

The Use of Fillers by Malaysians in Intracultural and Intercultural Communication Abroad

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100156>

Received: 21 September 2026; Accepted: 26 September 2026; Published: 03 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Malaysian English carries a small set of discourse particles, among them lah, meh, lor, ah, kan and sia, which add little to the propositional content of an utterance but a great deal to its interpersonal texture. This qualitative study asks what becomes of those particles once their speakers leave Malaysia. Six Malaysian students in the United Kingdom took part in semi-structured interviews, and recorded conversations between a Malaysian participant and two non-Malaysian peers, one Emirati and one Welsh, were collected as naturally occurring talk. The interview transcripts were examined thematically, while the recordings were read through a discourse-pragmatic lens framed by Communication Accommodation Theory. Two particles, lah and sia, were observed directly in the recorded interaction; participants additionally reported using meh, lor, ah and kan. The central result is a gap between what the students believed they did and what they were recorded doing. In interview they described holding their particles back when speaking to non-Malaysians. In the recordings they did no such thing. Particles were retained with Malaysian and non-Malaysian interlocutors alike, and no instance of divergence was found. What the participants restrained was register rather than culture: lah was set aside for professional and academic settings, not for foreign listeners. In peer talk the particles worked as convergence devices, softening a response, carrying affect and shortening social distance. Filler use therefore indexes Malaysian identity in a habitual and largely unremarked way rather than a performed one, and the intracultural and intercultural distinction predicts far less about particle use than register does.

Keywords: Malaysian English, discourse particles, Communication Accommodation Theory, cultural identity, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

Language does more than move information between people. It also places the speaker. Every choice of word, particle and intonation tells a listener something about where the speaker has been and whose company they keep. When a global language settles into a local community it takes on that community's shape, and Malaysia offers a clear case of the process. The colloquial variety widely known as Manglish draws on Malay, Chinese dialects and Tamil, and it has developed a small inventory of discourse particles, among them lah, meh, lor, ah, kan and sia, that are instantly recognisable to Malaysians and largely opaque to everyone else (Baskaran, 2005; Pillai and Ong, 2018).

These particles are often dismissed as fillers, as though their work were simply to occupy a pause. The research record says otherwise. Schifffrin (1987) established that discourse markers tie an utterance to the talk around it and to the social relationship in which that talk sits. Work specific to Malaysian English has since shown that the

local particles soften directives, register stance, manage turn-taking and signal that speaker and hearer share a stock of cultural knowledge (Kuang, 2002; Tay et al., 2016; Ting et al., 2018). AlAfnan et al. (2025) treat them as pragmatic resources and as markers of belonging at the same time, which is a useful way of holding both functions together rather than choosing between them.

Difficulty arises when the speaker steps outside the community that reads the particles fluently. Malaysian students in English-dominant countries meet an environment in which these forms fall outside the standard, and in which a listener may hear them as evidence of imperfect English rather than as deliberate interpersonal work. The pressure is not only external. Tan et al. (2018) found that Malaysian undergraduates at home already rank localised English below normative English, associating the standard variety with academic and professional reward. A student who carries that hierarchy abroad has reason to watch their own speech.

What happens next is an empirical question, and it has largely gone unasked. The literature on Manglish particles is overwhelmingly domestic, describing their functions within Malaysia. Far less is known about how they behave once a speaker is living somewhere that, in the course of a single week, requires them to talk to Malaysian housemates, to classmates from half a dozen countries and to a supervisor. That mixed setting is precisely where language choice and cultural identity come under pressure together, and it is the setting this study examines.

The study follows six Malaysian students in the United Kingdom and reads their talk through Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles and Ogay, 2007). One expectation shaped the design and was not borne out. If the particles serve to assert a distinct identity against a dominant norm, their persistent use abroad ought to surface as divergence, a deliberate marking of difference. It did not. The recorded data contain no divergence at all. What they contain instead is convergence, together with a clear mismatch between what participants said about their own speech and what their speech actually did. That mismatch is the study's principal contribution.

Research Questions

This study set out to describe the particles Malaysian students continue to use abroad, to establish the conditions under which those particles are used or withheld, and to examine what the resulting pattern implies for cultural identity. Three objectives follow: to identify the types of fillers commonly used by Malaysian students studying abroad; to analyse how and when these fillers are used in intracultural and intercultural communication; and to explore how their use contributes to the retention of Malaysian cultural identity. The objectives are addressed through three research questions.

