

Paper title:

The pragmatics of Malay numeral classifiers: An investigation of modern Malay corpuses

Sub-field:

Pragmatics

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Abstract:

Anaphora and definiteness are most commonly expressed in Malay via the use of pronouns (e.g. “*dia*”, “*mereka*”) and the language’s *kata penentu* (i.e. “*itu*”, “*ini*”) respectively (Abdullah Hassan, 1993; Nik Safiah Karim, 1995). In addition to the two grammatical categories, numeral classifiers – a linguistic device that overtly manifests the human conceptual categorization (Allan, 1977; Craig, 1986) – have also been used both in the written and spoken discourse of several numeral classifier languages to achieve similar effects (Craig, 1986; Downing, 1986; Goral, 1978; Hopper, 1986). Downing (1986, p. 345) illustrates how Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese numeral classifiers may function as a “stylistic neutral anaphoric option for the speaker anxious to avoid the ponderous repetition of full nouns...”. She explains how sufficiently powerful numeral classifiers can be as anaphoric reference by showing the use of Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese numeral classifiers as a cohesive device to refer to objects not only beyond the noun phrase boundary but also beyond the sentence boundary in which the numeral classifiers are used (Downing, 1986). Using examples from *Hikayat Abdullah*, Hopper (1986) on the other hand, suggests that numeral classifiers in the classical Malay may sometimes be used to indicate the extent of definiteness of a noun in question. He demonstrates how numeral classifiers in the text were used to foreground a particular noun phrase so as to signal to the audience that the noun phrase in question has the potential to be activated later in the discourse. Because definiteness can be expressed via the use of numeral classifiers in Malay, alternatively, the absence of this syntactic-semantic category could have the potential to indicate indefiniteness in this Austronesian language. This paper presents an analysis of various modern Malay corpora accessible to children which includes children’s television programs in Malay and children’s online pages by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*. The analysis suggests that the Malay numeral classifiers are also used in modern Malay corpora to perform both anaphoric and determinative functions and that they sometimes do get omitted despite being described by Malay linguists as an obligatory entity when a noun is present with a numeral. This paper also discusses the omission of numeral classifiers in the corpus in terms of pragmatic factors and indefiniteness of the noun phrase in question – and show that this omission is not due to speakers’/writers’ lack of knowledge in the use of numeral classifiers. (393 words)

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