
Malay Idiomatic Expressions : Their Structure and Categorization

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Most people believe that they have mastered a language when they are able to express themselves fluently in it. But language is not just about words and grammar; language is unique because it reflects the culture of the people using it. Hence to be able to master a language and understand the actual meaning behind the words, expressions and sentences uttered, one needs to learn the language **frills** such as idiomatic expressions and colloquial forms. Expressions like '*to read him like a book*', '*on the house*', '*to be nuts*' and '*like a house on fire*' may not be understood correctly by a non-native speaker of English if he were to interpret the meaning literally

Idiomatic expressions form a very important part of most languages. They are widely used in informal conversations and literary writings to give life and richness to the language and to express concepts and ideas in an interesting way. For example it is more interesting to say that, '*The manager wants the workers to eat out of his hands*' than '*He wants them to believe everything he says*' to imply a range of effects or meanings.

A form of idiomatic expression that is used widely in writings and conversations is the **idiom**. An idiom is a fixed phrase with fixed meaning and is a form of metaphor. Larsen sees idioms as '**dead metaphors**' as they are part of the lexicon of the language (Larsen,1984. 249). Frankin and Rodman (1978:127) define idiom as

"fixed phrases, consisting of more than one word which have meanings that cannot be inferred by knowing the meaning of the individual words"

For example, 'drive a bargain' does not mean 'driving' and 'fly by night', which means 'not reliable' and 'not to be trusted', have nothing to do with the dictionary meaning of each word.

Idioms exist in most languages as people tend to conceptualize the things that they see and experience in their language idiomatically (Lakoff,1980). Idioms are peculiar to a language, and, thus, it is necessary to understand the culture and the way of life in which the language is spoken to understand the cultural references and connotations which idioms have. In the Malay language a form of idiomatic expression with its own peculiarities is known as *Simpulan bahasa*.

Simpulan Bahasa

The **Kamus Dewan** (1970:1110) defines *simpulan bahasa* as ,

"an expression or a phrase consisting of more than two words and with a meaning different from the words used"

The word *simpulan* means 'a knot' and *bahasa*, which originates from the Sanscritic *Basha*, means language. The term *simpulan bahasa* refers to two words which are tied or knotted into a phrase to form a meaning of its own. When they are *untied* the words revert to their dictionary meaning. The peculiarity of Malay idioms is that they are mostly two-word expressions, although a small number of *simpulan bahasa* are made up of three or four words, for example '*melepaskan batuk ditangga*' (to cough at the foot of the stairs) and '*kacang lupakan kulit*' (the nut that forgets its skin).

As Malay society tends to conceptualize the things that they see and experience around them, new *simpulan bahasa* will be created and used in the

language and old *simpulan bahasa* will disappear as they become irrelevant to the society. Some old *simpulan bahasa* will lose their idiomaticity and become clichés (Keraf:1981). This explains why some people are not aware of the use of *simpulan bahasa* in their utterances, such as '*berat sebelah*' (lop-sided), '*bintang filem*' (film star), '*budi bahasa*' (language and kindness) and '*cincin tanda*' (symbolic ring).

In the early days most Malays were farmers and fisherman living in small villages and thus most *simpulan bahasa* were formed from the things that they saw and did everyday. *Simpulan bahasa* like '*gelora hati*' (storm liver), which means 'to feel violent', and '*kena pancing*' (caught by the hook), which means 'to be trapped', show that the seas and the rivers were part of the lives of the traditional Malays and they depended on these places for their livelihood. '*Setahun jagung*' (one-year-old corn), which means 'a child' or 'someone who is new at work', and '*beras basah*' (wet rice), which means 'something which is useless' reflect the lifestyle of the traditional Malays who were mostly farmers. Poultry farming among the Malays led to the formation of *simpulan bahasa* like '*tidur ayam*' (chicken sleep), and '*ajak-ajak ayam*' (invite chicken). These *simpulan bahasa* mean 'light sleeper' and 'to invite someone half-heartedly'

Nowadays, most Malays have migrated to the city to become professionals and entrepreneurs. Thus, new *simpulan bahasa* like '*Ali Baba*', '*Minah karan*' (electric Minah or girl) and '*mulut laser*' (mouth laser) have been created. '*Ali Baba*' describes Malays who act by proxy as directors for companies that are actually owned by non-Malays. '*Minah karan*', which refers to female factory workers, indicates the industrial development experienced by the Malays. These examples show that expressions which were typical of Malay life many years ago are no longer used nowadays as new ones emerge in the society.