RQ1. What types of fillers do Malaysian students commonly use while studying abroad?

RQ2. In what contexts are these fillers used, and with whom?

RQ3. How does the use of fillers relate to the students' sense of Malaysian cultural identity?

Each subsection of the Findings and Discussion answers one of these questions in turn, so that every claim presented can be traced back to the question it was collected to answer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysian English and its discourse particles

Malaysian English is best approached through the World Englishes framework, which treats local varieties as structured systems shaped by history and social circumstance rather than as deviations from a metropolitan norm (Baskaran, 2005; Pillai and Ong, 2018). The variety runs along a continuum, from forms close to the international standard through to the colloquial end usually labelled Manglish, and speakers move along that continuum according to whom they are addressing.

Discourse particles sit at the colloquial end and are among the variety's most distinctive features. Kuang (2002) and Tay et al. (2016) have documented lah, ah, lor and meh in detail, showing that each carries a stable range of

pragmatic meanings which competent speakers deploy with precision. Their regularity is the point. A form used consistently, in predictable positions, to achieve predictable effects is not a lapse in fluency; it is a feature of a system.

Discourse particles as pragmatic resources

Pragmatically, these particles operate on the relationship between speakers rather than on the content of what is said. Schiffrin's (1987) account describes discourse markers as devices that bracket units of talk and link them to the surrounding discourse and to the interactional context. They are not semantically empty. They encode stance, attitude and assumptions about what the hearer already knows. Recent corpus work supports the same conclusion in other settings, with Farahani and Ghane (2022) showing that markers in academic spoken English maintain relational coherence, and Pan (2024) demonstrating that multilingual speakers adjust their pragmatic markers to suit the expectations of different situations.

Because these meanings are conventional rather than literal, they travel badly. A listener who has not acquired the convention hears a syllable and not a stance. This is why particles become visible in intercultural encounters in a way they never are at home, and why speakers in such encounters are sometimes reported to reduce or suppress them (Tan et al., 2018).

Intracultural and intercultural communication abroad

Intercultural communication involves participants who do not share a cultural background and who therefore cannot rely on a common stock of assumptions to carry meaning (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2011; Rings and Rasinger, 2022). More of the interpretive work has to be done explicitly. Intracultural communication is the opposite case, in which shared expectations allow speakers to use compressed, culturally specific forms and still be understood (Mehdaoui, 2023). Discourse particles are a textbook example of such a compressed form.

In English as a lingua franca setting, speakers are often described as shedding culturally specific features in order to maximise mutual intelligibility (Seidlhofer, 2011; Brunner, 2022). Studies of Malaysian students overseas similarly describe continual adjustment between intracultural and intercultural modes, mediated by intercultural sensitivity and by what students believe their hosts expect (Awang-Rozaimie et al., 2013). The implication usually drawn is that culturally marked forms will be withheld in intercultural talk. Whether that actually happens in spontaneous peer interaction is an empirical matter, and it is tested directly here.

Language, identity and Communication Accommodation Theory

Identity is not a fixed possession that language merely reports. Hall (1992) described it as something continually produced through representation, and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) located that production in the ordinary, often unreflective choices speakers make in interaction. Joseph (2004) and Khalid and Khan (2020) document the same process among multilingual and immigrant populations, where particular forms come to mark in-group membership and emotional affiliation. Schroeder et al. (2017) found that the linguistic repertoire of bilinguals predicts their patterns of cultural identification, which suggests that small habitual features may index identity more reliably than declarations about identity do.

Communication Accommodation Theory supplies the analytical vocabulary for the present study (Giles et al., 1991; Giles and Ogay, 2007). Its two central moves are convergence, in which a speaker adjusts towards the interlocutor to reduce social distance and ease the interaction, and divergence, in which a speaker accentuates difference in order to maintain a boundary or assert a group identity. Either may be deliberate or automatic. The theory has been applied productively to peer interaction among students, where the absence of a status differential allows accommodation to operate without the complication of institutional power (Sung, 2016). That is the configuration examined here, and it matters for how the results should be read: peer talk is the condition under which convergence is most likely and divergence least likely, which places a real limit on what these data can show.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The design is qualitative and interpretive. Its interest lies in what particles do in context and in how speakers understand their own use of them, neither of which is recoverable from a frequency count. No counts are reported and none are claimed; the analysis rests on the interpretation of extracts rather than on their distribution.

Two analytical methods were used, each matched to one dataset. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), was applied to the semi-structured interviews, because interviews yield accounts, perceptions and reflections rather than naturally occurring language. Discourse-pragmatic analysis framed by Communication Accommodation Theory was applied to the recorded conversations, because these yield language in use. Keeping the two methods separate, and tied to their respective datasets, is what makes the comparison between reported and observed behaviour possible.

Participants and setting

Purposive sampling was used. Six Malaysian students who had lived and studied in the United Kingdom for at least six months formed the focal group; the six-month threshold was set so that participants would have accumulated sustained contact with Malaysian and non-Malaysian interlocutors alike. Two non-Malaysian students, one Emirati and one Welsh, took part as interlocutors in the recorded conversations, giving eight participants in total. The United Kingdom was selected for its British English norm, its substantial Malaysian student population and its accessibility to the researcher. Participant details appear in Table 1, with codes used in place of names.

Table 1 Participant Profile

Participant	Age	Occupation	Cultural origin	Role in study
D	24	Student	Malaysian	Interview
H	21	Student	Malaysian	Interview and recorded conversations
M	24	Unemployed	Malaysian	Interview
W	22	Teacher	Malaysian	Interview
J	27	IT Executive	Malaysian	Interview
L	25	Consultant	Malaysian	Interview
F	21	Student	Emirati	Recorded conversation (interlocutor)
R	21	Student	Welsh	Recorded conversation (interlocutor)

Instruments and procedure

Data were collected through two instruments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online by video conference, a necessary accommodation given that the participants were in the United Kingdom and the researcher in Malaysia. A common schedule of twenty open questions was used, covering which particles participants used, with whom, in which settings, whether they had ever had to explain a particle to a non-Malaysian, and whether particle use affected their sense of being Malaysian. The semi-structured format kept responses comparable while leaving room to follow what participants raised.

Alongside the interviews, conversations between a Malaysian participant and each of the two non-Malaysian peers were recorded with the prior consent of everyone involved. These took place in informal and semi-formal settings, so that the talk would be as close to ordinary as the presence of a recorder permits. All recordings and interviews were transcribed verbatim, with particular attention to the position of particles within the turn, since position carries much of their pragmatic force. Extracts are reproduced below exactly as transcribed.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were read repeatedly before coding began. Codes were developed around participants' awareness of their own particle use, the settings in which they reported using or avoiding particles, and the feelings they attached to doing so. These were then grouped into the three themes reported below.

The recorded conversations were analysed by locating each particle in its sequential position, identifying the interactional work it performed there, and classifying the move as convergence or divergence under Communication Accommodation Theory. The two sets of results were then set against one another. This comparison is the substance of the triangulation, and it is what exposed the gap between account and practice reported below.

Trustworthiness and ethics

Several measures support the credibility of the analysis. The same interview schedule was used with every participant, and transcription was verbatim throughout. Member checking was carried out: transcripts were returned to participants, who were able to correct, clarify or expand their responses before analysis proceeded. A pilot interview was conducted with a participant who met the inclusion criteria but did not form part of the final dataset, and the feedback from it was used to sharpen the wording of several questions, a step Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend for exactly this purpose.

The strongest safeguard is the two-dataset design itself. Miles et al. (2014) note that triangulation strengthens confidence when patterns recur across sources. The present study illustrates the value of the converse case: where the sources disagree, the disagreement is itself a finding, and one that could not have been detected from self-report alone. Ethical approval was granted by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee. All participants, including the non-Malaysian interlocutors, gave informed consent before data collection, and all are identified by code rather than by name.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised by research question. Each subsection states what the two datasets show, sets the interview evidence against the recorded evidence where the two bear on the same point, and interprets the result through Communication Accommodation Theory. Table 1 profiles the participants, Table 2 answers RQ1 directly, and Table 3 presents the extracts on which the analysis of RQ2 and RQ3 rests.

RQ1: The particles that travel

Two sources of evidence bear on the inventory, and they do not cover the same ground. In the recorded conversations, two particles occur: lah and sia. In interview, participants named a wider set, adding meh, lor, ah and kan to the two observed directly. Table 2 separates the two categories, because the distinction matters for how much weight each form can carry in the analysis.

