Overt Expletives in Malay

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the presence of overt expletives (viz. pleonastic subjects) in the Malay language through a corpus analysis of newspaper articles archived by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2013). While previous research has explored the existence of null expletives in Malay via a theoretical approach, this study applies the theory and provides a focussed examination of constructions involving such expletives in actual language use in order to confirm the postulation of expletives in Malay. The methodology involves the identification of an overt non-referential nominal expression in the subject position of a small set of expletive constructions, e.g., raising, extraposition, and *tough*-constructions. It is found that, albeit scarce, overt expletives in the form of the 3rd person singular pronoun *ia* are used in the language, thus allowing us to confirm the presence of overt realisations of the null expletive postulated by scholars in theoretical studies of Malay. With concrete evidence of expletives in Malay, it is possible for linguists to model the language more accurately, not just allowing greater descriptive adequacy in theoretical syntax but also various applications in the field of linguistics, such as improved grammatical accuracy in machine translation and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Expletives, extended projection principle, Malay, pleonastic subjects

INTRODUCTION

According to the Extended Projection Principle by Chomsky (1982), expletives such as *it* and *there* are non-referential pronouns that exist for the sole purpose of "the structural requirement that certain configurations… must have subjects" (p. 27). The subjects in the following examples carry no semantic content and do not refer to anything:

(1) a. * *It is raining.*
     b. * *There is no time to waste.*

Replacing them with a *wh*-phrase would render the corresponding questions ungrammatical; *wh*-phrases require an antecedent, whereas expletives cannot supply such an antecedent because they are semantically vacuous.

(2) a. * *What is raining?*
     b. * *Where is no time to waste?*

Malay presents an interesting case as the subject position of constructions expected to be occupied by an expletive is consistently empty, as illustrated below:

(3) a. ___   *sedang*   *hujan.*
                 prog   rain
         'It is raining'

     b. ___   *ti-ada*   *masa*   *untuk bazir.*
                 neg-exist time   for waste
         'There is no time to waste.'

Comparing Malay to English, the following question holds: Is there any physical evidence of the existence of expletives in Malay?

(4) a. **Apa*   *yang*   *benar-benar akan   hujan?*
         What   comp   true-red   pros   rain
         (What will truly rain?)

     b. *{*Apa / dimana*}   *terdapat lebih   daripada satu   kesan?*
         What at where   exist   more   than   one   effect
=   (Where is more than one effect?)

RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on expletives in Malay is scarce. Although there are scholars who have postulated expletives such as Salleh (1995), Wahab and Nomoto (2017), and Selvanathan (2018), no substantiation or argumentation regarding their existence in Malay is provided.

Table 1
Overt expletives in the corpus

Construction	Example from Corpus
Tough	*Ia akan menjadi sukar untuk saya berjaya.* "It will become difficult for me to succeed."
Extraposition	*Ia adalah jelas bahawa polis mahu reka keterangan.* "It is clear that the police want to fabricate testimonies."
Weather	*Ia benar-benar akan hujan.* "It truly will rain."
Passive Reporting V	*Ia boleh dirumuskan bahawa terdapat petanda-petanda pemulihan ekonomi.* "It can be summarised that there are signs of economic recovery."
Raising	*Ia mungkin kelihatan bahawa kita tidak mengikut ajaran Islam.* "It might seem that we are not following Islamic teachings."
Existential	*Ia terdapat lebih daripada satu kesan.* "There is more than one effect."

To address this issue, I argued in Mustaffa (2020) that certain constructions are occupied by a phonetically null variant of the expletive, Pro. These null expletives exist based on the adherence of Malay to the EPP, the movement of the subject from its base-generated position to SpecTP due to the EPP, and the definiteness restriction caused by expletive-argument chains. However, neither I nor other scholars have documented overt expletives in actual use in authentic language.

METHODS

Analysing a corpus of newspaper articles archived by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2013), this study has employed the following procedures:
1. Searching for relevant predicates in the corpus used in expletive constructions
2. Identifying instances of overt nominal expressions occupying the subject position in various syntactic constructions known to host expletives
3. Determining the referentiality of such constituents (if the constituent is non-referential, it can be concluded to be an expletive)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The usage of 3rd person *ia* provides support for the theoretical postulation of expletives in the language. The subject in the constructions in Table 1 is non-referential, as confirmed by the ungrammaticality of replacing it with a *wh*-phrase, as shown below in examples (4a-b):

(5)   a.   **Apa   yang benar-benar   akan   hujan?*
         What comp true-red   pros   rain
         (What will truly rain?)

b. *{*Apa / dimana*}   terdapat lebih   daripada satu kesan?
   What at where   exist   more   than   one effect
= (Where is more than one effect?)

Ia is a weak pronoun that is barely ever used anymore, especially in spoken Malay, as suggested by its need for reinforcement by the 3rd person enclitic = *nya* in *ianya*. It used to replace human and non-human referents in previous stages of the language, but nowadays it can only be used with non-human referents. This has warranted its use as an expletive in Modern Malay.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have important implications for both the theoretical modelling of Malay syntax and practical applications in computational linguistics. The confirmation of overt expletives in Malay enhances the descriptive adequacy of syntactic theories and opens up possibilities for improving the accuracy of machine translation systems and artificial intelligence applications.

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