

Two copulas in Bahasa Malaysia: *ialah* and *adalah*

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In the Malay language, the two copulas *adalah* and *ialah* are interchangeable (Sneddon 1996: 237). Yet from my observation at a Malay course (the instructor is a Chinese bilingual native to Klang), there still exist some differences regarding their co-occurrence constraints and types of copular functions.

First, *adalah* tends to link verbal predicates while *ialah* tends to link nominal predicates:

(1) Kereta merah itu **ialah** kereta saya.

‘That red car is my car.’

(2) Hadiah itu **ialah** untuk pelajar tercemerlang.

‘This gift is for the most brilliant student.’

(3) Semua keterangan saya **adalah** benar.

‘All of my opinions are correct.’

(4) Kenduri kesyukuran itu **adalah** untuk meraikan kejayaan adik mendapat pertaman dalam sukan Olimpik.

‘That thank-you party was to celebrate that [my] brother had won the first place in Olympic games.’

Such a nominal/verbal contrast in the co-occurrence constraints is similar to that of the negator pair *bukan/tidak*. This suggests a likely distinction between *ialah* and *adalah* in their affinity with nouns/verbs.

Also, *adalah* has a unique sense of ‘in fact’ when it appears sentence-initially, which for its function of introducing new information can be considered a predicational type copula (Akmajian 1979, cited in Dikken 2005):

(5) **Adalah** dipercayai dadah itu dibawa masuk dari negara jiran.

‘In fact, it is believed that the drug was smuggled from neighboring countries.’

As for *ialah*, it is the only copula allowed to go with a cleft sentence, which is typical of a specificational copular use (ibid.):

(6) Yang tinggal di Taman Bahagia **ialah** Lee dan Asmah.

(7) *Yang tinggal di Taman Bahagia **adalah** Lee dan Asmah.

‘The ones who live in Taman Bahagia are Lee and Asmah.’

This functional difference between *adalah* and *ialah* can be explained in etymology. *Adalah* is composed of the existential *ada* and the particle *-lah* while *ialah* is composed of the pronoun *ia* and *-lah* (Yap 2007:19). The existential *ada*, for its function to introduce new information, echoes the predicational use of *adalah*, and the pronoun *ia*, for its presupposed antecedent, attunes with the specificational use of *ialah* to clarify given information.

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