

## Discourse particles in colloquial Malay

*Tom Hoogervorst*  
*Oxford University*

The presented paper focuses on discourse particles in the colloquial variety of Malay as spoken in the city of Kuala Lumpur. The presented data are acquired through fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur. Recordings of natural conversations have been made and subsequently transcribed and analysed with the help of native speakers.

The Malay variety spoken in Kuala Lumpur belongs to the Selangor dialect group. Unlike several other Malay dialects, this variety is generally understood throughout Malaysia and among the Malay speaking communities in Singapore, Brunei, and Sumatra, Indonesia. A written, but not standardised, form can be found in comics, youth literature, popular magazines, and on the internet. Several television programmes, among which cartoons, exhibit this spoken Malay variety. As opposed to standard Malay, colloquial Malay involves code-switching and code-mixing with English, less frequent and somewhat different use of affixation, the occurrence of phonologically truncated forms, and the extensive use of discourse particles.

There is no scholarly consensus on the exact definition of ‘discourse particles’ or ‘discourse markers’, but, in this study, I have identified them as small, syntactically and phonologically integrated lexical units that contribute to the expressive power of the language. Rather than affecting the truth-value of an utterance, discourse particles comment on what is being said, often also hinting at the relation between the speakers, such as English “you know” and “isn’t it”.

In standard Malay, as well as in standard Indonesian, the number of discourse particles is rather limited, bringing us not much further beyond *ya* and *kan*. In colloquial Malay, however, I found nineteen items functioning as discourse markers. Some of these can be classified exclusively as discourse markers, whereas most examples additionally fit into one or more other lexical categories, such as interjections or demonstratives.

Some reflexes of suffixes in the standard language, such as *-lah*, *-kah* and *-tah*, are used as discourse particles in spoken Malay. Other examples, such as *tak*, *nah* and *ah*, which we know (among others) as interjections in standard Malay, additionally function as discourse particles in the colloquial variety. Finally, spoken Malay exhibits various discourse particles that underwent considerable phonological as well as semantic change from the words from which they were presumably derived, yielding a set of distinctive and frequently used discourse particles such as *jom*, *meh* and *kot*.

Many of the lexical units found in colloquial Malay, which I have argued to be discourse particles, occur in other syntactical settings as interjections, demonstratives or other function words. This, together with the various diverging definitions found in the literature, makes it a hard task to decide whether a (colloquial Malay) word is a discourse particle or not. The colloquial variety of Malay exhibits various words that are tricky to categorise within the available framework of lexical classification terminology.