

Why do you clap so sparsely? – Single handclaps in Papuan Malay

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Papuan Malay, a non-standard variety of Malay, is spoken in coastal West Papua. This paper discusses a particular form of gestures used by Papuan Malay speakers, namely single handclaps. They have discourse pragmatic function in that they accentuate particular words or phrases, thus marking them as significant for the speaker's discourse.

The discussion is based on narratives and spontaneous conversations between Papuan Malay speakers. The 16-hour corpus contains 137 single handclap tokens which are analyzed in terms of their phonological, syntactic, and discursive environments.

Concerning their phonological environment, most handclaps are either embedded with the stressed syllable of their anchor points, or alternatively, precede or follow the lexemes they are anchored with. A minority of the tokens is embedded with a non-stressed syllable of their anchor points. Most of these tokens can be explained in terms of their syntactic embedding. Concerning their syntactic environment, two thirds of the handclaps occur in clause-initial or -final position. About one third of them occur in clause-internal position. Most of these are anchored with lexemes belonging to an open word class. Regarding their discursive environments, half of the handclaps accentuate pertinent elements of the speaker's plot structure or highlight relations between propositions. Speakers also use handclaps to underline reactions to propositions, or to accentuate dislocated constituents, listed items in enumerations, interjections, or constituents that do not fit the mentioned categories.

In the example below, the single handclap is signified by two juxtaposed vertical lines “||”; the lexeme that anchors the single handclap is bolded; and the stressed syllable of the anchor point is marked with the acute accent which signals the slight increase in pitch.

- (1) baru Magda pu mata ni besar **begíni** ||
and.then Magda POSS eye D.PROX be.big like.this
[After having seen a ghost:] ‘and then Magda’s eyes here (got) big like **this**||’

The utterance occurred during a conversation between a group of teenagers and their aunt after the group had returned from a trip to a neighboring district. The speaker relates that she did not like the village they were staying at, because there were ghosts. She relates how one participant got startled by a ghost with the consequence that her eyes became big *begini* ‘like this’. By embedding a single handclap with *begini* ‘like this’ the speaker further highlights how big the referent's eyes became.