

## Variation Within the Northern Malay Dialects

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The documentations of the Malay language and its varieties are still scarce and rather patchy, with Malay dialectology and dialect geography remaining as underdeveloped sub-fields (Boberg, Watt & Nerbonne, 2018). Existing reference publications of Malay are limited to Kamus Dewan dictionary (2005), the grammar by Nik Safiah et al. (1986) and a canon of Penang-words by Hamilton (1922). To date, the three urban varieties of the Northern Malay dialects (focusing on capital cities) have yet to be looked at by sociolinguistic dialectologists. Prior claims suggest that there are variations between the dialects spoken in Kedah, Perlis and Pulau Pinang. Marsden (1812), who claimed that Kedah is the centre of Malay culture in the north of Malaysia, later included Pulau Pinang as a separate but related dialect of Malay. Similarly, Hamilton (1922) has also noted the difference between Kedah Malay and the so-called Penang Malay by providing a canon of words and some descriptions of their pronunciation. However, these claims lack credible justification.

In this talk, I will present the findings of my first study which was carried out to remedy the lack of documentation regarding the three northern Malay dialects in Malaysia as well as presenting an overview of the second study that I have conducted. Drawing on dialectology and using variationist sociolinguistic fieldwork methods, the studies which focus on lexical and sociophonetic variations were conducted to investigate:

1. Do the three urban varieties of the Northern Malay dialects vary between one another?
2. If so, how do they vary between one another?
  - a. The use of region-specific lexical variants?
  - b. The use of specific vowels and/or consonants?
3. How does internal and external factors account for variations observed?

The studies are synchronic – inferring language change from differences between age groups rather than tracking change over time (Wolfram, 1997). The respondents included both male and female native speakers of each dialect who are currently residing within the set geographical range of each capital city in each state.

The first study was an online questionnaire conducted between March to May 2022 using Qualtrics. Respondents were required to provide dialectal synonyms for 90 everyday words given in Standard Malay. The respondents aged between 20-35 and 50-65, evenly distributed between the social groups. The findings of the online questionnaire show that out of the 90 lexical items, 15 were included, leaving only 75 lexical items to be observed. From this, 49 show no lexical variation and 26 show lexical variation between the three urban varieties. These numbers account for 65% of similarity rate or 35% of the variability rate between the three urban varieties of the Northern Malay dialects. Contrary to existing claims on the dialects being distinct from each other, the degree of variation is much less than what is expected.

Drawing from the findings of first study, the respondents in the second were required to respond to questions of socio-geographical identity and language use, as well as reading aloud a passage and a wordlist. Unlike the previous study that sought to document dialectal variants lexically, this study sought to record the realisation of /r/, word-final /r/ to /q/ and word-final /s/ to /ih/. I will conclude the talk by presenting what findings can be foreshadowed from the second study, with the aim to answer the posed research questions regarding the current claims of the status of these dialects and their variability from one another by providing empirical evidence.

## References

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