

Towards a proper description of vowel lowering in Malay

This paper reports the results of a preliminary study on the status of vowel lowering in Standard Malaysian Malay. It is well-known that high vowels (*i* and *u*) in closed syllables undergo lowering in certain environments (e.g. Farid 1980; Yunus 1980; Teoh 1994): /pilih/ [pileh] ‘to choose’. The description of vowel lowering in previous studies are in fact not satisfactory. First, the specific environment in which the lowering takes place is not clear. Farid (1980) states that the lowering occurs word-finally (C#) and when another consonant follows (CC) whereas Teoh (1994) states that it only occurs stem-finally (C]_{stem}). Second, regardless of the actual environments, the process does not appear to be as robust as described in the literature. In reality, cases of unexpected application and failure in application are observed quite often. That is to say, vowel lowering is subject to variation. Therefore, a proper description of vowel lowering must clarify the patterns in observed variation.

As a first step to this goal, we examined 200 disyllabic roots. Our word list contains words with all of the following syllable structures (the vowel in question is underlined): (a) (C)V.CVC, (b) (C)VC.CVC, (c) (C)VC.CV, (d) (C)VC.CVC. Vowel lowering is expected to occur only in (a) and (b) according to Teoh’s description and in all these environments according to Farid’s. We selected words in which the underlined vowel is spelt as *i*, *e*, *u* and *o*. (*E* and *o* are included because the orthography does not always reflect the underlying representation of a sound.) Five native speakers were asked to read the word list. We listened to the recording and identified how they pronounced the underlined vowel. After the recording, the same speakers were also asked to self-report how they think they pronounce the vowel in question. For those words which they do not know, the speakers can indicate so on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted to capture native speakers’ phonological knowledge more directly.

The results confirmed our initial doubt about the empirical robustness of the lowering.

(1) a. Unexpected application					
Word	Speaker	Recording	Self-report	Prediction (Teoh)	
c <u>i</u> kgu	A, B	i	e	i	
<u>i</u> khlas	A	i	e	i	
<u>i</u> khlas	B	e	i	i	
b <u>u</u> ncit	A	u	o	u	
b <u>u</u> ncit	B	u~o	u	u	
b. Failure in application					
Word	Speaker	Recording	Self-report	Prediction	
ad <u>i</u> b	A, B	i	i	e	
b <u>i</u> jih	A	i	i	e	
bi <u>u</u> s	A	u	u	o	
bi <u>u</u> s	B	o	u	o	

Moreover, many cases of unexpected raising were observed, on the assumption that orthography reflects underlying representation. For example, the sound spelt as *o* in *calon* ‘candidate’ was pronounced as *u~o* by speakers A and B and self-reported as *u* by speaker A. Our data shows that unexpected raising often occurs when followed by a nasal and in words of Arabic origin.

In conclusion, the formulation of vowel lowering needs refinement. For instance, the frequency and etymology of a word as well as the phonological environment are thought to affect the lowering process in tandem. Furthermore, our methodology needs to be reconsidered. Different results could have been obtained if our questionnaire had options such as *ɪ* and *ʊ*. In fact, Teoh (1994:34) suggests the possibility that vowel lowering has a laxing component in it. The present study indicates that such a possibility is worth a serious exploration.

References

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