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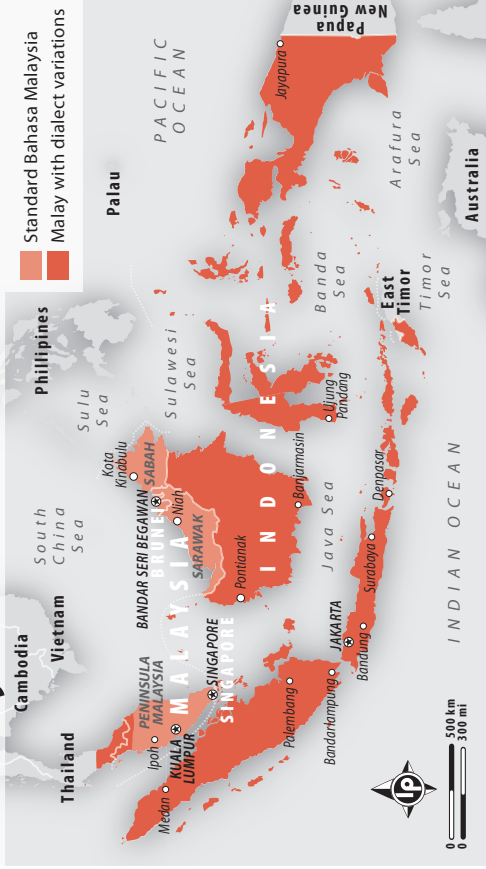
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malay



ABOUT > Introduction

The national language of Malaysia is Malay. Malaysians refer to it as *Bahasa Malaysia* (Language of Malaysia) or *Bahasa Melayu* (Language of the Malays). It's been the language in government and schools since the early '70s, so nearly every Malaysian speaks it, either as their first or second language.

Don't be confused by the terminology. 'Malays' are those who are racially considered Malay, usually Muslim, who also speak the language Malay. Malaysians are, of course, anyone who is a Malaysian citizen.

Malay is a member of the Western Austronesian language family and is spoken with slight variations throughout Malaysia and some parts of southern Thailand, Singapore and Brunei. In Malaysia, it's by no means the only language. Multiracial Malaysia is of course multilingual. Chinese Malaysians, who form approximately one third of the population, belong to many different dialect groups, including Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew and Hainanese, and many also speak Mandarin. Indian Malaysians have linguistic backgrounds in Tamil and Malayalee; other groups speak Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali. They account for about 10% of the population.

Wherever you go in Malaysia you will see shop signs in a rainbow of languages and scripts. Malay uses the Roman alphabet, but was originally written in *jawi*, an adaptation of Arabic script created during the introduction of Islam in the 14th century. You might notice the *halal* sign in *jawi* script, which shows food is kosher for Muslims. At the crossroads of many trade routes, Malaysia's language has a potpourri of influences. In addition to Arabic (*mahkamah*, 'court'), there's Portuguese (*garfu*, 'fork'), Sanskrit (*istana*, 'palace'), Chinese (*mee*, 'noodles'), and English, (*elektrik*, 'electric').

Classical Malay was almost lost during British colonisation. It was the traders and merchants who kept the language alive

during these times. 'Bazaar Malay' became a lingua franca and was the basis for the Bahasa Melayu we know today.

Bahasa Melayu also forms the basis for *Bahasa Indonesia*, but while Indonesian has been influenced by Dutch, Malaysian has adopted more English words, making it a dream of a language to learn for English speakers. English is Malaysia's second tongue, and is a compulsory subject in schools from the age of seven. Words such as 'clinic' and 'antibiotic' are incorporated into Malay through a change of spelling (*klinik* and *antibiotik*) and educated Malays often tend to mix languages in their daily conversations. English is commonly spoken in urban areas and it's not difficult to find someone who speaks some, even in rural areas.

While standard Malay is spoken in Kuala Lumpur, other regions of Malaysia have their own dialects that vary in pronunciation and accent. Regional accents can be strong, with variations in vocabulary. In Kelantan, *Apa khabar?*, 'How are you?' becomes *Guano demo?*. But never fear, your attempts at standard Malay will definitely be understood!

bahasa malaysia or bahasa melayu?

In this country where racial tensions still bubble under the surface of every decision, the difference between these two terms is loaded with meaning.

After the race riots of 1969 the government made many moves to address economic inequities, including a declaration that Malay should become the national language and the medium of instruction in all schools. But what to call the language?

Bahasa Malaysia, 'the language of Malaysia', was considered a unifying name, implicitly for Malaysians of all origins. In 1989 however, the members of the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (The Hall of Language and Publishing), who are predominantly Malay, decided to change it back to *Bahasa Melayu*, 'the language of the Malays'. This move was seen by some to be a racially possessive, 'our language, not yours' move. It remains the official name.

how to use this phrasebook

you *can* speak another language

It's true – anyone can speak another language. Don't worry if you haven't studied languages before, or that you studied a language at school for years and can't remember any of it. You just need to start speaking. Once you start, you'll be amazed how many prompts you'll get to help you build on those first words. You'll hear people speaking, pick up sounds from TV, catch a word or two from the local radio, see something on a billboard – all these things help to build your understanding.

plunge in

There are a few everyday words you could learn right away. The general greeting is *Selamat pagi*, *se-lah-mahtpah-gee*. For other hellos and goodbyes, see page 40. If you are moving through a crowd or trying to get past people it is polite to say *Maafkan saya*, *mah-ahf-kahn sai-yuh*, which means 'Excuse me'. For tips on civilities and body language, see page 53. Two easy words to remember are *Tidak*, *tee-dah(k)*, 'No' and *Ya*, *ya*, 'Yes'. If you're having trouble understanding someone, just say *Saya tidak faham*, *sai-yuh tee-dah(k) fah-hahm*, 'I don't understand'. 'How much is it?' is *Berapa harganya ini?*, *be-rah-puh hahr-guh-nyuh ee-nee?*. If you find yourself in an emergency situation, turn to page 203 for some handy phrases.

abbreviations used in this book

adj	adjective	lit	literal translation
col	colloquial	n	noun
excl	exclusive	pl	plural
incl	inclusive	pol	polite
inf	informal	v	verb