The historical nature of the Malay language has been a topic which has been debated at length in the literature. At times the language itself or some varieties of the language have been called creoles (Hall 1966, Romaine 1988, Adelaar and Prentice 1996), a position which others have disputed (Collins 1980, Wolff 1988, Gil 2001). At issue is the lack of morphological complexity in the colloquial language, which lacks any kind of inflectional or derivational affixes. McWhorter (2001a, 2001b) has called it a “simple” language, and has concluded that it is therefore a creole. Others, who dispute this conclusion, call it an “undressed” language (Gil 2008) or an example of “extreme analyticity” (Arka 2007). At issue in these arguments is the fact that when colloquial Malay first appears in the historical record, about 500 years ago, it already had much the same character as it has today. The formal written language, today, and since its first appearance in the historical record some 1200 years ago, lacks the “undressed” nature of the colloquial language.

In considering the history of the Malay language, therefore, several seemingly insoluble questions have arisen: when did the formal (literary) language diverge from the colloquial language? Did Malay ever undergo creolization? Can this be determined by linguistic or socio-historical factors?

In a recent paper (Paauw In press), I propose a period of creolization occurring about 2000 years ago, when the Malay language spread from its homeland on the island of Borneo to the island of Sumatra (and later to the Malay peninsula). This dispersal of the Malay language took place in two waves, and most likely involved relatively small numbers, creating large-scale language shift in an environment where there were few models. A small elite maintained the formal (or non-creolized) language as an elite code which developed into the literary language, while the vast majority of speakers of Malay used the creolized language which became modern colloquial Malay, and which gave rise to numerous languages throughout the Malay archipelago.