Indonesian and Translation: National Identity in the Global Border Contests

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Abstract
As a national symbol, the Indonesian language has played a crucial role in unifying Indonesia’s highly diverse communities, which consist of over a thousand tribes with over six hundred vernaculars. Recognising the value of Indonesian, the government has endeavoured to maintain it, especially through the standardisation of grammar and vocabulary and the development of language teaching. However, translation, which should be able to enhance the functions of Indonesian, is one area that seems to have been neglected. Despite the country’s staggering reliance on translated literature, the quality of the translations (especially from English) is generally very low. In translated texts Indonesian is becoming more Anglicized instead of being enriched by the creative incorporation of foreign elements. This corrosion of Indonesian may pose a serious threat to the language as a national symbol that sets the nation apart from others. With globalisation contesting national borders at an unparalleled rate, it is imperative that translation be seriously considered in the country’s language policy to ensure the national symbol’s vitality and protect its linguistic and cultural wealth.

Key words: National Identity, Translation, Language Policy, Globalisation.

Introduction
As a national symbol, the Indonesian language has played a crucial role in unifying Indonesia’s highly diverse communities, which consist of over a thousand tribes with over six hundred vernaculars. Recognising the value of Indonesian, the government has endeavoured to maintain it, especially through the standardisation of grammar and vocabulary and development of language teaching. As the major medium of state administration, education, media and communication across the archipelago, the Indonesian language may be considered to be one of the most successful imposed languages in the world. However, translation, which should be able to enhance the functions of Indonesian, is one area that seems to have been neglected. Despite the country’s staggering reliance on translated literature (40-60% of the national production, excluding mass-media), the quality of the translations is generally very low. Many, if not most, of the translations seem to have been heavily influenced by the source language (normally English), not only in lexicon but in structure as well. As a result, in translated texts, Indonesian is becoming more Anglicized instead of being enriched by the creative incorporation of foreign elements. This corrosion of Indonesian may pose a serious threat to the language as a national symbol that sets the nation apart from others, especially with the increasing hegemony of English through globalisation. With globalisation contesting
national borders at an unparalleled rate, it is imperative that translation be seriously considered in the country’s language policy to ensure its vitality and protect its linguistic and cultural wealth as it plays a role in representing the nation. I will address this issue by first looking at the significance of national identity and Indonesian as a symbol of national identity. Later, I will move on to address translation in Indonesia’s language planning and the pandemy of translationese in the country. I will conclude the discussion by emphasising the need for a specific language policy on translation to maintain Indonesia’s national language and recommend programs for improving the situation.

National identity: why it matters

The Indonesian term of national identity (identitas nasional) is normally understood as the manifestation of a nation’s cultural values and characteristics which makes it different from other nations (Siswomihardjo 2005). Such a definition reflects the two faces of identity. On the one hand, it is concerned with a shared association to common beliefs and attributes, and, hence, as Kumaravadivelu (2012: 142) puts it, “sameness”. On the other hand, it refers to “an awareness of difference” – “a feeling and recognition of ‘we’ and ‘they’” (Lee 2012: 29). National identity seen in this way is fluid as the nature and relationship of Self and Other, also constantly change.

In a developing country with a highly pluralist society such as Indonesia, national identity is crucial in order to build unity and stability to accelerate development (Budhisantoso 1996). Endeavours are therefore made in politics to continuously revitalise and strengthen symbols of national identity to make the nation “differ” from others (Budhisantosa 1998: n.p). Indeed, as Watson points out, “[n]ational identity does not grow “naturally” in any society; it has to be created, nurtured and carefully promoted” (1993: 80). Efforts in the construction of national identity is becoming more and more important to “hold the citizenry closer to the state” as the world is increasingly globalised (Bechoffer & McCrone 2009: 4).

