

## FALSE FRIENDS

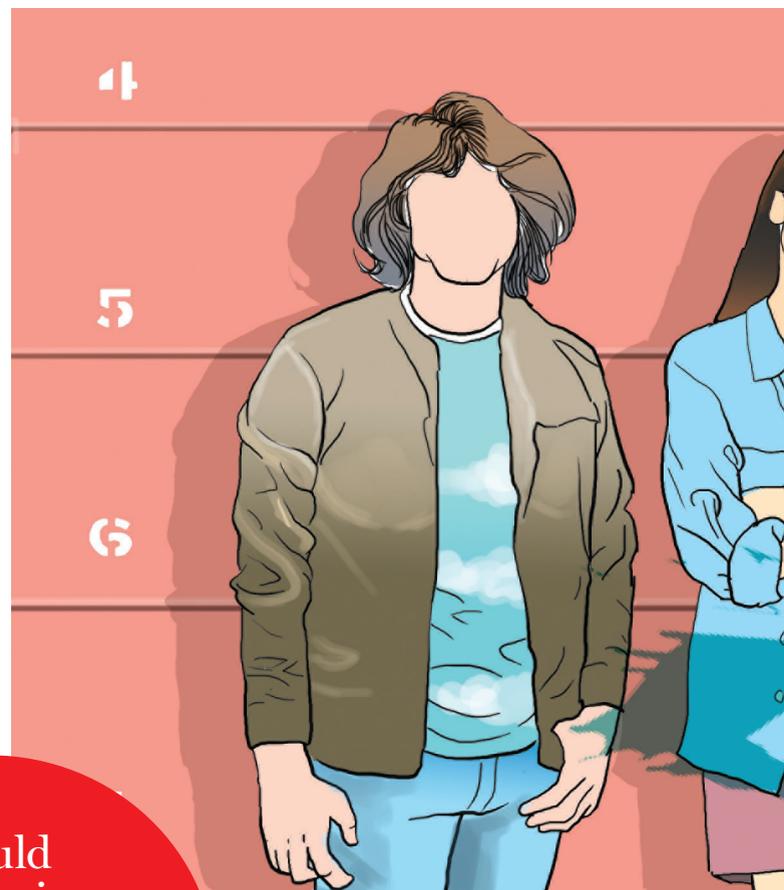
**T**HIS month the 2018 Winter Olympics are being held in Pyeong Chang, South Korea. The big news is not the sport, but the fact that competitors from North and South Korea are competing together under a united flag. The Korean combined hockey team is made up of players from both North and South. When the players got together to practice before the event, it turned out that they had difficulty in communicating. About one third of their vocabulary was different. North and South Korea split in 1945. In only 72 years the language north and south of the 38th parallel has already veered apart to the extent that the hockey players required the assistance of a translator.

In this Korean case, the hockey players acknowledged their linguistic differences and communication difficulties because communication was vital to their sporting success. Often, like American English and British English, Canadian French and European French, Indonesian Malay and Malaysian Malay, it is a case of ‘false friends’, when words and expressions look and sound the same, but are not, or not quite. As the Irish writer George Bernard Shaw once famously said of England and America, and could just as easily be said of Indonesia and Malaysia, they are “two countries divided by a common language.”

The Korean case is extreme, after all one half of the equation has sealed itself off as the ‘Hermit Kingdom’, but the phenomenon is interesting. What drives divergence of a common language between national boundaries?

British English and American English separated geographically in the 18th century, long before broadcast and recording. Their media link was print, and the written word can be read across differences much more than sounded words. I find it quite amazing that these broad versions of English are not more different today than they actually are. Perhaps it was the early unifying fact of written text that kept them close. There was also the powerful role that status played, with links to England kept strong after American independence, and travel of the American elite to England for education (and marriage) right up to the 20th century.

Linguistic differences are often a factor of time, namely which variant or dialect is elevated to national use at a certain point of history. In terms of vocabulary, American English kept some words common in Elizabethan English that British English dropped. Bill Bryson, in his book *Made in America* lists some of these, including: gotten, fall (as a synonym for autumn), mad (for angry), platter (for large dish), slim (for small, as in ‘slim chance’), hog (pig), trash (rubbish), quit (resign), and deck of cards (pack of cards). Almost all of these examples have now been readopted into British (and other) English through media exposure. American English pre-



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served them for us.

