

# The Use of Repetitive Structures among Malaysians

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the complexities of using English in a bilingual context. It looks at some common forms of repetitions and reduplications that exist among speakers of the Malay and Tamil languages in Malaysia which is easily transferred into their English discourse. While most proficient speakers of English generally recognize it as awkward and inaccurate word use, the message is generally understood and accepted due to the cross cultural mix of the society. Less proficient speakers are either unaware of the awkward structure or ambivalent to its usage. The first part of the article sets out to investigate the various forms of reduplications that exist in Malay and Tamil and how such forms are used in the learners' discourse. The second part explains the semantic and syntactical organization that enables such forms to be repeated meaningfully. It further explores the reasons for people wanting to retain such repetitive structures despite realizing its inaccuracy and calls for some level of flexibility in the way English should be used in second language environments. The article has implications for both bilingual education and socio cultural identities.*

*Keywords: Reduplication, repetition, cultural identity, code mixing, language transfer*

## **Introduction**

In Malaysia, it is common to come across speakers who begin a conversation in one language and then switch to a number of other vernaculars before reverting to the initial language again. Such conversations can go on for a while, with speakers introducing word forms in the form of reduplications and repetitive structures that often make little sense to the outsider or monolingual speaker. To an unaccustomed listener, the situation can be awkward because it often leaves the listener wondering whether the repetition was the result of a slip of the tongue, or meant to serve as a vital piece of information, which the listener had actually missed. Such are the intricacies and complexities of language transfer and code mixing in places where a number of languages are spoken by the community and boundaries between languages are blurred. This situation can be quite pronounced in Malaysia where a number of languages (e.g. Malay and Tamil) which use repetitive structures at both the semantic and syntactical level coexist. Speakers in their zest to get on with the conversation, often find it necessary to use both words and concepts from their first language to explain terms in English. Nevertheless, this behavior is acceptable in informal conditions, because this is a nation where there are more bilinguals compared to monolinguals and people rarely keep their languages separate. Even within the monolingual mode, there is evidence of occasional codemixing and repetition regardless of the context of use. While codeswitching and codemixing are generally acknowledged (Gill, 2002), the widespread application of reduplication and repetitive structures in English discourse by Malaysians is rarely discussed and often overlooked as a transitional phase which speakers overcome as they become proficient in the language. This level of complacency can be related to the socio cultural mix of the population, where interjections, codemixing and borrowings are common features of language use and society has developed a level of tolerance over such intrusions. Nevertheless, the rampant use of repetitive structures in English has become problematic, where policy makers and language instructors see it necessary for speakers to use native speaker conventions that include accurate and appropriate language forms and structures. With the region's emphasis on using English as the language for Science and Technology and Business, there is increasing concern that Malaysians must exercise greater control over the way they speak and communicate in English (Gill, 2002). Current consensus being that code switching, codemixing, borrowing and cross linguistic transfers reflect deficits in the learners' linguistic