

Sound Strategy for a Shifting Malay?

Abstract

In the latest compilation of an Indonesian-English Dictionary (Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings 2004: 720), *pawagam* 'cinema', a common Malay word, is observed as a lexical entry of Malay origin into the Indonesian lexicon for the first time. The coinage is a composition of the initial syllables of the compound word *panggung* 'hall' and *wayang gambar* 'film'. This coining strategy is very much a Malayan way of dealing with new references not found in the lexicon that operates at the sub-word level. The truncation of words and the combination of syllabic units are congruent with the formation of words with phonaestheme (Firth 1970, Blust 1988, Sew 1997). To meet the needs of lexical expansion and semantic extension, this discussion suggests phonaesthemes as an option for constructing new Malay concepts in corpus planning and as an answer to supplying techno jargon for native languages like Malay in the face of globalisation.

Key Words: Lexicography, Sound Symbolism, Term Coining, Malay Phonaestheme

Introduction

Crowley identified four types of changes in meaning, namely broadening, narrowing, bifurcation and shift (1997: 151). Lexical borrowing from English into Malay is both broadening and narrowing. The expansion of vocabulary and the extension of reference capacity are broadening for younger Malay speakers. Furthermore, Tan (2005:60) acknowledges English as the Malaysian national identity of the urbanised fully English-literate middle class Malaysian society. However, this embrace of English in communication narrows or replaces the ability to use the mother tongue. Some native Malay students find it

difficult to provide the Malay equivalents for ‘tricycle’ *beca*, ‘clock’ *jam*, ‘meeting’ *mesyuarat*, ‘tank’ *kereta kebal*, ‘thread’ *benang* and ‘vinegar’ *cuka* in Malay (interpersonal communication with Malay students).

The preference for English in oral and written communication among native Malay speakers poses a narrowing threat to Malay usage. The communication mode among modern Malay students is predominantly English, as English is the medium of instruction and first language in the education system (see Sew forthcoming). The use of Malay is in decline in Singapore, where the national population census has shown an increase of 3.1 % of Malay speakers using English at home in 1990, up from 2.3 percent in 1980. A case study on the use of Malay language among Malays in Geylang, a Malay heartland in Singapore, revealed a low level of Malay use, giving way to English, especially among youngsters and the educated generation (Bibi Jan 1994: 210). Bibi Jan informs further that the use of Malay language among the native speakers might diminish further if left unchecked (1994: 211).

This dominance of English and consequent lack of ability to use the existing Malay addressing terms with parents and older family members in social communication, for example, narrows the capacity for native language use. Malay children adopt a different worldview, generalising addressing terms to *auntie* and *uncle*, irrespective of chronological order coded in those of their mother tongue. The worry about the decline in Malay warrants a descriptive study, though, rather than a prescription on how to coin Malay vocabulary. The basis of this coining mechanism is sound symbolism. Malay has a wealth of sound symbolic segments that operate on sound symbolic meaning.

Prelude to Phonaestheme

Many Malay researchers have noticed some kind of sound symbolism at the syllable level. Brandstetter (1916) noticed clusters of identical penultimate syllables designating a particular semantic criterion and calls them *root words*. Asmah uses the same term *kata akar*

in Malay (1993). Blust (1988) proposes a root theory and invokes the term *phonestheme*. Tham (1977) calls the recurrent meaning of certain penultimate and antepenultimate Malay segments sound symbolism. Following Firth (1970:183-4) I call these Malay segments *phonaesthemes*:

it is possible to have an infinite number of different phonetic patterns ... the same patterns and analogous patterns are constantly recurring with the recurring familiarities ... and the tendency is towards phonetic economy ... very nearly the same sounds can function differently according to their situational contexts ... known as homophony...homophony also serves as a link grouping 'words' together into etymemes and morphemes...the whole of the *slack* etymeme belongs to a much bigger group of habits we may call the *sl* phonaestheme...

