

On the Origin of the Betawi and their Language

Uri Tadmor

Bahasa Betawi is the language spoken by the indigenous ethnic group of Jakarta, the Orang Betawi. The language is of great historical and sociopolitical importance, not least because it served as the basis for the formation of Jakarta Indonesian, the most influential colloquial variety of Indonesian. Although Bahasa Betawi has enjoyed relatively close attention by scholars, its origin is still a question of debate. Most researchers treat it as an 'inherited' Malay dialect directly descended from Proto Malayic, either explicitly (Blust 1988:8, Nothofer 1995, Paauw 2008:11) or implicitly (Adelaar 1992, by using it as a data source for the reconstruction of Proto Malayic). Grijns (1991:4) made the most forceful argument to the contrary, clearly stating that 'Jakarta Malay developed from Malay as a second language into a Malay-based first language', or in other words that it is in fact a creole rather than an inherited dialect.

This paper evaluates the linguistic evidence on both sides of the debate and compares it to the historical evidence. The hypothesis presented is that the Orang Betawi originated from a core community consisting mostly of Chinese men, their Balinese wives, and their descendants. For reasons which will be explained, members of this group converted to Islam and used a pidgin—later creolized—whose main lexifier was Malay but which was infused with Chinese and Balinese elements. This community gradually absorbed large numbers of people from various other indigenous Indonesian groups, most importantly Sundanese and Javanese. Betawi then underwent significant decreolization, not—as is usually the case—by converging towards the main lexifier, but rather by converging towards the major substrate languages, Sundanese and Javanese.

References

Adelaar, K. Alexander, 1992. Proto Malayic: The Reconstruction of its Phonology and Parts of its Lexicon and Morphology. Pacific Linguistics C – 119, Canberra: The Australian National University.

Blust, Robert, 1988. Malay Historical Linguistics: A Progress Report. In Mohd. Thani Ahmad and Zaini Mohamed Zain (eds.): Rekonstruksi dan Cabang-Cabang Bahasa Melayu Induk (The Reconstruction and Branches of Proto Malayic), pp. 1-33. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Grijns, C.D., 1991. Jakarta Malay: A Multidimensional Approach to Spatial Variation. Part I. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Nothofer, Bernd, 1995. The History of Jakarta Malay. *Oceanic Linguistics* 34:86-97.

Paauw, Scott H., 2008. The Malay Contact Varieties of Eastern Indonesia: A Typological Comparison. PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.