Most *simpulan bahasa* were formerly '*bahasa kiasan*', that is similes, and when used by society from time to time they changed their form to *simpulan bahasa* (Keris Mas 1988, Zaba 1965). For example, the *simpulan bahasa* '*pekak badak*' was originally '*pekak seperti badak*' (as deaf as a rhinoceros) and '*harimau berantai*' was formerly '*garang seperti harimau berantai*' (as fierce as a chained tiger). Then there are those *simpulan bahasa* that originated from folktales and popular beliefs like '*Cina buta*' '*Abu Jahal*' and '*Mat Jenin*'. Others were formed through association with ordinary things or happenings which could be related to the environment, food and animals. Thus, this

explains the formation of *simpulan bahasa* like '*kutu embun*' (dewy louse), '*makan suap*' (to be fed), '*panjang tangan*' (long hands), and '*makan garam*' (eating salt) (Zaba 1965).

The Structure of *Simpulan Bahasa*

Simpulan bahasa are usually made up of a combination of nouns, verbs and adjectives (Keris Mas 1988). For example, the expression '*makan hati*' (eat liver) is made up of a verb '*makan*' and noun '*hati*', and '*berat tangan*' (heavy hand) is made up of an adjective '*berat*' and a noun '*tangan*'. *Simpulan bahasa* can be classified into the following four groups:

- a. noun + noun
- b. verb + noun
- c. adjective + noun or noun + adjective
- d. verb + noun + adjective

(a) Noun + Noun

In this category, both the words used in the *simpulan bahasa* are nouns. Some examples are '*kaki ayam*', '*buaya darat*', '*bapa ayam*', '*kaki botol*' and '*kuku besi*'. The words in these expressions are all nouns and literally mean 'chicken feet', 'land crocodile', 'father chicken', 'foot bottle', and 'iron nails' respectively. However, when they are combined and used as *simpulan bahasa*, they carry the figurative meaning of 'being barefooted', 'swindler', 'pimp', 'alcoholic' and 'dictator' respectively. This is illustrated in the table below.

Table 1 . Noun + Noun

<i>Simpulan bahasa</i>	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
<i>Kaki ayam</i>	Chicken feet	Barefooted
<i>Buaya darat</i>	Land crocodile	Swindler
<i>Bapa ayam</i>	Father chicken	Pimp
<i>Kaki botol</i>	Foot bottle	Alcoholic
<i>Kuku besi</i>	Iron nails	Dictator

(b) Verb + Noun

The words in this group of *simpulan bahasa* comprise a verb and a noun. For example, the *simpulan bahasa* 'pelawa ayam', 'ambil hati', 'ganti tikar' and 'pasang telinga' are each made up of a verb and a noun. They can be literally translated as 'invite chicken', 'take liver', 'change mat' and 'fix ear'. These *simpulan bahasa* which are made up of a verb and a noun, figuratively mean 'to invite someone half-heartedly', 'to be offended or hurt', 'to marry one's sister-in-law after the death of one's wife' and 'to eavesdrop'. The table below illustrates this.

Table 2 : Verb + Noun

<i>Simpulan bahasa</i>	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
<i>Pelawa ayam</i>	Invite chicken	To invite someone half-heartedly
<i>Ambil hati</i>	Take liver	To be offended/hurt
<i>Ganti tikar</i>	Change mat	To marry one's sister-in-law after the death of one's wife
<i>Pasang telinga</i>	Fix ear	To eavesdrop

(c) Adjective+Noun or Noun+Adjective

The *simpulan bahasa* in this group comprise an adjective and a noun. They can be in the form of adjective + noun or noun + adjective. Some examples are 'ayam tambatan', 'janda berhias', 'lipas kudung' and 'muka papan'. These *simpulan bahasa* comprise a noun + adjective and can be literally translated as 'tied chicken', 'decorated divorcee', 'maimed cockroach' and 'wooden face'. As *simpulan bahasa*, these expressions figuratively mean an experienced and aggressive person, 'an attractive and young divorcee', a person who does things fast and 'a thick-skinned person' respectively. *Simpulan bahasa* in this group can also be in the form of adjective + noun. Some examples are 'pekak badak', 'pendek fikiran' and 'ringan lidah'. These expressions - which can be literally translated as 'deaf rhinoceros', 'short thought', and 'light tongue' respectively - comprise adjective + noun and carry the following meanings respectively: 'someone who pretends to be deaf', 'an impulsive person' and 'a talkative person'. This can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 . Adjective + Noun or Noun + Adjective

<i>Simpulan bahasa</i>	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
<i>Ayam tambatan</i>	Tied chicken	An experienced & aggressive person
<i>Janda berhias</i>	Decorated divorcee	An attractive & young divorcee
<i>Lipas kudung</i>	Maimed chicken	One who does things fast
<i>Muka papan</i>	Wooden face	A thick-skinned person
<i>Pekak badak</i>	Deaf rhinoceros	One who pretends to be deaf
<i>Pendek fikiran</i> <i>Ringan lidah</i>	Short thought Light tongue	An impulsive person A talkative person

(d) Verb + