

EXPRESSIVES IN KEDAH MALAY

JAMES T. COLLINS

Through the years several books and articles have been written about Malay grammar. Some specifically deal with the problem of Malay morphology. Yet very few of these studies have touched upon the question of Malay expressives and the rules that relate to them. In fact, some authors have mistakenly identified certain expressives as 'verbal roots'.¹ The cause of these errors and oversights is unclear since expressives appear with considerable frequency in spoken Malay. The fact that they seldom appear in written Malay may explain why earlier writers, whose analyses were primarily textual, failed to concern themselves with these phenomena. Then, too, the standard languages of Malaysia and Indonesia, both variant forms of Malay, are essentially based on written Malay. Hence, modern studies of standard Malay likewise omit reference to this part of the language. Diffloth (1972) also observed:

The fact that ideophones are semantically unfamiliar (the majority of linguists alive today do not have ideophones in their respective mother tongues) and also difficult to observe for sociological and stylistic reasons can explain this neglect.

For whatever reason, analysis of the ideophones of Malay is sadly lacking. Some forms are cited in dictionaries, particularly those forms which are onomatopoeic. Studies of Malay dialects sometimes mention expressives, particularly with regard to the appearance of nasal vowels (Collins 1976; Wilding 1972; Brown 1927). Forty years ago there was considerable discussion regarding "the directional qualities and tones" of Malay sounds (Maxwell 1936). While there was spirited debate about the premise that all of the sounds of Malay words are based on onomatopoeia (Wilkinson 1936; Gonda 1940), no effort was made to isolate expressives from the rest of the vocabulary. Discussion about the role

of iconic language in Malay has been clouded because those forms which are exclusively iconic, expressives, have not been carefully analysed. While the expressive system of at least one other Austronesian language, Javanese, has been preliminarily defined and described (Uhlenbeck 1971), this is not the case for the expressives of Malay.

The assertion that "there is no clear-cut boundary between expressives and non-expressives" (Carr 1966) is not true. This paper hopes to provide an introductory description of expressives in Malay. The description is based on the Malay spoken in one area of West Malaysia, namely Kedah,² because, as has been mentioned, expressives rarely appear in the standard national languages of Malaysia and Indonesia. The paper is divided into five sections: a brief review of the theory about expressives and iconicity, analyses of Malay expressives and of their relations to what they signify, to other signs in the language system and to the speakers including some remarks regarding iconicity in Malay.

1. EXPRESSIVES AND ICONICITY

The category of words referred to here as expressive has been observed and noted for a long time. Brandstetter (1916:39-40) suggested that in Austronesian languages there were three kinds of "interjections": 1) those evoked by internal psychological processes; 2) those elicited by some external event; and 3) those which express a complete judgement. Those of the second group he further subdivided into words which are imitative of sudden events and those which are not imitative or not related to sudden events. It is this second group with all its subdivisions which constitutes the expressive system of a language. Brandstetter was right to distinguish these expressives on the basis of their relationships to real, external events and, yet, he was correct, too, to group them under the cover term "obscure formations of the emotional impulses". As Jakobson (1965) remarked, "An expressive signals the presence of certain sensations in the speaker."

Brandstetter's use of the term "interjection" for both exclamations and expressives is unfortunately misleading. There is an inherent connection between the expressive and the related event. This connection is one which exclamations do not have. Since Brandstetter's observation there has been some refinement of theory and terminology. Doke (1935) has proposed a semantic definition of the "ideophone"; others (Voeltz 1970, Baker 1938, 1939) suggest syntactic categories for them. There seems to be an accepted typology of the expressive (Johnson 1974). While there is some disagreement as to the scope of the relationship, most authors agree that expressives are in some sense imitative of the

event that evokes them. An expressive belongs to that kind of linguistic sign called icon. "An icon is a non-arbitrary intentional sign - that is, a designation which bears an intrinsic resemblance to the thing it designates" (Pierce 1931).