The answer to RQ1 is therefore a qualified one. The particles that Malaysian students continue to use abroad, on the evidence of this study, are lah and sia in observed interaction, with meh, lor, ah and kan reported as part of the same repertoire but not captured in the recordings. The qualification is worth stating plainly rather than smoothing over. A study of this size, drawing on a small number of recorded conversations, is far more likely to catch the high-frequency general-purpose particles than the specialised ones. Lah in particular is the workhorse of Malaysian English and turns up wherever the register is informal, whereas meh carries a narrow interrogative and sceptical function that simply may not have arisen in these exchanges. The absence of a form from a small recorded sample is weak evidence that speakers have stopped using it.

Two observations follow. First, the observed inventory is consistent with the established descriptive literature on Malaysian English, in which lah is documented as the most pervasive and functionally broad of the particles (Baskaran, 2005; Kuang, 2002; Tay et al., 2016). Second, and more interestingly, sia appears in this dataset although it features rarely in the classic descriptions. Its presence suggests the repertoire these students carry is

the living colloquial one rather than the canonical list, which is what one would expect of speakers reproducing ordinary peer talk rather than performing a variety.

Table 2 Malaysian English Particles Observed and Reported in This Study (RQ1)

Particle	Observed in recorded talk	Reported in interview	Function attested in this dataset
lah	Yes	Yes	Softens a response; carries affect and warmth
sia	Yes	Yes	Marks affective stance, here mild exasperation
meh	No	Yes	Not evidenced in the recorded data
lor	No	Yes	Not evidenced in the recorded data
ah	No	Yes	Not evidenced in the recorded data
kan	No	Yes	Not evidenced in the recorded data

RQ2: Where the particles appear, and with whom

This question produced the study's clearest result, and it is not the result the design anticipated. The interview data and the recorded data disagree and reading them together is what makes the disagreement informative.

What participants reported was restraint. The dominant theme in the interviews was an acute awareness that these particles carry a register, and that the register is wrong for some settings. J was explicit about it: “I do feel it now because I’m working, and so I can’t use ‘lah’ in a work setting. I feel like that’s a bit inappropriate” (Extract 1, Table 3). The monitoring is real and the participants are articulate about it. In Communication Accommodation Theory terms this is classic upward accommodation towards a perceived institutional norm (Giles et al., 1991), and it is consistent with evidence that multilingual speakers police their own speech most closely where the social or professional stakes are highest (Rings and Rasinger, 2022).

The decisive detail is what J is accommodating to. It is not a foreign listener. It is a workplace. The constraint named in the interviews is consistently a matter of formality, professionalism and institutional setting, and not a matter of the interlocutor's nationality. This distinction was blurred in the initial framing of the study and the data separate the two cleanly.

What the recordings show is retention. Across the recorded conversations with the Emirati and the Welsh peer, the Malaysian speaker did not withhold particles at all. Three patterns account for their use, and all three are convergence.

The first is convergence through shared informality. Responding to a complaint about a delay, the Malaysian speaker replies, “It was damn late, sia” (Extract 4, Table 3). The particle conveys mild exasperation without sharpening the exchange into a complaint, marking the speaker's evaluation of the situation while keeping the register light. Tay et al. (2016) describe exactly this affective and evaluative work. Under Communication Accommodation Theory the move is convergence, but not of the obvious sort: the speaker is not adopting the interlocutor's forms, but matching the informality of the exchange, and extending a culturally specific resource to a listener outside the culture. Convergence here is a matter of relational alignment rather than linguistic imitation, which is how Giles and Ogay (2007) frame it.

The second is convergence through softening. Offered a compliment, the speaker answers, “I mean, I don’t know if it’s a niche talent, lah, but I mean, it’s ok” (Extract 5, Table 3). The particle does the face work. It deflects the compliment without rejecting it and without the speaker appearing either falsely modest or pleased with themselves. This is the mitigating function that Tay et al. (2016) identify as central to lah, deployed in an intercultural exchange where the interlocutor almost certainly cannot parse the particle but can read the warmth it carries.

The third is convergence through affect and identity. Asked about going home, the speaker answers, “It’s a good vibe, lah. A lot of my friends are going back, so I know it’s going to be really fun” (Extract 6, Table 3). Here lah

adds enthusiasm and colour to an otherwise flat report. The particle is doing interpersonal rather than propositional work, and it carries a trace of where the speaker is from while doing so.

