

## Social Variation Of Malay Language In Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia: A Study On Accent, Identity And Integration

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### Abstract

Language variation is conveyed through its regional or social dimension. In line with that proposition, this paper discusses the social variation of Malay language spoken in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia focussing on their accents. As part of the Malay language society, the Malays of Kuching have their own accent which is different from other Malay accents or the standard national accent. This paper analyzes the status of national standard accent and non-standard accent among the Malay informants in the city of Kuching. The discussion is based on a sociological urban dialectology research. For the analysis, five phonological variables are chosen. They are open-ended vowels (a), such as *kita* 'we', close-ended (i), such as *bilik* 'room', close-ended (u), such as *masuk* 'enter', initial (r) or (r)<sub>1</sub>, such as *rumah* 'home', and final (r) or (r)<sub>2</sub>, such as *pasar* 'market'. Issues on accents are studied through four different degree of formality of speech styles, namely reading word list style (WLS), reading passage style (PS), conversational style (CS) and story-telling style (STS). Three social contextual variables - socio-economic status, sex, and age groups of the informants will be considered in the analysis. The use of national standard accent compared with the non-standard accent will be linked to issues of identity and integration.

**Keywords:** language variation, standard accent, Malay language, identity, integration.

### Introduction

The most widely encountered symbol of emerging nationhood is language and language is seen as the primary outward sign of a group's identity (Crystal, 1987). For Malaysia, the Malay language, which is the national and official language, plays the above-mentioned role. In the context of regional differences, Malay language acts as an integrating device between the people of Malay Peninsula and the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. The Malay language was implemented as a national and official language of Malaysia on September 1st 1967 for the Malay Peninsula, 1973 for Sabah, and 1985 for the state of Sarawak (Awang, 1993). Prior to that, English was the national and official language of the nation.

However, in the implementation, neither pronunciation nor phonological matters were taken into consideration. From the linguistic point of view, there is a social significance for phonological aspects, especially in relation to integration and identity of a language community (Honey, 1997). Furthermore, variations in pronunciation can become powerful indicators of regional identity and affiliation Montgomery (1995: 64). Differences in patterns of variation that are produced by geographical or spatial isolation are regularly transformed into powerful mechanisms for asserting and recognizing social differences (Spolsky, 1998). In the case of English for example, post-vocalic (r), such as in *car* and *fourth* is capable of implying social significance. In this context, there are two variants of (r) - pronounced or silent. In Scotland, Ireland, Boston, New York, and eastern USA, pronounced (r) is a standard prestige accent and it implies the integration and identity of English speakers of those regions (Holmes, 2001). Furthermore, there are accent differences between British, USA, and Australian English. The different accents show their identity and simultaneously imply the national integration of the respective nations.

For Malaysia, pronunciation can also be a tool for integration and national identity (besides other tools such as the posting of government staff and students between the two regions, electronic media, and the role played by the administrative and cultural centre in Kuala Lumpur). This is because the Malay language is not just spoken in Malaysia, but also in Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia), Brunei, and Singapore.

The pronunciation features of Malay language as the national language among speakers who are separated by regions and races, and local dialects in Malaysia could change if the speakers take into account the issues of integration and national identity when conversing in a formal situation. In sociolinguistic, this phenomenon is termed 'speech accommodation' that is, using the same pronunciation as a way of showing identicalness (Holmes, 2001; Downes, 1998; Giles, 1984). For instance, currently the federal ministers as well as artistes from Sabah and Sarawak were found to have accommodated their Malay language accents to the standard Malay Peninsula language which has the national features when interviewed by the media. This is an early sign of their national identity awareness. However, what about the majority of the society?

This is a socio-phonological study - a combination of sociolinguistics and phonology. The phonological variable is relevant in such a study because it is more practical (Milroy, 1987) and able to show a considerable rate of linguistic differences (Asmah, 1985; Holmes, 2001). In fact, language accommodation takes place more often in phonology (Asmah, 2004: 134). This study examines two main issues in national accent - integration and identity. The focus will be on the question of *convergent* or *divergent* pronunciation.