While vocabularies diverge through preferred synonyms, the same word can also develop different meanings and associations, often when one of its meanings is promoted over others. With American and British English this is particularly evident in informal speech and slang. The word ‘fanny’, for instance, in American English is a pretty innocuous word for one’s ‘bottom’ (or ‘backside’). In British English, it is a term for female genitalia, usually impolite. In American English, ‘bum’ is a neutral word for a tramp or vagrant. In British English it is a crude word for your bottom. In American English, ‘ass’ is your bottom, but in British English, an ‘ass’ is a donkey (what the pregnant Mary rode to Bethlehem), while the crude word for



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*kereta* is linked with *api* (fire) to make *kereta api* (literally ‘fire carriage’), which is the positively 19th-century sounding word for ‘train’, whereas in Malaysia ‘*tren*’ is more commonly used. In Indonesian Malay, the word *budak* means slave, but in Malaysian Malay its first meaning is child, (*‘budak sekolah’* means school child/ren), and secondly ‘servant’, both literally and figuratively, as in ‘your humble servant’. The word *kebenaran* to an Indonesian means ‘truth’, but to a Malaysian means ‘permission’, just as *membenarkan* in Indonesia means to validate, and in Malaysia, to permit. As Daud Soesilo has written, this particular difference can lead to serious misunderstanding when Malaysia and Indonesia use the same Bible translation.

There are a great many other common words with different meanings or associations. For instance, the word *boleh* in Indonesian means ‘may’ or ‘might’, but in Malaysia (and in parts of Indonesia too, especially in Sumatra), it means ‘can’. ‘*Boleh cakap Melayu?*’ (can you speak Malay?) is the question you will be asked in Malaysia. In Indonesia, it is ‘*Bisa bicara bahasa Indonesia?*’ In Indonesian, *bisa* is primarily the verb ‘can, to be able’ (a synonym of *dapat*) whereas in Malaysia, *bisa* is the noun meaning ‘poison’, which is a secondary meaning in Indonesia. Another word to be aware of is *butuh*, which is a common verb in Indonesian meaning ‘to need’, but in Malaysian Malay it is a noun meaning ‘penis’. With ‘*bisa/boleh*’ and ‘*butuh*’ generally both places know the other’s use, but it can still be confusing.

Some common words have different positive and negative associations, for instance *percuma*, which in Malaysia primarily means ‘free of charge’ (yippee!) and in Indonesia ‘useless’, ‘trifling’, or a ‘waste of time’ (oh no!). In Malaysia, the word *banci* means ‘number’, used for people, as when the population is counted in the census. In Indonesian, *banci* is a derogatory word for a transgender male to female or cross-dresser. In Malaysia the word *bual* means to chat about something, and a *pembual* is a speaker (at a conference, for instance). In Indonesian, *bual* has primarily a negative meaning of ‘to brag’ or ‘boast’, and so a *pembual* would be a loudmouth bragger (well, come to think of it, maybe a conference presenter after all...). The different interpretations come from the common first meaning of *bual*, which is to bubble up, like water.

There are dozens—nay, hundreds—of examples of meaning shifts between Indonesian and Malaysian Malay. Search ‘differences between Indonesian and Malaysian languages’ on the Internet and you will be led to sites reveling in compiling lists of words that differ in meaning. But would Indonesian and Malaysian sporting teams ever need a translator? I doubt it, and not just because the common language of sport for them to revert to would be English. No, the lexical differences are not that great, just as there is no Indonesian-Malaysian or Malaysian-Indonesian dictionary. Are there lexical differences? Yes, for sure. Are they significant? Occasionally.

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bottom/bum/backside is not ‘ass’, but ‘arse’. In British English, a ‘fag’ is the slang word for a cigarette. In US English, it is an offensive term of abuse for homosexual. And so on. And on.

Indonesian Malay and Malaysian Malay have differences in vocabulary like this: words that have survived or fallen out of use in one or the other, and words that appear the same but have come to have different meanings and connotations. This is quite apart from the differences in vocabulary we have previously discussed because of the colonial influence of Dutch (on Indonesian) and English (on Malaysian).

Some common examples of lexical differences include *kereta*, which in Indonesian Malay means carriage or chariot, but in Malaysian Malay means car (as well as carriage, chariot). In Indonesian, the word *mobil* for car comes from Dutch, and *kereta* to an Indonesian ear sounds quaint. But then in Indonesia,

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