An expressive, then, conveys in a linguistic sign a sensate experience of sound, sight, touch or feeling in a way which resembles the external event which evokes the perception. There is a correspondence between the word and the perceived event or, rather, "between an acoustic image and a conceptual one, between phonetic and ideational values" (Friedrich 1976). As such, these words are distinct from the elements of language which are arbitrary or conventional correspondences of sound and meaning.³

Exactly how this relationship is effected remains obscure. Few experiments about the nature of iconic language have been undertaken (Wisseman 1954; Brown 1955; Markel and Hamp 1961). Current theories are based on data drawn from various languages and variant interpretations of these data. Often these data do not convincingly demonstrate the validity of any semantic or grammatical approach to expressives (Grossman 1975). At this point, this paper adopts the sound-symbolic approach which insists on the iconic relation of word and perceived event (Diffloth 1973). To what extent this position is justified with respect to the expressives of Malay will be considered later in this paper.

2. EXPRESSIVES AND THEIR SHAPES

As in many other languages, expressives in Malay can be recognised both by their peculiar phonetic qualities as well as by the existence of certain paradigmatic processes restricted to them. What these phonetic and organisational factors are will be discussed in this section.

There are at least two phonetic peculiarities of Malay expressives which mark them off from the rest of the vocabulary: nasal vowels and trilled [r]. It must be admitted that not all expressives involve either of these phenomena. Furthermore there are a few, very rare occurrences of both nasal vowels (in non-predicted environments) and trilled [r] in other parts of the lexicon.⁴ While such phenomena are extremely rare in other parts of the lexicon, they are quite common in the expressive vocabulary.

In general Malay has no 'phonemic' nasal vowels; any nasalisation that takes place is due to the phonetic environment of the vowel. [Riŋiŋ] 'dollar'; [kəmīʔ] 'dented'; [m:ləh] 'to slaughter some animal

with proper Islamic ritual'; [akãʔ] 'root'. Nasalisation occurs immediately after nasal consonants /m, n, ŋ/ or after nasal plus liquid or glide. It also occurs preceding the pharyngeal fricative [ʕ].⁵ In short, nasalisation is predictable - except for the nasal vowels of expressives.

- [pʕʔ] 'of a stone tossed against a tree trunk'
 [tīt tīt] 'of a chick when it is near its mother'
 [siāp siāp] 'of moving very quickly like lightning'
 [kuēʔ kuēʔ] 'of writhing movements (snakes in water, fish in mud)'
 [biū biū] 'of swinging fists (that do not hit the mark)'

In these examples there are no conditioning environments to explain the appearance of nasal vowels. Here nasal vowels are an essential part of the expressives.

Malay spoken in Kedah has no trilled liquid; [R], an uvular fricative, occurs as well as its allophone in final position, [ʀ] (Asmah 1975 and 1977). In expressives, however, both [r] and [R] occur - particularly in words of onomatopoeic character.

- [prep prep] 'of paper being crinkled and crushed'
 [kroʔ kraʔ] 'of brittle objects knocking against each other like water buffaloes horn to horn, wooden floats of a net colliding with each other when a school of fish enters the net, stones in a coconut shell'
 [gɾɛŋ gɾɛŋ gɾɛŋ] 'of a motor scooter warming up'
 [bɾaw bɾaw] 'of heavy rain especially on tin roofs'
 [pɾaŋ] 'of a single piece of crockery falling on cement and shattering'
 [Rop Rop Rop] 'of walking on dry moss in a fallow rice field'
 [cRĕ:] 'of oil sizzling in a heated cauldron'
 [sRop sRāp] 'of new batik brushing against itself when worn'

Something more will be said about the appearance of [r] and [R] in intervocalic position but at this point let it be noted that the appearance of [r] is highly unusual in the non-iconic vocabulary of Malay and yet rather frequent in iconic vocabulary.

Besides these two striking phonetic peculiarities of many expressives there are clear word-building processes for expressives; one might say 'morphology'. There are two main processes: affixation and reduplication including vowel and consonant alternation. These two processes often interact.

In the early part of this century Brandstetter mentioned some of the affixes associated with onomatopoeic words in Malay: [də-, kə-]. Both