### **Malaysian national accent**

Standard Malay accent as a national language in this study refers to the accent that is normally spoken in a formal official government broadcasting agency - Radio Television

Malaysia (RTM) national news, in national schools and higher learning institutions.<sup>1</sup> In sociolinguistics, this concept of accent is called ‘received pronunciation’ (RP). RP refers to the accent which is used by educated and prestigious members of the society (Asmah, 1985; Holmes, 2001).

In the case of Malaysian Malay language, the phonological variables which play a significant role in the issue of identity and potent as an integration function among their multilingual society are: open-ended (a), such as in *kita* ‘we’, close-ended (i), such as in *bilik* ‘room’, close-ended (u), such as in *masuk* ‘enter’, initial (r) such as in *rasa* ‘feel’, and final (r) such as in *lebar* ‘wide’ (Idris, 1995). In the context of a national or standard accent of Malay language, these variables are pronounced [kitə], [bileʔ], [masoʔ], [rasə] and [lebar]<sup>2</sup> respectively. The pronunciation implies the Malaysian identity, which differs from speakers of Malay language of other countries, such as Indonesia or Brunei. At the same time, the standard pronunciation of Malaysian Malay is a manifestation of the national integration of its people. Nevertheless, in a daily use of the language, there are variations in pronunciation of those phonological variables, depending on geographical location or race. Hence, there are [kita], [bilik], [duduk], [rasa], and [leba], [lebaw] or [lebɔ] which are considered as non-standard accent in this sense.<sup>3</sup>

## Objectives

The aim of this paper is to discuss accent differences (standard or non-standard) of the five Malay language phonological variables in four formal speech styles used among native Malay-speakers in the city of Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, which is located in Borneo. The uses of standard or non-standard accent will be analyzed from three social variables, specifically the socio-economic status (SES), sex, and age of the informants. The discussion will lead to the issues of national and local identity and integration.

## Research Methodology

This study was based on the sociological urban sociolinguistics approach which was pioneered by Labov (1972) in New York City, and later by Trudgill (1974) in Norwich and Milroy (1987) in Belfast. The study examined the interrelation between linguistic (phonological), speech style, and social variables and was conducted in Kuching, a city in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. The details of the research methodology are as follow.

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<sup>1</sup> RTM pronunciation is the model used in most Malaysian schools (Asmah, 1992: 172).

<sup>2</sup> According to Asmah (1992), RTM newsreaders and announcers seem to fluctuate between the flapped ‘r’ and silent in the case of final ‘r’. Recently, based on several hours of observation on TV1 RTM news, we found that this alveolar is used frequently as flap and not as trill.

<sup>3</sup> There was a notion of ‘codified pronunciation’ of Malay which was prescribed phonetically in the 80’s. The notion is ‘pronounce a word as it is spelt’. But it was no longer practiced because it sounded unnatural when spoken.

## People of Kuching and their accents

The state of Sarawak in Malaysia is located in the south-western part of Borneo Island and is separated from the mainland of the Malay Peninsula by the South China Sea. In addition to being the capital city and centre of administration for Sarawak, Kuching is also a business and cultural centre for the Malays of Sarawak.

In this study, city dwellers were selected as informants because they were the group of people who went through social and linguistic changes earlier than others as a result of development. Thus, city dwellers were regarded as a dynamic group of people. In addition, city dwellers in this country have increased to 65 percent. This figure is based on the statistics from the Ministry of Rural and Territorial Development which affirmed that in 2005 rural dwellers comprised only 35 percent of the population (*Mingguan Malaysia*, 25 Mac 2007). As such, focusing on city dwellers is deemed appropriate for this study in order to discuss the national accent of this dynamic group of people.



Figure 1: Location of Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

The sub-dialect of Kuching Malay is considered the focus area for other Sarawak Malay dialects. Any development in the sub-dialect Malay of Kuching would be followed by other sub-dialects (Asmah, 1985: 178).

Table 1: Comparison of accents in five phonological variables of Kuching, Sarawak Malay: Examples

Phonological Variables	Example	National / standard Accent	Kuching / Local Accent
Open-ended (a)	saya 'I'	[sayə]	[saya]
Close-ended (i)	bilik 'room'	[bileʔ]	[bilik]
Close-ended (u)	duduk 'sit'	[dudoʔ]	[duduk]
Initial (r) <sub>1</sub>	rumah 'home'	[rumah]	[ɣumah] <sup>4</sup>
Final (r) <sub>2</sub>	bakar 'burn'	[bakar]	[bakarɣ]

Table 1 shows a comparison between national / standard and local Kuching accent. The examples of lexis are based on Asmah (1977).