No divergence was found anywhere in the recorded data. This is a substantive result and not an absence of one. Divergence, in Communication Accommodation Theory, is the accentuation of difference in order to hold a boundary, and it would have been the expected behaviour had the particles functioned primarily as a defensive assertion of Malaysian identity against a dominant English norm. They did not. Every particle in the dataset was doing cooperative work: reducing distance, softening, warming. The finding must be read with its condition attached, however. All the recorded interactions were informal exchanges between peers of comparable status, which is the configuration in which divergence is least likely to appear (Sung, 2016). The claim these data support is that particles are not used divergently in relaxed peer talk, not that Malaysian speakers never diverge.

Set the two datasets side by side and the answer to RQ2 emerges. Participants believe they restrain their particles abroad; the recordings show that in peer conversation they do not. The variable that actually governs use is register rather than culture. Particles are withheld in formal and professional settings, whether the listener is Malaysian or not, and retained in informal peer settings, whether the listener is Malaysian or not. The intracultural and intercultural distinction, which the study was designed around, turns out to predict very little on its own.

The interview data contain their own corroboration of this, which is easy to miss because it sits inside an account of habit rather than of context. Describing her speech abroad, D says it “does sometimes slip out when I’m speaking to my international friends, and they would sometimes ask me what it is” (Extract 3, Table 3). The particles reach non-Malaysian listeners often enough to prompt questions. The participants’ own evidence, in other words, already contradicts their belief that they suppress these forms in intercultural talk. The recordings simply make the contradiction visible.

This gap between report and practice is the methodological payoff of the two-dataset design. Pragmatic features are exactly the kind of linguistic behaviour speakers have poor introspective access to, because they are automatic and carry no propositional content to remember. Had this study relied on interviews alone, it would have concluded that Malaysian students suppress their particles in intercultural communication, and it would have been wrong. Miles et al. (2014) recommend triangulation for the confidence that convergent findings provide; this case shows that divergent findings can be more valuable still.

Table 3 Representative Extracts from the Interview and Conversation Data

No.	Source	Extract	Analysis
1	Interview (J)	I do feel it now because I'm working, and so I can't use “lah” in a work setting. I feel like that's a bit inappropriate.	Restraint is indexed to register, not to the interlocutor's culture (RQ2)
2	Interview (L)	Using fillers does make me feel somewhat more Malaysian, but not in an exaggerated or performative way. It's more a subtle sense of familiarity and comfort that comes from speaking in a way that reflects my background.	Identity indexed habitually rather than performed (RQ3)
3	Interview (D)	If I'm speaking with my friends in the UK, yes, and Malaysian friends in the UK, yes. It does sometimes slip out when I'm speaking to my international friends, and they would sometimes ask me what it is.	Self-reported evidence that particles reach non-Malaysian listeners (RQ2, RQ3)
4	Recorded conversation (H with F, Emirati)	F: Damn, delayed. H: It was damn late, sia. Like, I don't know why.	Convergence through shared informality; sia marks stance (RQ2)
5	Recorded conversation (H with F, Emirati)	F: But you know what? I feel like now you've found your niche talent, and I just love that for you.	Convergence through softening; lah performs face work (RQ2)

		H: I mean, I don't know if it's a niche talent, lah, but I mean, it's ok.	
6	Recorded conversation (H with R, Welsh)	R: Your family's there. Have you got friends there as well? H: It's a good vibe, lah. A lot of my friends are going back, so I know it's going to be really fun.	Convergence through affect; lah carries warmth and origin (RQ2, RQ3)

RQ3: Particles and the sense of being Malaysian

Participants consistently connected their particles to Malaysian identity, but the connection they described was quiet rather than declarative. L put it carefully: “Using fillers does make me feel somewhat more Malaysian, but not in an exaggerated or performative way. It’s more a subtle sense of familiarity and comfort that comes from speaking in a way that reflects my background” (Extract 2, Table 3). The distinction L draws between feeling more Malaysian and performing Malaysianness is precisely the one Bucholtz and Hall (2005) make when they locate identity in habitual interactional practice rather than in deliberate self-presentation.