Within Malay lexical clusters are recurrent bi- or tri-segmental (C)VC structures that designate recurrent criteria of meaning respectively. The relation between the semantics and the sub-morphemic unit is termed phonaestheme. Blust (1988) has identified more than 100 such phonosemantic segments and proto segments. Malay phonaesthemes are further imbued with a historical linguistic foundation. Along the same vein, Campbell (2004) includes sound symbolism in the analysis of historical linguistics.

Phonaesthemes

Phonaesthemes, Malay submorphemes, typify an authentic Malay lexicon. These syllabic structures maintain a Malayan originality in lexical coinage. Although according to Blust (1988: 66) the proto Austronesian root *-bak* suggests the meaning of 'pound' and 'thud', the following examples of *-bak* phonaesthemes in Malay designate the denotation of 'overwhelming' (cf. Sew 1995, 1997 for other phonaesthemic findings in Malay):

Malay lexical	Meaning
<i>jebak</i>	overflow
<i>lambak</i>	abundantly spilling over
<i>rebak</i>	spread
<i>sabak</i>	inundated

<i>sebak</i>	almost flood
<i>gerbak</i>	spread
<i>gerabak</i>	flow
<i>lembak</i>	overflow
<i>semerbak</i>	pervasive
<i>wabak</i>	epidemic

We can appreciate certain Malay words with the *-bak* phonaestheme that have a similar sense of ‘overwhelming’, e.g. *ombak* ‘waves’, and *tamak* ‘greed’. Another phonaestheme with a clear semantic criterion is *-jang* that symbolises a perpendicular sense in many Malay words:

Malay	Meaning
<i>bajang</i>	ghost with long nails that open out
<i>janjang</i>	stairs
<i>jenjang</i>	ladder
<i>jinjang</i>	a long strip of rice field
<i>kejang</i>	astretch, to stretch limbs convulsively
<i>kinjang</i>	jumping
<i>lajang, lejang</i>	kicking off
<i>lanjang, telanjang</i>	naked (implying a long/full exposed body)
<i>anjang, panjang</i>	lengthy, long
<i>ranjang</i>	bedstead
<i>rejang</i>	the distance a horse can run
<i>runjang</i>	poke or thrust
<i>serenjang</i>	perpendicular
<i>tunjang</i>	leaping, kicking, stamping
<i>terajang</i>	kick with the sole of the foot

Maxwell (1936) observed that the syllable *bu-*, *bun-*, or *bung-* convey the idea of roundness such as *bulan* ‘moon’, *bulat* ‘round’, *buah* ‘fruit’, *buyung* ‘a round-bottomed piece of earthenware’, *butir* ‘grain, classifier for round items’, *busar* ‘bubble’, *bukit* ‘hill’, *busut* ‘molehill’, *buntar* ‘rounded tummy’, *bunting* ‘pregnant’, *buncit* ‘love handle, blown out

belly’, *buntut* ‘bottom, buttock’, *buntur* ‘full of food’, *bongkok* ‘humped back’, and *bungkus* ‘wrapped’.

Penultimate syllables can be the locus of phonaesthetic occurrence in Malay. McCune (1985) made a similar assertion for Indonesian roots. This observation affirms the notion that while sounds are symbolic, with meaning, the distribution of meaning need not necessary be bounded in a particular position of a word unit, although the phonaesthetic locus has been limited to the final syllabic structures (cf. Blust 1988). The imposition of a nucleic segment within a fixed syllable is incongruent with the operating procedure of our brain and mental process, that knows no boundary in creating fibres of meaning through neuronal networks (cf. Sew 2004).