### Social variables

The social variables which were taken into consideration in this study were sex, age, and socio-economic status (SES). SES is counted by combination of level of education, types of occupation, and income items of informants.

### Phonological variables

There were five (5) phonological variables studied in the four (4) speech styles (see below). They were: the final syllable open-ended vowel (a) such as in *kita* 'we', final syllable close-ended vowel (i) such as in *ini bilik* 'room' and close-ended vowel (u) such as in *masuk* 'enter', initial consonant (r) or (r)<sub>1</sub> such as in *rumah* 'home', and (r) in final position or (r)<sub>2</sub> such as in *pasar* 'market'. Among the five phonological variables, two (2) were the most significant in relation to accent and identity; (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub> (see Asmah 1985). Accents for the five phonological variables were categorized into two variations – national / standard accent (S) and non-standard accent (NS).

### Speech styles

This research was carried out in a formal context. Formal here signifies that the researchers and the informants were strangers and the interview questions were specifically constructed. For this purpose four different speech styles were formed as the basis for this study, namely reading word list style (WLS), reading passage style (PS), conversational style (CS), and story-telling style (STS).

WLS was constructed by listing 51 words which comprised all the 5 phonological variables, with 8 occurrences for each. PS on the other hand was made up of three

<sup>4</sup> ɣ is fricative velar (Asmah, 1985)

paragraphs consisting of 150 words. Phonological variable of (a) occurs 19 times in the passage, (i) 5, (u) 10, (r)<sub>1</sub> 9, and (r)<sub>2</sub> 5. For CS, the researchers prompt informants to converse by posing relevant questions. Among the questions raised were about themselves and their views on the city of Kuching. For STS, the researchers motivated the informants to recount a story about their previous experiences; pleasant or bad or to talk about their hometown to the researcher. There was minimum interruption from the researchers. The occurrences of the phonological variables for CS and STS were not predetermined but subjected to their emergence in the informants' utterances.

WLS and PS involved the use of text, and were considered as 'text style' whereas CS and STS were considered as 'non-text style'. These four speech styles differed in their degree of formality, with WLS being the most formal, and STS the least formal (most casual).

### **Informants**

The informants in the study were 25 native speakers of Malay language in Kuching, a city in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. The sex distribution of the informants was almost equivalent with 13 (52 percent) males, and 12 (48 percent) females.

From the scores of the three SES items, the informants were grouped into four categories: middle lower group (MLG), upper lower group (ULG), lower middle group (LMG), and mid-middle group (MMG). The distribution according to SES group was also fairly even with MLG, LMG, and MMG at 24 percent and ULG at 28 percent.

The distribution according to age group showed that four age groups were present in the study. Age group 1 (15-25 years old) comprised 20 percent, age group 2 (26-40 years old) 36 percent, and age group 3 (41-55 years old) 36 percent. All the groups included both males and females. Meanwhile, age group 4 (56 + years old) comprised only 8 percent and was represented by merely two male informants.

More than half of the informants (68 percent) said 'yes' to the question of whether they had ever been to the main region of the country – the Malay Peninsula. 40 percent of them were males and 28 percent females. Only 32 percent of the informants had never been there. Distribution details for these percentages are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Profile of informants<sup>5</sup>

Socio-economic Status of Informant (SES)	Sex		Age group / Years				Been to Malay Pn.		Total
	M	F	1 15-25 Young	2 26-40 Early Adult	3 41-55 Adult	4 56+ Old	Yes	No	
2 - MLG	3	3	2	1	2	1	1	5	6 (24)
3 - ULG	5	2	1	1	4	1	6	1	7 (28)
4 - LMG	2	4	2	3	1	-	5	1	6 (24)
5 - MMG	3	3	-	4	2	-	5	1	6 (24)
Total	13 (52)	12 (48)	5 (20)	9 (36)	9 (36)	2 (8)	17 (68)	8 (32)	25 (100)

### Research Procedures

This study involved audio recordings of the informants' speech in the four speech styles which were specially designed. The recordings and the fieldwork were carried out by the researchers themselves. After the researchers met individuals who agreed to become informants, initial exchange took place, such as greetings, introducing themselves, asking for their names, enquiring whether they were from Kuching or lived there, requesting if they could spend 15-20 minutes of their time, and informing what were expected of them. Most importantly was to mention that the interaction would be audio taped.