Indonesian: symbol national identity and policy

The significance of language as the major vehicle of a people’s culture, which is a central dimension of national identity (Guibernau 2004, Smith 1991), cannot be overemphasised. According to Jiang, language is “the symbolic representation of a people” because it is shaped by its historical and cultural background, including their approach to life and ways of thinking (Jiang 2000: 328). Language is naturally a basic symbol of identity since it determines much of how a person is perceived and perceives. As Joseph (2004: 225) puts it:

‘Language’ in the sense of what a particular person says or writes, considered from the point of view of both form and content, is central to individual identity. It inscribes the person within national or other corporate identities [...]. It constitutes a text, not just of what a person says, but of the person, from which others will read and interpret a person’s identity in the richest and most complex ways.
So close is the link between language and identity that Orman (2008: 46) argues that language planning may be seen as the “most salient [...] type of identity planning”. To this he adds:

*If we can talk of language planning as a type of identity planning, it follows that we can view language policies as types of identity policy and when they operate at the level of nations and states we may then talk of language-in-national-identity policies.* (Orman 2008: 47)

As a unifying symbol of its highly diverse people, Indonesian is a vital part of Indonesia’s national identity. Its role was proved indispensable in bringing different ethnic groups together during the country’s nationalist movement. It was proclaimed as the nation’s language of unity in the Youth Pledge *(Sumpah Pemuda)* in 1928, which gave impetus for the people’s independence movement. In this sense, Benedict Anderson (1991) is correct in saying that national language serves as a bedrock for nationalism - which, in my view, is inseparable from its unifying aspect. This integrative function of Indonesian continued to be pivotal after the birth of the country in 1945. Both the national and official language, Indonesian is not only the language of administration, mass media and education, but the language most commonly used by people from over a thousand different ethnic groups speaking more than 600 local languages. While it was a dialect of Malay, it has grown into a major language influenced by Indonesia’s various regional vernaculars and distinctly represents the country’s national culture.

Recognising the crucial role of Indonesian, a great deal of efforts have been made to maintain and develop the language, e.g. vocabulary and grammatical development, promotion through education (especially language teaching) and mass media. The efforts in language policy have been generally very fruitful.¹ Errington (1998: 2) says that “Now Indonesian is a fully viable, universally acknowledged national language.” Indonesia’s national language policy has also often been deemed a great success (Pauuw 2009). However, translation, which should be able to enhance the functions of Indonesian, is one area that seems to have been neglected. There is no particular language policy and planning in the field by the Indonesian government. Consequently, starting from 1998, when the need for translation began surging with the country’s adoption of more liberal democracy and increasing globalisation, the quality of Indonesian in translations started to drop (see also Agustinus, n.d. in Thipani 2014). As we shall see in the next section, while there has always been recognition over the importance of translation in language development, there has not been serious effort on the part of the government to develop the area since early in the country’s history of language planning.

¹ The imposition of Indonesian in education has to some extent undermined local languages, which is an important issue the country needs to deal with. There is an absolute need to create a balance between the promotion of the national languages and local ones, but it is not my concern in this present article.
Translation in Indonesia’s language planning

In addition to its vital role in transfer of knowledge and information for nation building, translation is paramount in the development of national languages by enlarging their capacities as a medium of communication, be it in vocabulary and organisation of ideas. As an act of mediated interlingual communication, however, translation is far beyond, borrowing Shing’s (2007: 37) words, “a pure linguistic transfer”. With language manifested itself with social, political and cultural values, translation is often positioned at the very frontier in constant negotiation with the Other. In this way, according Paul St-Pierre, translation is central in shaping national identity:

Translation [...] plays an essential role in determining how a nation establishes its identity in terms of others, be this through opposition through foreign influences, through assimilation or “naturalization” of the foreign whereby differences are erased to as great a degree as possible, or through imitation of another, usually dominant culture. These are all different strategies of translation, becoming possibilities at different moments in history and underlining the various types of relations between nations which can exist. (In St-Pierre, n.d, as cited in Das 2005: 79-80, cf. St-Pierre n.d: 2)

The significance of translation for the development of Indonesian was recognised and encouraged by the government, especially in the early decades after Indonesia’s independence. At least eight of ten National Congresses on the Indonesian Language, which give input to the National Institute for Language Cultivation and Development (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa - BPPB), mentioned the need for translation in their recommendations, especially in regard to developing the country’s literature, enhancing literature’s function as a medium of education, and disseminating science and technology. The government was also advised to establish a national body for translation (KBI III, 1978) and introduce Indonesian literature to the world through translation (KBI VII, 1998). The need for translation was mentioned again in the last KBI in 2013, to “enhance the status and functions” of the national language. One recommendation concerned the proper use of Indonesian in translation (KB III, 1983), although the recommendation was not meant for translation per se but for publications in general.

