

Symbolisation in Malay: Evidence in Genre and Lexicon.

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1. Introduction

The Malay culture of obedience and benevolence though not always true in practice could still be traced in the language behaviour of the Malay speech community. The verbal style of meaning one's intention in language could reflect the cultural trait within a particular language. As the Malays are polite in general, their politeness could be traced in their verbal communication. A Malay speaker usually would avoid using the authentic personal pronoun *Aku*¹ 'I' except when conversing with very good friends and even parents seldom use this pronoun with their children unless they are angry. Malay speakers would also prefer to speak their minds in an indirect manner. This implicit way of meaning one's intention could be found in Asmah (1992) where four types of indirect communication in Malay are outlined.

The phrase *kurang ajar* which literally or at surface meaning means lack tutoring suffices to illustrate symbolic meaning in Malay. This phrase is actually understood as rude or crude. No single Malay speaker would like to be associated with this phrase as it is directly associated with its symbolic sense and instantaneously understood upon its usage either in written or spoken. This form of symbolic meaning can be regarded as the semantics of a particular indirect speech act in Malay which could be an important source of insight into communicative routines (cf. Wierzbicka 1985) of Malay culture.

¹ *Aku* is a T form first person pronoun. The Malays would usually employ *saya* a V form first person pronoun in daily communication. But *aku* can also denote a neutral sense because it is used in the prayers among Malay muslims as *aku* is the conventional pronoun when communicating with God. In my recent visit to Sabah, I found out that '*Aku*' is commonly used among speakers regardless of age and race (Chinese-Malay) in certain areas in Sabah.

2. Symbolic Meanings in Malay Culture and Discourse

In this section I shall look at pantun as an indirect form of communication in Malay. In its most basic form the pantun is a four-line verse, where each line is composed of eight to twelve syllables, usually about four or five words (Muhammad Haji Salleh 1991:29). Pantun is fully justified to be an authentic representation of Malay mentality, which contains the Malay emic viewpoint as stated by Azhar Simin in Zulkifley Hamid (1994). According to Asmah (1992:179) the Malay pantun is a microcosm of a typical social communication in Malay life and the first two stanzas represent the phatic communion whereas the last two are the actual communication. Asmah also points out :

...if the pantun is a microcosm of Malay communication, then it is an example par excellence in the use of imagery in communication. When a Malay communicates in the pantun form he can be said to be at the height of his finesse and decorum.

In communication, the pantun is used as a form of communication in formal propositions for marriage, and engagement and wedding ceremonies. It is in such events that directness is greatly shunned and indirectness rules the day. (1992:180)

The authenticity of pantun is further acknowledged by Daillie when he says the Malay pantun is regarded as a must in any form of Malay Studies as, "They are probably as old as the language itself and yet still alive - a perfect mirror of the Malay world as a whole, and of the Malay soul." (Daillie 1988:3). He also maintains that :

"The Malay pantun...is an epitome of life and a universe in a grain of sand. It carries within itself all the elements of the Malay man's life [especially in the first two lines, see Daillie 1989]...it expresses his customs and traditions, wisdom, beliefs and feelings of all sorts, his love of man, woman and God." (Daillie 1988: 6)

In certain delicate facets of human endeavour, symbolic meanings become the norm of communication. This has been observed by Tham (1977:18):

A most pervasive character of Malay is the symbolic use of language...The process may be summarised in the following way: linguistic categories are associated with a set of standard or surface meanings but this set of standard meanings signals its associated symbolic meanings. However, the categories used and their ecological connexions are localized and culturally defined.

In settings such as courtship and marriage for example, words are more symbolic as in *menengok*, though it literally means 'watching', it is actually the tradition of elders viewing a potential bride (Wazir Jahan Karim 1990:25). The love of a couple could be depicted and expressed in a pantun such as below (Hamilton 1982:52-3):

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Hilang dadu di dalam dadih, | Within the curds the dice are lost, |
| Dadih bercampur minyak lada. | Sweet curds with oil of pepper fixed. |
| Hilang malu kerana kasih, | Fond love my sense of shame has lost, |
| Rindu hati bercampur gila. | For love was e'er with madness mixed. |

Within the above quatrain, a clearer representation of Malay meaning is visible. The first two lines are *pembayang* described by Wazir (1990) as 'concealed meaning usually contain metaphoric symbolic statements' followed by the actual message intended by the conveyer. This is an ontological manifestation of symbolic meaning existing within the Malay speech community. According to Benjamin the objective articulation of one's thought is not only tedious but could expose one to be controlled by other individuals as to how one should express one's thought thus it is a tendency for speakers to "cleave to the deeper and more personal satisfaction of holding their thoughts in the condensed, non-articulated, symbolic forms to which they have instantaneous (because non-linerised) access, and which are truly private." (1983:7). To illuminate this point further, it would be necessary to quote the process of communication between two parties in *merisik*, an informal visit by a middle-aged female

representative of the man's family to explore the possibility of marriage proposal to a prospective bride's parent, outlined by Sweeney (1987:150):

The visitor will remark that an important wish/matter has brought her here (Datang ini ada hajat besar, or Inipun ada hal maka datang). The following exchange will involve various allusions to flowers (the girl) and bees (the boy). Traditionally this might include the trading of **pantun**. The visitor may say that she hears there is a flower blossoming in this house. If it has no owner, one would wish to pluck it. (Katanya di rumah ini ada pula bunga yang sedang kembang. Kalau belum ada tuannya ingin pula hati 'tu nak menyuntingnya)...She may then use another allusion. For example, "If one has a bird, one should find a cage for it; it will appear radiant only when hung under the eaves" (Kalau ada burung 'tu elok dicarikan sangkarnya, barulah berseri kalau disangkutkan di tepi cucuran atap)...(emphasis provided)

The above quotation suggests a symbolic mode in Malay semantics and pragmatics. It also provides support to Asmah's explanation (1992:176) for the first type of indirectness in Malay communication as 'Beating About the Bush (B.A.B.). In addition to the quatrain and the verbal discourse recorded, the Malay literary and oral traditions have also shown immensely that symbolic meaning is the norm of intracommunication in Malay society. Such symbolic mode of meaning is found from the allegories in Malay Annals or *Sejarah Melayu* where the rulers are criticised subtly as one's life is at stake if the king or Sultan is confronted head-on. More obvious symbolisation can be easily traced from the Malay stories such as *Musang Berjanggut* and *Pak Pandir* from which *pandir* in the latter is literally adapted into the Malay lexicon to mean one's simple-mindedness. Subtler symbolism is also detected in *Tikus Rahmat*, *Matinya Seorang Patriot* and *Tok Guru*.

3. Rhyme in Malay Genre

The perplexity of rhyme in semantics is an indicator for sound-meaning association. In Malay, rhyme is properly capitalised in verbal communication.