Subsequently, the informants were requested to read aloud the word list which contained 51 words (WLS), the reading passage which had three paragraphs of about 150 words (PS), and subsequently followed by an interview (CS). Among the questions posed were the names of their schools and their higher learning institutions, their highest level of education, the degrees they hold, their age, place of work and occupations, working environment, salary, their lives in the city, and whether they have been to Malay Peninsula. The interview questions were constructed to get data on their speech and their personal background. Finally the informants were asked to recount a story (STS) about their unforgettable experiences or about what they would do if they were given a chance to govern the city.

With the assistance of two linguistic Master students who had been trained to identify the pronunciation variations of the five (5) phonological variables, the recordings were later listened to and the frequency of their occurrences were recorded. The raw data gathered were then analyzed using a form which was specially designed for the purpose of this analysis. The frequency of accent occurrence (national accent or the local accent) in all styles was also converted into percentages and means.

<sup>5</sup> Percentage figures in all tables in this paper are shown in parentheses.

Personal details and SES of the informants were transferred to a coding form. The informants were categorized into groups based on the SES scores, age group, and sex, and whether they had been to the Malay Peninsula. The frequency, percentage, and mean of each phonological variable used were next sorted according to SES, sex, age and speech styles to be analyzed.

### Reality of Malay accent in Kuching

The discussion starts off by expounding the reality profile of Malay language accent as the national accent by examining each of the five phonological variables. Subsequently, it will look into the use of accent by means of the five phonological variables, based on three sociological variables; social economic status (SES), sex, and age category.

### Overall Findings

The overall finding of this study is that majority of the informants in Kuching used standard accent (variation) more frequently than non-standard accent. This is depicted in the total mean of all phonological variables which shows 65.8 percent for standard accent, as compared to non-standard accent with only 34.2 percent (refer to Table 3 and Figure 2). The finding shows that the Kuching Malays informants are ready to accommodate their accent to the national accent. The increased use of standard accent was mainly impelled by three phonological variables; (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub> with 81 percent, 89 percent, and 95 percent respectively. However, for the other two phonological variables; (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub>, the usage is still below 45 percent with only 21 percent and 43 percent respectively.

Table 3: Overall profile of standard accent in Kuching

		Phonological Variable					
Accent	Stat	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) <sub>1</sub>	(r) <sub>2</sub>	Mean
Standard (S)	<i>f</i>	313	455	652	509	200	
	%	21	81	89	95	43	65.8
N-Standard (NS)	<i>f</i>	1190	106	84	29	267	
	%	79	19	11	5	57	34.2



