

Distinctly Mesolectal Properties in Malay / Indonesian Dialects

David Gil

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

Mesolects, by definition, are language registers or varieties that occupy a mid-point on a cline between basilects and acrolects. Based on his studies of the Jakarta dialect of Indonesian, Jim Sneddon (2002) proposes a sociolinguistic universal governing the nature of mesolects, in accordance with which the properties of mesolects are circumscribed by those of the corresponding basilects and acrolects. In other words, if a particular linguistic feature has a different value in the basilect and the acrolect, then its value in the mesolect may be identical to that in either the basilect or the acrolect, or else it may assume an intermediate value; however, it may never take on a value outside the range defined by the basilect and acrolect.

Although the sociolinguistic circumstances of Jakarta Indonesian are quite complex, those of some other dialects of Malay / Indonesian are perhaps even more complicated. In fact, a more detailed examination of several other Malay / Indonesian dialects reveals numerous violations of Sneddon's proposed universal. Such violations exhibit one of the following two abstract patterns: (i) X-Y-Z: the given feature has value X in the basilect, Y in the mesolect, and Z in the acrolect, where Y is not in-between X and Z in any sense; and (ii) X-Y-X: the given feature has value X in both the basilect and the acrolect, but value Y in the mesolect. An example of an X-Y-Z pattern is provided by the form of the progressive aspect marker in the continuum from Riau to Standard Indonesian: the marker is absent from basilectal Riau Indonesian, *lagi* in mesolectal Riau Indonesian, and *sedang* in Standard Indonesian. An closely related example of an X-Y-X pattern is provided by the form of the progressive aspect marker in the continuum from West Sumatra to Standard Indonesian: here the forms are *sedang* in both basilectal West Sumatra Indonesian and Standard Indonesian but *lagi* in mesolectal West Sumatra Indonesian. In patterns such as the above, the Y value, that which violates Sneddon's proposed universal, defines what might be termed a *distinctly mesolectal property*.

Diachronically, distinctly mesolectal properties can generally be explained in terms of language contact. Perhaps the most common scenario is that in which the distinctly mesolectal property is borrowed from an adstratum language. For regional varieties of Indonesian, the relevant adstratum language is typically the Jakarta variety of colloquial Indonesian, which is gaining in importance as a lingua franca throughout the archipelago. Crucially, once the Jakartan basilect leaves its hometown and, via the mass media, arrives in the provinces, it becomes hip, trendy and upscale; accordingly, when forms from Jakarta Indonesian are borrowed into local varieties of Indonesian, they enter through the mesolect, leaving both basilect and acrolect untouched. Thus, they become distinctly mesolectal properties of the target language. For example, the progressive marker *lagi*, a distinctly mesolectal property of Riau and West Sumatran Indonesian, is probably a borrowing from Jakarta Indonesian. Although a majority of distinctly mesolectal properties can be accounted for in this way, some other such properties cannot; in these cases, a variety of other scenarios, also involving language contact, albeit of different kinds, must be invoked.

REFERENCES:

Sneddon, James N. (2002) "Diglossia in Indonesian", Paper presented at the Sixth International Symposium on Malay/Indonesian Linguistics, Bintan, Riau, Indonesia, 4 August 2002.