That reading is reinforced by how participants characterised the mechanism. They described the particles as arriving unbidden. D's account of them slipping out captures it: the forms are not selected, they simply appear, and they appear even when the speaker knows the listener will not understand them. Awareness and control turn out to be separable. Participants could describe the social meaning of these particles in detail and still not govern their production, which is consistent with the persistence of habitual variants under normative pressure that Tagliamonte (2011) documents.

A more deliberate register of identity work also appears, and it is worth distinguishing from the habitual kind. One participant described a conscious effort to hold on to the language abroad: “But I make more of a conscious effort to speak Malay when I’m abroad. Because I don’t want to lose the language. When you’re surrounded by people who don’t speak the language, it just helps out more. And also, when you’re around a lot of people who are not, or are proud of their own identity, you also want to be proud of that. You also want to share that part of your Malaysian identity as well.” This is intentional maintenance, prompted by the visible pride of others, and it operates alongside rather than instead of the automatic pattern. Schroeder et al. (2017) would predict exactly this layering, with the repertoire itself doing the indexing while conscious effort works on top of it.

The answer to RQ3 is that these particles sustain Malaysian identity primarily by not being noticed. They are not flags. They are the residue of a way of speaking that the student has not stopped being, and their survival in an English-dominant environment is evidence of cultural continuity of a low-intensity, durable kind. This matters for how the wider claim about identity should be framed. Identity is not being asserted against the host environment, which is what divergence would have looked like. It is simply persisting through it. Hall's (1992) account of identity as continually produced rather than possessed fits the data better than any model in which speakers choose, at each encounter, which identity to display.

There is a further implication for how localised Englishes are read abroad. If these particles are largely automatic, then a listener or an institution that treats them as errors is not correcting a choice; it is asking a speaker to suppress something closer to an accent. Tan et al. (2018) show that Malaysian students already internalise a hierarchy placing localised English below the standard, and Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) show that environments hostile to a speaker's habitual forms raise anxiety and depress willingness to communicate. Taken together, the two findings suggest that the cost of stigmatising these particles falls on confidence rather than on intelligibility.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Three contributions follow from these findings. Theoretically, the study extends Communication Accommodation Theory into a case its usual application does not anticipate. Convergence is normally described as movement towards the interlocutor's forms. Here the speaker converges by retaining her own culturally specific forms, because in a relaxed peer exchange those forms are what relational alignment sounds like.

Convergence is better understood as alignment on the relationship than as imitation of the code, and intercultural peer talk is a useful site for seeing the difference.

Methodologically, the study is a demonstration of why self-report alone is insufficient for pragmatic features. The interviews produced a coherent, confident and incorrect account of the participants' own behaviour. Only the recordings corrected it. Any study of discourse particles that relies on what speakers say they do should treat its findings as evidence about beliefs rather than about speech.

Practically, the findings speak to institutions hosting international students. Localised English forms are doing relational work in peer settings, including with peers from other cultures, and they are largely automatic. Treating them as deficiencies imposes a cost that is not repaid in comprehensibility. A more accurate view is the one the World Englishes tradition has long argued for: these are systematic features to be evaluated on contextual appropriateness and communicative effect rather than against native-speaker norms (Baskaran, 2005; Pillai and Ong, 2018).

All three claims need tempering by the study's limits. Six focal participants in a single host country, a small number of recorded conversations, and an exclusively peer-level dataset together mean that these findings describe a configuration rather than a population. The absence of divergence in particular is a finding about informal peer talk and cannot be extended to hierarchical encounters, which is where the interview data suggest suppression actually happens. Three extensions would test the account directly: recordings from hierarchical settings, where the register hypothesis predicts the suppression that peer data cannot show; a longitudinal design tracking whether the particles erode across a degree programme; and replication in other host countries to establish whether a British English environment is doing any particular work.

This paper began by asking what happens to Malaysian discourse particles when their speakers move abroad. The answer is that less happens than the students themselves believe. The particles cross the border largely intact, they continue to do interpersonal work with Malaysian and non-Malaysian peers alike, and they are set aside not for foreign listeners but for formal rooms. Malaysian identity, on this evidence, is maintained abroad not by being asserted but by being spoken.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the eight participants who gave their time to this study, and in particular the Malaysian students who agreed to have their everyday conversations recorded. The authors also acknowledge the guidance of the project supervisor and the support of the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA.

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