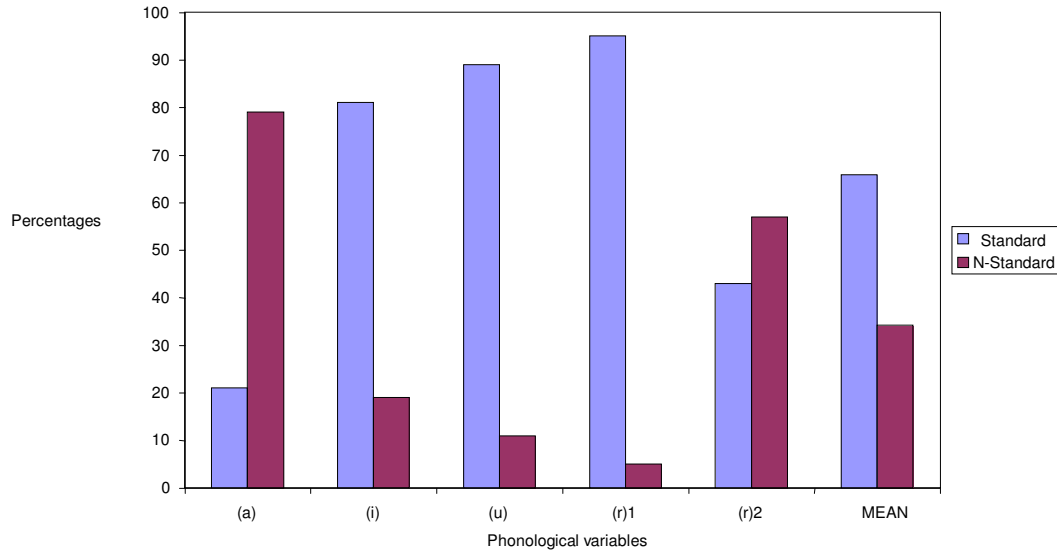


Figure 2: Accent in Kuching

The result also shows that there are two categories of phonological variables: first category, (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub>; second category, (i), (u), (r)<sub>1</sub>. Variables (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub> were mainly used as non-standard accent (with 79 and 57 percent respectively), whereas variables (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub> were used more as standard accent. For (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub>, the excessive use of non-standard variation is associated with the 'codified' pronunciation notion, which actually pronounce (a) as [a]; meanwhile (r)<sub>2</sub> as fricative velar or silent.

### Accent and speech style

Overall, there seems to be no indication of any relationships between the choice of accent and speech style variation. Meaning, the change of formality level in speech style does not influence the choice of accent. The mean for all the five phonological variables indicates approximately 61 marks for standard accent in each speech style (refer to Table 4). This implies that any signs or symptoms of observer's *paradox*<sup>6</sup> among the informants had been successfully overcome during the research.

Specifically, there exist two categories of phonological variables. First category; (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub> were mostly used as non-standard accent in all the four speech styles. Second category; (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub> were mostly used as standard accent in all the speech styles. However, for variable (a), the lower the formality level of the speech style, the higher the usage of standard accent, that is, 4 percent, 1 percent, 31 percent, and 44 percent respectively in WLS (most formal), PS, CS, and STS (least formal). In text style, standard accent was only used 2 percent, whereas in non-text style, the usage increased to 36 percent. Once again, (a) shows its unique feature.

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<sup>6</sup> See Labov (1972).

Table 4: Malay accent in Kuching based on speech style

Speech Styles	Accent	Phonological Variables (%)					MEAN
		(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) <sub>1</sub>	(r) <sub>2</sub>	
WLS	S	4	76	83	99	49	62.2
	NS	96	24	17	1	51	37.8
PS	S	1	90	91	99	50	66.2
	NS	99	10	9	1	50	33.8
Text Style	S	2	82	88	99	49	64
	NS	98	18	12	1	51	36
CS	S	31	80	88	79	28	61.2
	NS	69	20	12	21	72	38.8
STS	S	44	80	95	72	29	64
	NS	56	20	5	28	71	36
Non-Text Style	S	36	80	90	76	28	62
	NS	64	20	10	24	72	38

The rationale why informants generally used local accent for (a) which is pronounced [a] for text style (reading) may be due to the influence of the 'uniformity pronunciation' concept which, prior to this, stressed the need to 'read/pronounce according to the spelling'.

#### Accent and socio-economic status

Informants who belong to the higher cluster of social economic status (SES) have the tendency to employ standard accent more frequently. This is revealed from the mean of all the five phonological variables for each SES cluster. Two middle group clusters; LMG and MMG used standard accent at 74.6 and 69.2 percent respectively, in comparison to MLG and ULG which used 56.8 and 61.4 percent (even though the MMG score was less than the mean score for LMG, the score is more than the scores of the two lower clusters (MLG and ULG)) (refer Table 5).

The SES cluster variable also denotes the separation between the two categories of phonological variables. For variable (a), it was discovered that all SES clusters used less standard accent compared to standard accent. Apart from that, MLG and ULG also used less standard accent (r)<sub>2</sub>. For variables (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub>, all SES clusters used more standard accent than non-standard accent.

These findings show that there is a relationship between the informants' socio-economic status (SES) and the choice of Malay language accent in formal style context.

