

Syntax-Semantics Interface in Malay Comparatives

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Introduction

Malay is an SVO agglutinative language. The language expresses comparatives morphologically and syntactically. Syntactically, the degree adverb, such as ‘sangat’ and ‘paling’, is used to indicate comparative by placing *itu* before or after an adjective as shown in (1) to (3):

(1) Shafiq seorang ketua yang *sangat tegas*.

(2) Tapi, aku malu pada diri aku sendiri dan *malu sangat* pada dia.

(3) Maka dengan agama kita Islam inilah senjata kita yang *paling tajam* dan kuat buat mengalahkan sekalian musuh-musuh kita itu.

Morphologically, comparatives are expressed by using the affix ‘ter-’ and ‘se-’, such as ‘tercantik’ and ‘sehebat’ in (4) and (5).

(4) Kembang hidung mereka, megah akan mendapat Papan Kemajuan *tercantik* seluruh dunia.

(5) Adik tidak *sehebat* dia.

Studies on Malay comparatives are quite limited. Most of these studies focus on prescriptive, rather than, descriptive description. In Malay prescriptive grammar, only *Tatabahasa Dewan* (Nik Safiah et al., 2009), classifies comparative as ‘kata penguat’ (intensifier) which, syntactically, exists before or after an adjective word or phrase, such as (6) and (7).

(6) Dia terbeli baju yang *besar sangat*. (Nik Safiah et al., 2009: 261)

(7) Masakan ibunya *paling sedap*. (Nik Safiah et al., 2009: 260)

Asmah (2009), on the other hand, categorizes comparative as ‘frasa perbandingan’ (comparative phrase) which is a subcategory of ‘frasa sifat’ (adjective phrase), such as (8) dan (9).

(8) Rumah ini *paling cantik* di antara ketiga-tiganya. (Asmah, 2009: 342)

(9) sangat baik¹ (Asmah, 2009: 343)

Zainal Abidin (2000: 172, 177-178), another prescriptive grammarian, classifies comparative under ‘sifat kata darjah’ (degree adverb) which is then subdivided into four types. One of these four types is ‘pangkat menyangat’ (‘intensity level’), such as ‘sangat besar’.

In terms of semantics, it appears that Zainal Abidin (2000), Asmah (2009), and Nik Safiah (2009) describe and explain the meaning expressed by comparatives.

Question arises when *Tatabahasa Dewan* (Nik Safiah, 2009: 259) states that comparatives must be present with an adjective word or phrase. This is because corpus data show that there are other syntactic behaviour for comparatives. For example, ‘sangat’ can occur before a verb such as in (10) and (11) and before a noun such as in (12).

(10) Semangat Pak Mansur *sangat dikagumi*.

(11) Aristotle pula *sangat berminat* tentang kemajuan bidang sains pada zaman awal-awal bidang tersebut.

¹ Asmah only gives examples at phrase level for this structure.

(12) Allah adalah *Maha Pengampun*, lagi *Maha Penyayang*.

Also, the data show that verbs which follow ‘sangat’ appear to have an object, such as (13) and (14).

(13) Pertama kali ke Sematan, melihat pantai cantiknya, sangat menggemirakan dirinya.

(14) Saniah sangat tergores hati mendengar kenyataan itu.

Previous studies have also shown that meanings which can be expressed by comparatives can be looked at from the sentential distribution. Aloni & Roelofsen (2014) who studies the English comparative ‘some’ and ‘any’ and German ‘irgend’-indefinites find that the comparatives for the two languages express focus. Lin (2009) and Grano & Kennedy (2012) focus on Mandarin’s morpheme ‘*bi*’. Lin (2009) shows that ‘*bi*’ phrase is both argument and non-argument dependent. Grano & Kennedy (2012) find that comparatives can be constructed using a transitive verb, causing it to appear like a transitive verb construction.

Therefore, this study believes that the current prescriptive grammar on comparatives needs to be revisited in order to look at the syntax-semantics interface for comparatives. This is extremely important for Malay grammar because the result of this study will present a rule and a description that reflects the real usage by native speaker of Malay.

Methodology

Corpus Data

The study uses two sources of open corpus data. First is the data from Sistem Pangkalan Data Korpus Bahasa Melayu Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (which will be known in this paper as DBP); second is from Malay Concordance Project (which will be known in this paper as MCP). Both corpora are limited to collection of written texts. In terms of the number of words, the DBP corpus has about 10 million words from newspapers, books, magazines, and both classical and modern texts (Rusli, Norhafizah & Chin, 2008). MCP corpus has about 5.8 words from 165 classical Malay texts, which includes traditional prose, letters, newspapers, and classical literature.

In semantic, and pragmatic, studies, corpus can help provide the meaning characteristics for a word objectively (Mindt, 1991). According to Zaharani (2013), the use of corpus can help show the typical behaviour of a word, phrase, and clause in a real language use environment. Mint and Zaharani’s statement shows that the study of meaning can be proven by empirical data.

