

What is There to Learn in Riau Indonesian?
Idiomatcity in Isolating-Monocategorical-Associational Language
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In recent publications (Gil 2005a,b, to appear) I have argued that Riau Indonesian approaches — albeit without actually attaining — an ideal prototype referred to as Isolating-Monocategorical-Associational (IMA) language, defined as follows:

- (1) (a) *Morphologically Isolating*
No word-internal morphological structure;
- (b) *Syntactically Monocategorical*
No distinct syntactic categories;
- (c) *Semantically Associational*
No distinct construction-specific rules of semantic interpretation;
 compositional semantics relying exclusively on the Association Operator.

In Hurford (2010) a email conversation is presented, in which the author asks me various questions about my analysis of Riau Indonesian and its implications for the evolution of language. The conversation concludes with the following exchange:

Hurford: [If Riau Indonesian is as you describe,] what is there to learn, beside vocabulary? How come you need a full-time teacher?

Gil: The grammar, in the narrow Chomskyan sense of ‘set of well-formed strings’, can be learned in less than an hour. But still, in order to be able to be mistaken for a native speaker down a dark alley, you’d need to spend years learning: lexicon, phonetics, and, most interestingly, that nebulous domain that is sometimes referred to as idiomatcity – being able to say something that is not just grammatical but also stylistically felicitous in the appropriate context.

In summarizing the conversation, Hurford writes that he "pondered what Gil could mean by 'idiomatcity'". Hurford's trouble with my formulation is understandable, as I was not very clear with regard to what I meant by the term in question. This paper, then, represents a preliminary attempt to define the notion of idiomatcity, and to argue for its importance to linguistic description.

Idiomatcity is a general term pertaining to the relationship between communicative situations and linguistic forms. In Figure 1, a shared communicative situation is associated, in two different languages, with two structurally distinct linguistic forms, with distinct semantic representations, and, possibly (for the purposes of the present paper I will remain non-committal on this) distinct conceptual representations. In part, the differences in linguistic forms are due to the different lexical and grammatical devices that are available in the respective languages. However, the differences in linguistic forms usually go well beyond what can be attributed to differences in lexicon and grammar. It is these further differences which may be said to reflect variation in idiomatcity between the respective languages. Idiomatcity is about "ways of saying things" (Ross 2001:146); it is about when both languages provide the means to say something either one way or another, but still, in one language you say things one way, while in the other language you say things the other way. Or, as encapsulated in the title of Grace's (1987) book, it is about the "linguistic construction of reality".

Although idiomaticity is rarely acknowledged in the literature as a single unitary phenomenon, there are numerous studies of idiomaticity in specific linguistic domains. One of the most well-known is Talmy's (1985) typology of lexicalization patterns of motion verbs, which can be illustrated with the following contrast between Riau Indonesian and English:

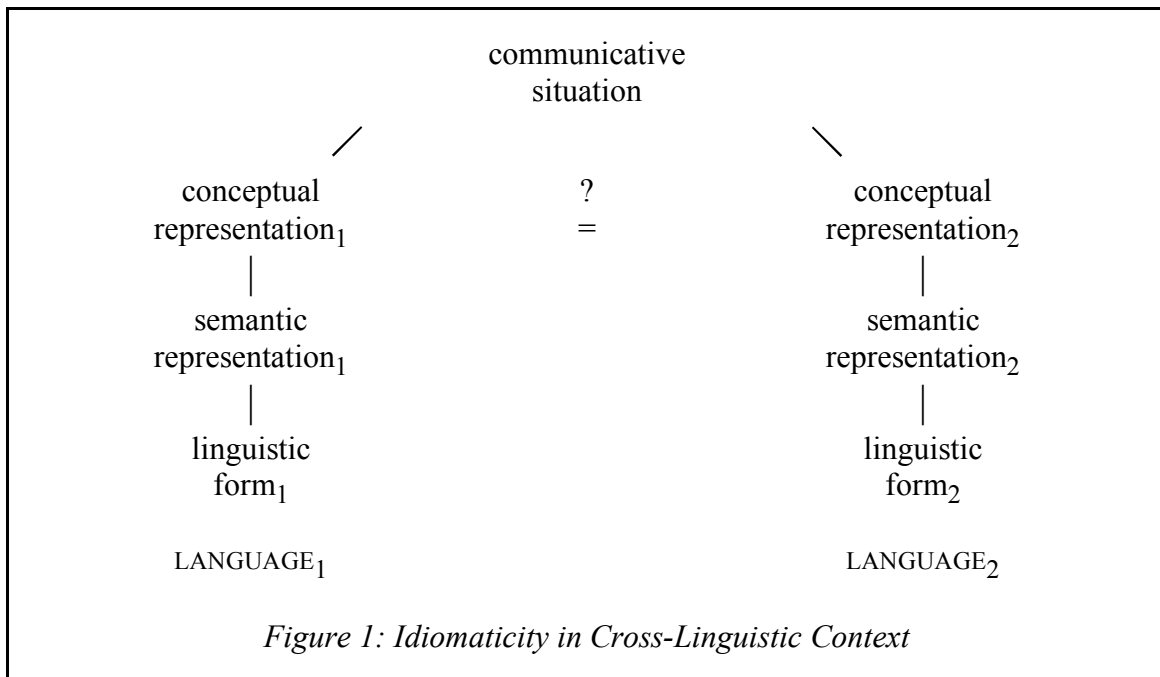
- | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------|
| (2) | (a) Jon tari ke dalam kamar
Jon dance to inside room | Riau Indonesian |
| | (b) Jon masuk kamar lagi tari
Jon enter room PROG dance | |
| (3) | (a) John danced into the room | English |
| | (b) John entered the room dancing | |

While all of the above sentences are grammatical in their respective languages, there is a clear contrast with respect to which of the two constructions is more felicitous in each language. In Riau Indonesian, (2b) is much more natural than (2a); Riau Indonesian is thus a "path language", in which the lexical conflation of motion with path is preferred. In contrast, in English, (3a) is probably better than (3b), suggesting that English is a "manner language", favouring the lexical conflation of motion with manner.

This paper presents a contrastive analysis of Riau Indonesian and English with regard to idiomaticity, discussing, in turn, a variety of domains with respect to which the two languages differ in idiomaticity, among which are the following:

- (4) In comparison to English, Riau Indonesian ...
- (a) makes less use of clausal subordination
 - (b) makes less use of stacked attributive expressions
 - (c) exhibits a stronger preference for isomorphism between syntactic and information-flow structures. (For example, in a sentence where an expression of quantity or manner convey the primary new information, such an expression is likely to occur in a higher position in the syntactic structure.)
 - (d) makes more use of focus particles contrasting an overtly expressed semantic element with alternative understood semantic elements
 - (e) makes more use of sentence-terminal demonstratives denoting the situation containing the main activity or state expressed by the sentence
 - (f) makes more use of kinship terms and personal titles reflecting the social relationship between speaker and hearer

The above differences, and others like them, are all things that a native speaker of English must master before s/he can claim to have acquired native-like proficiency in Riau Indonesian. Thus, even in a near-IMA language of extreme grammatical simplicity such as Riau Indonesian, there is still lots to learn. More generally, the contrastive analysis of Riau Indonesian and English presented in this paper shows that an adequate account of idiomaticity, in its multifarious manifestations, is an essential part of the complete description of any language.



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