Table 5: Malay accent in Kuching based on socio-economic status (SES)

Social Variable		Phonological Variable					Mean
Sex	Accent	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) <sub>1</sub>	(r) <sub>2</sub>	
MLG	S	12	71	88	95	18	56.8
	NS	88	29	12	5	82	43.2
ULG	S	16	87	92	97	15	61.4
	NS	84	13	8	3	85	38.6
LMG	S	36	85	87	100	65	74.6
	NS	64	15	13	0	35	25.4
MMG	S	20	83	87	88	68	69.2
	NS	80	17	13	12	32	30.8

### Accent and sex

Male informants show more awareness of standard accent than females. The mean for standard accent of all the five phonological variables for male informants was 54.2 percent; compared to only 45.8 percent for female informants (refer Table 6).

The awareness of male informants in reference to standard accent is also revealed in four phonological variables; specifically (i), (u), (r)<sub>1</sub>, and (r)<sub>2</sub>. This scenario can be linked to the belief that males in Malaysia, in general are more mobile than females.

For variable (a), both male and female informants show the same level of awareness for standard accent that is, 49 and 51 percent respectively. This strengthens the findings that phonological variable (a) has specific meaning in Malay language variation.

Table 6: Malay accent in Kuching based on sex

Social Variable		Phonological Variable (%)					Mean
Sex	Accent	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) <sub>1</sub>	(r) <sub>2</sub>	
Male	S	49	53	55	52	62	54.2
	NS	56	60	51	34	52	50.6
Female	S	51	47	45	48	38	45.8
	NS	44	40	49	66	48	49.4

### Accent and age

The study shows that age does play a role in the choice of accent used. Generally speaking, informants who fall under the category of adolescent, early adulthood and adult are more sensitive to standard accent compared to the elderly informants. Informants under 55 years old used standard accent more often than those aged 56 and above. Category age 1 (15-25 years old) recorded 62.4 percent standard accent usage, while

category age 2 (26-40 years old) 68.0 percent and category age 3 (41-55 years old) 65.4 percent (refer Table 7). This condition can be linked to the effects of national education and also to the mobility factor among the younger informants.

Two categories of phonological variables were identified in relation to their usage and age cluster. First, (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub> were used as non-standard accent to a great extent for all the four age clusters. Second, (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub> were mostly used as standard accent.

Table 7: Malay accent in Kuching based on age

Social Variable	Phonological Variable (%)						Mean
	Accent	(a)	(i)	(u)	(r) <sub>1</sub>	(r) <sub>2</sub>	
1 - (15 – 25 years old)	S	17	81	90	100	24	62.4
Adolescent	NS	83	19	10	0	76	37.6
2 - (26 – 40 years old)	S	23	83	86	94	54	68.0
Early Adulthood	NS	77	17	14	6	46	32.0
3 - (41 – 55 years old)	S	23	83	91	91	39	65.4
Adult	NS	77	17	9	9	61	34.6
4 - (56 + years old)	S	0	58	90	100	44	58.4
Elderly	NS	100	42	10	0	56	41.6

## Conclusion

A major function of language is the expression of identity – signalling who we are and where we ‘belong’ and many social situations display language which unites rather than informs (Crystal 2003). Based on this theory and the formal context of the accents used in Kuching, Sarawak this research concludes as follows.

- (a) Informants in this study are accommodative to the national standard accent when they interact in a formal context. As such, there is a tendency for national identity and integration among the informants in Kuching. This is depicted by the cluster of informants based on SES, all age clusters, and male informants, especially for (i), (u), and (r)<sub>1</sub> phonological variables which are used in standard accent frequently.
- (b) Local identity is more apparent when informants used phonological variable (a) and (r)<sub>2</sub> as non-standard accent in terms of sex, age, and SES. In spite of this, there appears to be a move toward standard accent in the case of sex, age, (especially adolescent age cluster) and SES.

To conclude, even though being outside the administrative division of a country and separated by sea, the Malay informants in Kuching, Sarawak, on the whole demonstrate a satisfactory level of standard (national) accent usage in a formal context. This conclusion is strengthened by the male social variable, informants from higher SES clusters, and the informants from the younger age clusters who are more conscious of the national accent. These findings illustrate that in the context of formal situation, speakers tend to

accommodate their accent to the national accent to manifest their national identity and integration. Apart from those, the finding also shows that national identity and integration are shown through accents.

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