circle (e.g., Ghana, Singapore) or the Extending Circle (e.g., China, Egypt). For this reason, all categories in the last column of Table 2 are ‘Variable’, in contrast to the more stable parallel column for the Sabahan context.

LANGUAGE VARIATION	Local Tourist	Domestic Tourists	Regional Tourists	International Tourists
Tourist Awareness	High	High	Moderate	<i>Variable*</i>
Tourist Interest	Moderate*	High*	Moderate*	<i>Variable*</i>
Marketing Potential	Moderate	High	High	<i>Variable*</i>

Table 2: Tourist Types and their Engagement with Language Variation in Edinburgh, Scotland. (Note: * = can vary considerably by market.)

The nature of ‘language variation’ in the Edinburgh context is also different for the ‘local’ tourist than for the ‘domestic’ tourist. For example, tourists

who visit the city from other areas of Scotland might be interested in hearing accents they associate with the city itself, while tourists who visit from other parts of the UK outside of Scotland may not be as attuned to (or interested in) regional differences within Scotland. For this reason, the exact variety that the tourist might be more or less aware of, or have more or less interest in, is left intentionally vague.

Across all Edinburgh tourist participants (as opposed to the guide participants), we found that the overwhelming accent preference for a tour guide was ‘a light Scottish accent’ and that the vast majority of adjectives circled for that accent were positive. We also found that most tour guides, regardless of their personal linguistic background, considered local linguistic variation to be a valuable tourism resource. The extent to which an individual tourist showed interest in experiencing local linguistic variation seemed more predictive of their motivations for travelling to Edinburgh, rather than their linguistic background (see Hall-Lew et al., to appear 2014); this variation is represented by the asterisks in Table 2.

In contrast to the Malaysian results, in Edinburgh we found a more complex attitude profile for what we called ‘a heavy Scottish accent’. This descriptor was chosen less often than ‘a light Scottish accent’ in the commodity scenarios, and received far more negative evaluations (mostly *unclear* and *unintelligible*). These quantitative results were often accompanied by qualitative statements about the unintelligibility of some Scottish varieties, or specific travel contexts where Scottish accents would be less preferred. Further details can be found in Hall-Lew et al. (under review).

Summary

In both Sabah, Malaysia and Edinburgh, Scotland, hearing local accents (Sabahan Malaysian or Scottish English) was framed positively for their principal tourism markets, suggesting that tourism professionals in both sites may benefit from paying more attention to linguistic variation as a heritage resource. However, the two locations do differ in this respect, with tourists in Edinburgh more likely to complain of communication difficulties than tourists in Sabah, and with ‘heavy’ Scottish accents rated more negatively than ‘light’ accents. A possible corollary to this in Sabah, where English is more of a lingua franca for diverse multi-language nationalities and ethnicities, is reflected in the political sensitivities involved the way Sabah is presented as being exotic, but not too different, for Peninsular Malaysian tourists. Sabah also more clearly demonstrates how the linguistic and geographical background of the tourists themselves, as well as different

motivations for travel and needs while travelling, resulted in a greater complexity of responses in comparison to a relatively more homogenous tourist market for Edinburgh, at least for our survey population. Overall, these results join a newly flourishing area of work in language and tourism (Heller 2003, 2010; Jaworski & Pritchard 2005) and point to new directions of communication and social relations for applied linguistics.

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