

VOWEL PATTERNING AND MEANING IN MALAY PAIR-WORDS

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There is a class of words in Malay which Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Zaba) (1924) termed pair-words and which perhaps comes closest to phonetic symbolism as it is understood in the literature available on psycholinguistics. The term pair-words was defined as "set phrases consisting of two words combined which retain fully their literal meaning." Two types of pair-words were identified, namely (a) the alliterative, and (b) the non-alliterative. Those which come under the first category are pairs of words which repeat some of the sounds or reproduce them in some modified form as for example:

bukit bukau	} bukit-bukau ('hills and valleys')
gerak geri	} gerak-geri ('movements')
kueh mueh	} kueh-mueh ('cakes, savouries, puddings')

The first word is regarded as the principal word, and the second: qualifying, expanding, or intensifying the meaning of the first. What is meant is that when each pair-word is split, the morpho-syntactical status of the first word is primary whereas the second or following word is morpho-syntactically secondary. Words of primary status in this context have freedom of occurrence in other morpho-syntactical environments, while those words which are secondary do not have this freedom outside the fixed attachments they have with their respective primary or principal word. Thus the secondary word has semantic value, particularly when paired with the first, however, it cannot be treated in the conventional analytical fashion based on a contrast between signifier and signified. Zainal Abidin had suggested that formation

of secondary words largely depends on euphony whose emphasis is on agreement between sounds being motivated by such considerations as being pleasing to the ear and the ease of pronunciation.

In the case of pair-words which are non-alliterative, it is not a repetition of sounds or syllables by the second word that occurs but rather the role of the second word is essentially to signify a cognate idea on the basis of the first, e.g.:

kurus	'thin'	}	'thin and haggard'
kering	'dry'		
lintang	'across (of a barrier)'	}	'topsy-turvy, criss-cross, disorder'
pukang	'fork, junction'		
sangkut	'stick or stuck, correct'	}	'connection, implication'
paut	'clinging, hanging'		

Zaba explained non-alliterative pair-words as being arbitrarily structured and that they are all fixed conventional forms. The functions of such linguistic devices as found in alliterative and non-alliterative pair-words as suggested by him are (a) similar to those served by reduplication to strengthen and intensify the ordinary meaning of the primary single word, by adding to it an idea of indefinite plural confusion, (b) to imply indefinite repetition, association, continuity or multiplied quantity, or (c) when the pairs are nouns, to express an indefinite universal inclusion of all kinds or species (and sometimes all materials).

However, Zaba had tended to account for the existence of alliterative and non-alliterative pair-words in a general manner, attributing their phonological characteristics as being due to euphony. In this respect, his analysis is unsatisfactory and in the context of ascertaining phonetic symbolism in Malay inadequate. Pair-words in Malay, whether they are alliterative or non-alliterative exhibit a remarkable consistency of pattern and as such are semantically pertinent.

There are two ways of describing Malay pair-words. One way is to look at their syllabic structures and the other way is to examine their vowel and consonant contrasts. In the latter case some attempt will be made to link vowel contrast in Malay pair-words to phonetic symbolism.

Structurally, Malay pair-words may be regarded as a special kind of compound. Without exception two words or morphemes are involved in their formation. If only semantic criteria are used to determine compound status (such as when it is said that two words each with its own semantic value when linked gives a third semantic value), Malay pair-words would strictly be excluded as compounds. This is because the second word in the pair in Malay pair-words usually has no independent

semantic value. However, the second word is obligatory if the intention is to extend the semantic boundary of the first word. But the higher level of meaning signalled when two words are used as a pair retains substantially the central idea represented by the first word. We may regard compounds in Malay as made up of two types, viz. the 'true' compounds and the 'quasi' compounds. Malay pair-words come under the latter category. The use of the terms (true vs. quasi) is purely dictated by functional-explanatory reasons and does not suggest or imply a qualitative difference between the two. Also other dichotomies are possible outside the two suggested. Perhaps some examples to illustrate their difference would be useful at this juncture.

True Compounds

rumah	'house'	}	(rumah-tangga)	'a homestead'
tangga	'house-ladder, stairs; steps'			
meja	'table'	}	(meja-kerusi)	'furniture'
kerusi	'chair'			
kaki	'leg'	}	(kaki-tangan)	'staff; workers in an office'
tangan	'hand'			

Quasi Compounds (Pair-words)

anak	'child'	}	(anak-pinak)	'descendants; children of both sexes'
pinak	(no independent semantic value)			
senang	'ease; easy'	}	(senang-lenang)	'at ease; care-free; free of worries'
lenang	(no independent semantic value)			
batu	'stone; rock; pebble'	}	(batu-batan)	'all varieties and shades of stone'
batan	(no independent semantic value)			

Syllable Contrast in Pair-words

Syllable contrast in Malay pair-words may be best treated as linguistic phenomena associated with rhyming and chiming. In the case of rhyming a syllable in the primary word (which is always in initial position) matches a syllable in the secondary word (always in final position). Rhyming can occur between the initial syllable of the primary word and the initial syllable of the secondary word or between the final syllable of the primary word and the final syllable of the secondary word in disyllabic forms. In rare instances, rhyming may occur between the middle syllable of the primary word and the middle syllable of the secondary word in tri-syllabic forms, but this usually also involves the simultaneous rhyming of either the first or final syllable of the primary and secondary words as in:

se(rem)bah-se(rem)beh *'weeping copiously'*
 se(ka)li-se(ka)la *'once in a while, occasionally'*

The following are some examples of rhyming found in disyllabic forms:

Initial Rhyming

(a) Nouns

batu-batan *'all varieties and shades of stones'*
bukit-bukau *'hills and valleys'*

Final Rhyming

(b) Nouns

kuih-muih *'all varieties of cakes'*
selok-belok *'intricacies of a problem'*

Initial Rhyming

(a) Adjectives

gelap-gelita *'total darkness'*
jenggal-jenggul *'bumpy of roads'*

Final Rhyming

(b) Adjectives

kaya-raya *'wealthy'*
chondong-mondong *'inclining precipitously'*

Initial Rhyming

(a) Verbs

beli-belah *'shopping; buying'*
lesap-lesup *'vanished without a trace'*

Final Rhyming

(b) Verbs

cerai-berai *'separated; scattered'*
halau-balau *'drive away furiously'*

It should be noted that pair-words whatever their grammatical class may not be used as base forms to form complex words. In addition to this, pair-words are largely used (a) to show variety or heterogeneity, in which case they are verbs or nouns, and (b) to intensify or emphasise a quality or action in which case they are adjectives or adverbs. There are a great number of pair-words which are in fact onomatopoeic in function and character.

Chiming is the process whereby vowels in the primary word are somehow similar and these contrast with vowels in the secondary word which are also similar, e.g.: