

Classifying classifier functions in Malay

This paper takes up three functions of Malay classifiers, i.e. classification, singularization and referentialization, and discusses what sort of linguistic knowledge they really are, an issue often neglected by previous studies. I claim that while they are all “functions” of Malay classifiers, they are of different natures.

Classification The noun specifications of classifiers have been the primary concern of most studies on classifiers. They are not asserted meanings of classifiers, which affect truth conditions. Instead, they are conventionally implicated, as McCready (2009) argues based on Japanese facts. The noun specification information exhibits properties of conventional implicatures. (i) It is tied to particular lexical items, i.e. classifiers themselves. (ii) It is scopeless, projecting from negation. The condemnation generated by the use of the animal classifier *ekor* for humans cannot be negated in (1). (iii) The noun specification information cannot be bound, unlike presuppositions. The condemnation meaning persists in (2), regardless of the truth of the antecedent. (iv) The noun specification information passes unmodified through presupposition plugs such as belief contexts. Sentence (3) makes sense because it is the speaker, but not her mother, who despises the three men.

- (1) Adalah tidak benar bahawa *tiga ekor lelaki* itu meragut beg tangannya.
‘It is not true that the three men robbed her of her handbag.’
- (2) Kalau *tiga lelaki* itu berperangai seperti binatang, maka *tiga ekor lelaki* itu(-lah yang) meragut beg tangannya.
‘If the three men behave like animals, then (it is) the three men (who) robbed her of her handbag.’
- (3) Emak saya percaya *tiga ekor lelaki* itu orang baik.
‘My mom believes that the three men are good people.’

Singularization Numeral classifiers are often claimed to exist to individuate an unindividuated mass and enable counting (e.g. Quine 1968; Krifka 1995; Chierchia 1998). Given that direct numeral modification of nouns is generally possible in Malay, individuation in such a sense cannot be a function of classifiers. I argue that classifiers have a ‘singularization’ function. Classifiers restrict the already individuated/atomized domain to singularities/atoms, though this meaning is obscured by numerals in Malay. Thus, *tiga buah buku* = $3 \times \frac{1}{|\text{books}|} \times \text{books}$. Studies on languages in which classifiers can occur without numerals suggest that the singularization function of classifiers is truth-conditional (e.g. Greenberg 1975; Simpson et al. 2011). In other words, truth-conditionally classifiers are singular number morphology.

Referentialization Hopper (1986:314) states that noun phrases with classifiers in Malay are “typically new but referential, and refer to individual participants in the discourse.” The referentialization function is not always observed. A non-referential interpretation is also possible:

- (4) *Tiga orang pelajar* gagal. Harap-harap aku bukan salah seorang daripadanya.
‘Three students failed. Hopefully I’m not one of them.’

I propose that number markers, i.e. classifiers (singular) and reduplication (plural), are subject to syntactic licensing either by referential determiners or quantifiers, which both shift properties to arguments. Referentiality is thus not encoded by classifiers themselves, but by covert determiners licensing them.

References

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