Not all of these recommendations have been put into practice. A great deal of literature has been translated into Indonesian, but no government body has been set up to deal specifically with matters related to translation in the country, especially with the quality of the rendering. Although the government (Ministry of Education and Culture) pays attention to the quality of texts, most translations in the country are produced by commercial publishers without any quality-related supervision from the government. This, however, echoes the general outlook of the Indonesian Language Congresses which seem to emphasise the volume of translation over content.
Translation is not specifically mentioned in the current strategic programs of the National Institute for Language Cultivation and Development (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, BPPB), Ministry of Education and Culture (n.d.):

- Strengthening of the Indonesian Language as a medium of education
- Certification of language use in public spaces, especially at territorial borders
- Improvement of the quality and number of literary works and criticism
- Improvement of the function of Indonesian as an international language
- Development of instructional materials for language and literature
- Standardisation of proficiency in Indonesian
- Improvement of reading, writing and communication competencies in Indonesian in literacy education
- Preservation of language and literature
- Facilitation of Indonesian language and literature study programs in senior high schools and universities.

Unlike language teaching, literature and language standardisation, translation is not explicitly specified in the above-mentioned programs. Although, of course, translation might be considered a part of the strengthening of Indonesian as a medium of education and the improvement of the quality and number of literary works and criticisms, it should be dealt with specifically since the country relies on translation so heavily. As Grin (n.d.: 1) observes, translation “seems to be affected by a strange fate” with its underepresentation. Grin (n.d.: 1) states:

[I]n a multilingual world, [translation] is, arguably, indispensable; yet in discourses about multilingualism, its role is frequently overlooked: issues such as to foreign language learning, language rights, multilingualism in the classroom, the use of a lingua franca, etc., usually take centre stage, and translation is often treated as merely residual.

Grin (n.d.) suggests several reasons for the position of translation in Europe, such as the fact that people can learn foreign languages rather than using translation and the preference for using a lingua franca. In the context of translation into Indonesian, the first factor seems to be more relevant since the government has paid more attention to foreign language teaching, especially English. Another important factor seems to be the misconception of the nature of translation. People often mistakenly believe that once one learns a foreign language, he/she should be able to translate, which may be one reason why translation is often seen as subsidiary to foreign language learning. While it is true that one cannot translate without knowing another language, translation requires a completely different set of skills than those for monolingual communication. This misconception contributes to the low appreciation of Indonesian translators and leads to poor decisions in its production, especially the impossible time limits set for translators.

The situation is worsened with the Indonesian book market’s low affordability. People who have more money, on the other hand, generally do not have any choice but to use
whatever is available in the market because they lack competence in the source language (normally English). In 2014 a national book publisher, for instance, pays a translator around US$1.40 per page for translating into Indonesian. If a translator could finish, say five to six pages of translation per day, then, he/she would only get US$154 to US$184.80 a month (excluding weekends), which is much lower than Jakarta’s regional minimum wage set by the government. The government clearly needs to support Indonesian translators if the quality of translation in the country is to be improved.

Lost in translation: Translationese in Indonesia

The qualities of translations in Indonesian are notoriously low (Taryadi, 2003, Sinaga, 2003, Kurnia, 2009, Nababan, et.al., 2012, Wijaya 2013, Wijaya 2014). Many, if not most, translations have problems with mistranslations and unnatural expressions. The renderings are even often so literal that the language is difficult to understand. A quick search on the Internet will reveal numerous complaints on the poor quality of translations into Indonesian. Prasetyo (2013), an Indonesian reader, for instance, laments:

“Many complaints are raised on the poor quality of the translation of books [...] circulating in the market. The translators seem to have worked carelessly and as a result the rendering is confusing and makes you dizzy. You may even find some “unintelligible”. The translators seem to chatter in chaotic language grammar [...].”

Another reader, Wiguna (2009) writes in his blog:

“When the translation is difficult to understand, I would normally try to guess the English form of the rendering. But then I could not imagine how the text might have been written in the English version of the novel. There were paragraphs I had to skip because I couldn’t understand the sentences.”

