

Are there Clusters and Diphthongs in Malay?

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Adelaar's reconstruction of Proto-Malayic notes that the language had two or three types of clusters (Adelaar 1992:80-87). It also notes that Proto-Malayic had two diphthongs: *aw* and *ay*, (Adelaar 1992:54, 103). Descriptions of modern Malay have also noted the occurrences of consonant clusters and diphthongs. Farid (1980:38) and Teo (1994:45) discuss 'nasal clusters', while Yunus Maris (1980:41-43) and Teo (1994:23) posit three diphthongs in Malay: [ai], [au], and [oi]. Examples for such clusters and diphthongs are found in the words *tempat* 'place', *tanda* 'sign', *langsai* 'k.o. fruit', *pergi* 'go', *terpa* 'lunge at', *bersih* 'clean', *sampai* 'arrive', *pulau* 'island', *kalo* 'k.o. fish'.

In this paper, I would like to question the usefulness of the concepts of (consonant) clusters and diphthongs for the analysis of inherited Malay morphemes. In all instances, the constituent consonants of the so-called clusters can be shown to belong to different syllables: *tem.pat*, *per.gi*, etc. These 'clusters' form neither an onset nor a coda, and are simply sequences of consonants. As such, they are subject to several constraints which affect syllable juncture, but they do not function as phonological units. Similarly, the so-called diphthongs in Malay do not form a 'single syllabic nucleus which begins with one vowel and changes more or less smoothly to a second quality' (Trask 1996:114). Their distribution is at sharp variance with that of true syllabic nuclei: they only occur at morpheme-final position, and cannot be followed by a coda. They are thus better treated as rhymes consisting of a vowel and a consonant (which happens to be a glide).

If this analysis is accepted, it would have implications beyond the description of Malay. In conventional phonological analysis, vowels which belong to different syllables are not treated as diphthongs, and are said to be 'in hiatus'. Therefore, for the sake of consistency of the analysis, two consonants which belong to different syllables should not be analyzed as a single unit either. It is tentatively proposed here that 'medial clusters' do not exist as meaningful phonological units, not only in Malay, but in any language. Diphthongs do exist, of course, and may constitute vocalic nuclei in many languages. So while not useful for the analysis of Malay phonology, they are meaningful phonological units.

References

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