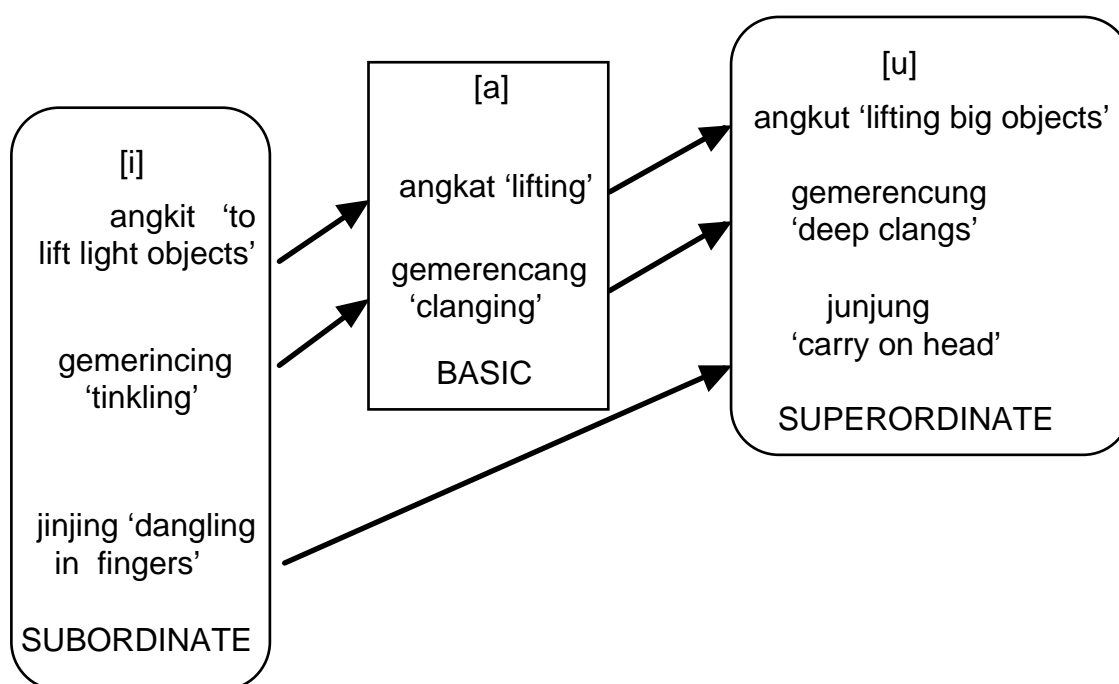
Malay [i] and Sound Symbolism

Beyond the syllabic unit, Sapir (1929) analysed sound symbolism and produced one of the first systematic correlation between [smallness] and the high front vowel [i]. In the psychosemantic experiment on *la*, *li*, *law* referring to three imaginary tables, *li* was singled out to be the smallest table, *la* the middle size, and *law* the biggest. The data in Malay support sound symbolism, which relate well with the symbolic meanings of the phonaesthetic network. The contrast between the vowel [i] and other vowels higher than [i] in minimal contrasts offers a weak/smaller meaning in opposition to a big/larger reference of the same category, kind, or milieu (Sew 1996a: 123):

<i>bendahari</i> (treasurer)	<i>bendahara</i> (prime minister)
<i>puteri</i> (princess)	<i>putera</i> (prince)
<i>pancit</i> (emit in thin stream)	<i>pancut</i> (squirt out)
<i>hanyir</i> (smelly)	<i>hanyur</i> (very smelly)
<i>lekit</i> (beginning to stick)	<i>lekat</i> (fixed)
<i>ungkit</i> (reiterate)	<i>ungkat</i> (drag up the past)
<i>negeri</i> (state)	<i>negara</i> (country)
<i>gigil</i> (shivering)	<i>gogoh</i> (quiver)

<i>ini</i> (this)	<i>itu</i> (that)
<i>sini</i> (here)	<i>sana</i> (that)

The notion of [i] as a weak/trivial segment could be further amplified in contrastive patterns with [a] and [u] in Malay (Sew 1995, 1996a, 1997). A hierarchy of vowel symbolism from the high-front to the low-back segment denotes a gradual weak to strong sense in minimal contrast:



Malay adds to Bolinger's data from 38 languages with clear evidence in designating smallness with high front vowels and high tone (1981: 161).