The more acceptable translations from English, on the other hand, are still normally characterised by relatively strong interference of the source language, not only by the tendency to use loan words but also at the level of syntax. The Anglicized influence on grammar is often shown by the use of a standard active construction in the contexts where a passive construction or a topic comment structure would be more natural in Indonesian. The following, for instance, are just two examples of the numerous parts that simply follow the active voice in the English source text in a translation of Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men”:

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2 Indonesian: “[B]anyak muncul keluhan tentang rendahnya mutu penerjemahan buku [...] yang beredar di pasar. Penerjemahnya terkesan bekerja asal-asalan, sehingga hasil terjemahannya membingungkan, bikin pusing, bahkan mencapai taraf “tak bisa dibaca”. [...]. Mereka seperti berceloteh dalam struktur bahasa yang kacau [...].”

3 Indonesian: “Biasanya kalau terbentur maka saya coba menerka kata atau kolimatnya dalam bahasa Inggris. Nah kalau itu saya sama sekali tidak bisa membayangkan versi bahasa Inggris dari novel terjemahan itu dan akhirnya ada paragraf-paragraf [buku terjemahan itu] yang terpaksa saya lompati karena tidak bisa mencerna maksud kolimatnya”
Example 1
From his side pocket he brought out two spoons [...]. p.17

a. translation
Dari saku sisinya, ia mengeluarkan dua buah sendok [...]  
From his side pocket he brought out two spoons  
Subject v active object
 
(Steinbeck, 1930/2006, Koesalamwardi, Trans, p.30)

b. more natural translation
Dikeluarkannya dua buah sendok dari saku sisinya  
Be brought out two spoons from his side pocket  
Passive verb object adv. modifier

Example 2
I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. P.53

a. translation
“Seharusnya aku menembak anjing itu sendiri, George. [...]”  
should I shoot the/that dog myself

I should have shot the dog myself
(Steinbeck, 1937/2006, Koesalamwardi, Trans., p. 115)

b. more natural version
Seharusnya anjing itu aku tembak sendiri  
should the/that dog I shoot myself  
topic comment

the dog I should have shot myself

This tendency of strong syntactic interference of English also appeared in translations in Japan after WWII until recently. Interestingly, translationese has not been seen as something necessarily negative, especially in non-fiction texts (Furuno, 2015). According Furuno (2015: 147), this is because the contemporary Japanese community, who wanted to import information and knowledge from abroad, “had a higher regard for Western culture than its own at that time”. The “adequacy” of the translation, i.e. the orientation towards the source norms, therefore, seems to have been more important than the use of natural Japanese language.

Unlike in the Japanese case, online comments seem to indicate that Indonesian readers tend to have a negative view of unnatural translation both in fiction and non-fiction. Further research, however, is necessary to find out to what extent they “tolerate” the source language’s influence on the translated texts - whether, for example, they tend to
oppose the use of more obvious unnatural structure and expressions\textsuperscript{4} but do not mind the use of active rather than passive constructions. The latter is more subtle since Indonesian also has an active voice (but with a different distribution than in English). It would be even more interesting to find out why they approve of such syntactic imports if they do. With translationese so pervasive in Indonesia since the reformation era (from 1998), Indonesian translation readers may have become used to the active voice in translated texts and may see it as natural. Such an attitude would show a more fundamental shift of Indonesian by the adoption of source language (SL) norms (English) compared to a mere tendency to follow the SL norms due to poor workmanship. Such unnecessary adoption of SL norms would be undesirable for the development of Indonesian as a symbol of national identity because it would only make the language more like English rather than improving its function.

\textbf{Conclusion}

As a form of language contact, translation shapes the development of national languages, hence national identities. With escalating globalisation and a continuous or increased need for this secondary communication, there would be a greater chance of language shifts, which will affect the dynamics of national identities. It is therefore high time for Indonesia, whose language plays a very significant political and cultural role, to set up an adequate policy to deal with translation. Specific planning is necessary in order to enable translations to enhance the functions of Indonesian while keeping the borders that set the nation apart from others “safe” by maintaining the language’s linguistic and cultural wealth. Several programs that may be incorporated into this are translation quality control, the establishment of translation training programs and an accountable national accreditation body for translators, as well as the promotion of the translation profession and welfare of translators. Considerable resources would be required to implement this, but in that Indonesian is vital for the country and good translations would go a long way for its development, it would be well worth the effort.

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\textsuperscript{4} Example of glaring unnaturalness:

\textit{“Kita hanya harus mendapatkan tanah itu,”} [...]  
\textit{We just have to/must get the land}  
\textit{‘We just gotta get the land’}  

In Indonesian, the word “just” is not natural when used in the above way. It needs to be deleted.
References