Comparative Semantics

This study uses the semantic analysis of comparatives proposed by Kennedy (2006, 2007) which reflects the observation by Sapir (1944 in Kennedy, 2006: 2) all languages have syntactic categories that express gradable concepts, and all languages have designated comparative constructions, which are used to express explicit orderings between two objects with respect to the degree or amount to which they possess some property.

This study also uses the syntactic analysis of comparatives proposed by Pancheva (2006: 3) who argues that phrasal comparatives are derived from small clauses, rather than full wh-clauses). Besides Pancheva (2006), the study uses the syntactic analysis of comparatives suggested by Bacskai-Atkari (2014:3) who describes that some languages allow the use of comparative degree markers, morphological adjective comparative formation, or periphrastic way.

Results

Table 1: Example of Superlative

No.	Structure	
1	Kesan dari penyiaran televisyen adalah sangat besar.	sangat + adjective
2	Baginda sangat dihormati dan disegani oleh penduduk Makkah kerana berakhlak mulia.	sangat + verb
3	Kamus ialah salah satu alat paling penting dalam kaedah mempelajari bahasa asing.	paling + adjective
4	Empat gadis ini mempunyai susuk badan yang paling mengancam dalam kumpulan mereka.	paling + verb

Table 2: Example of Superiority

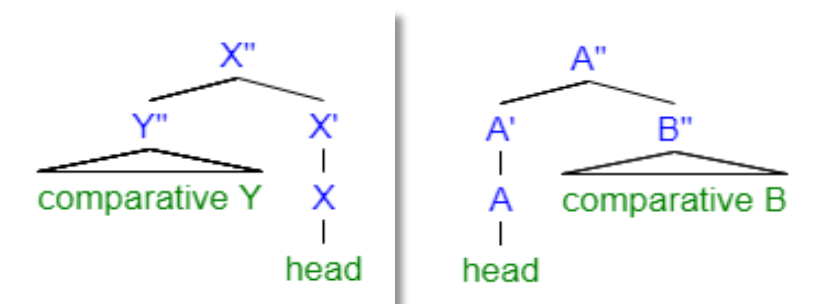
No.	Structure	
1	Sesungguhnya Allah Maha Kuat, lagi Maha Berat seksa-Nya.	maha + adjective
2	Tuhan Maha Berkuasa, manusia hanya menjalani atau melaksanakan perintah-Nya.	maha + verb
3	Dan Allah adalah Maha Pengampun lagi Maha Penyayang.	maha + noun

Table 3: Example of Equative

No.	Structure	
1	Badannya hampir sama besar dengan badan Seman	sama + adjective
2	Ini jauh berbeza dengan bagaimana ubat yang sama digunakan di Amerika Syarikat.	sama + verb

Table 4: Example of Inferiority

No.	Structure	
1	Bagi saya rungutan itu kurang tepat.	kurang + adjective
2	IPB mengutamakan pelajar Islam yang kurang berkemampuan	kurang + verb
3	Bagaimanapun, kurang promosi membuatkan ramai tidak mengetahui mengenai kewujudan restoran itu yang boleh dikunjungi mulai jam 10 pagi hingga 10 malam	kurang + noun



Discussion

This study only identifies the Malay comparative syntactic characteristics in four sentential forms: superiority, equative, superlative, and inferiority. The study finds that there are different characteristics for the four forms. These different characteristics show that, although ‘paling’ and ‘sangat’ are superlatives, they express different meanings. For instance, ‘paling’ in ‘Kamus ialah salah satu alat paling penting dalam kaedah mempelajari bahasa asing’ requires a syntactic context which indicates gradability (Asmah, 2009: 342-343). It needs one or more other implicit entities, besides, ‘kamus’ to make a comparison which allows the use of ‘paling’ with ‘penting’, such as ‘Kamus ialah salah satu alat paling penting, berbanding tesaurus dan buku nahu, dalam kaedah mempelajari bahasa asing’.

The study also finds that users employ both superlative forms for different syntactic environments. For instance, ‘sangat’ does not require a syntactic context to indicate the need to have other entities like the one with ‘paling’.

Besides that, the study finds that the use of the ‘maha’ comparative indicates perfective, especially in sentences which refer to Allah swt. God. Based on this observation, the Malay comparative can be analysed through the way meaning is generated by semantic predication, such as SANGAT <adjective> vs SANGAT <verb (adjective root)>, and proposition in a sentential environment, such as ‘X lebih Y daripada Z’. The study further finds that semantic observation can help classify the characteristics for Malay comparatives, although these comparatives are closed word class.

The study also finds a syntactic implicitness for comparative constructions such as “IPB mengutamakan pelajar Islam yang kurang berkemampuan”. A *daripada* phrase can be used to compare ‘kurang berkemampuan’, such as ‘daripada mereka yang lebih berkemampuan’.

Conclusion

Based on two corpora, DBP and MCP, the study finds that Malay comparatives require both syntax and semantics knowledge on the part of the language users in order to form phrasal construction to produce comparative sentences. This can be realized through (i) the combination of the word ‘paling’ or ‘sangat’ with other word to show superlatives, (ii) the combination of ‘maha’ and other word to show perfective for God, and (ii) the combination of ‘lebih/kurang ... daripada’ to show comparative.

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