If a sound strategy like phonaestheme is to be part of Malay sub-lexical unit there is a dire need to compile a dictionary of Malay phonaesthemes to curb phonaestheme loss in Malay (Sew 2003). An exhaustive list complemented with morphological examples of Malay phonaestheme enables the coining of words with more precision that are at the same time endemic to the local linguistic system. The Malay lexicon can adopt specific foreign terms if no conceptual similarity is found from the list of root clusters. This discussion on the sound strategy such as the phonosemantics of Malay is relevant because the guidelines for

borrowing to Malay provide nothing for concept borrowing based on Malay phonaestheme cluster. The Malay roots constitute natural linguistic elements for vocabulary coinage. By using the sound strategy of phonaesthemes as a lexical coining component, the construction adheres to an indigenous approach, primarily satisfying the semantic and phonological requirements and preserves the Malayan sense of the lexical coinages.

Sound Strategy for Coining Words

The discussion, thus far, aims to provide a sound foundation for using phonemic element in Malay corpus planning. Since 1972 Malay lexicography has been enriched with translation and transliteration as pointed out by Asmah (1979, see also Asmah 1987: 22-24). The translation of scientific terms into Malay are carried out through a number of strategy (Asmah 1979 90):

1. Transliteration with an appending /a/

English term	Malay term
Sperm	Sperma
Plasm	Plasma
Calc	Kalka

2. Dropping of stop phoneme

English term	Malay term
Context	Konteks
Concept	Konsep
Project	Projek

3. Neutralised clusters

English term	Malay term
Film	Filem
Record	Rekod
Modern	Moden

Given the salient feature of phonaesthemes in the existing Malay lexicon, the sound symbolic approach is advocated, in lieu of translation, for corpus planning in this discussion. Sound symbolic features are not to be confused with the corresponding spelling rules in translating English terminology to Malay (see Asmah 1993: 128-133; Tham 1990 114-115). The sound symbolic feature is the phonaestheme, a penultimate –CVC phonetic segment peculiar to Malay lexicon that shows recurrent semantic features. Another primary example of phonaestheme is –**ang**, that symbolises ‘brightness’ in the following Malay lexicon (Sew 1995):

Pis**ang** (banana)

Ter**ang** (brightness)

Per**ang** (brown)

Baw**ang** (red onions)

Pin**ang** (palm)

Gel**ang** (bangles, gold bangles are adorning items for Malay women)

Bel**ang** (stripe)

Belerb**ang** (sulfur)

Bend**ang** (golden paddy field during harvest)

The data provided in this discussion advocate for phonaesthemes as the relevant submorphemic unit in Malay lexicon. The Language and Literary Board (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), the semi-government Malay language planning body set up in 1956, might wish to consider phonaesthemes seriously in their corpus planning. There may be a need to categorise the full spectrum of Malay phonaesthemes for lexical engineering. It is through the incorporation of native linguistic resources like phonaesthemes, so that a unique Malay lexicon may be expanded without spiralling into the narrowing effect of direct translation from English.

Conclusion

In the history of Malay lexicology, foreign sounds have become increasingly popular. The influx of English terms via transliteration in many areas of science and technology testifies to the point. Furthermore, the import of English into Malay since the 1970s has given rise to language attrition in Malay (Sew 1996b). Another direct consequence from language attrition is code switching in Malay verbal discourse. The mixing of English words in Malay dyads also became a topic of discussion on Malaysian national TV in July 1998. The panelists used expressions like “cultural loss” and “value depletion” in their discussion. More recently, the plan to teach Science and Mathematics in the primary schools in English from 2003 onwards exacerbates the issue of language shift in Malaysia.

In the light of lexical and reference expansion in the language borrowing situation in the Pacific (see discussion in Crowley 2004:52), the language borrowing situation in Malay results in lexical substitution. The pro-English language attitude escalates the process of anglicizing Malay among the young speakers, as one sees in mass media and face-to-face communication. In response to the decline in the use of Malay among native speakers we need a more effective way to empower Malay against foreign linguistic debasement. This paper puts forth phonaesthemes as a possible lexical remedy. Vowel symbolism and phonethemes are crucial to maintain authenticity in Malay lexicology. By observing these sound properties in Malay lexicography, foreign loans may be contained. A sound management of corpus planning will sustain the integrity of Malay through this millennium.

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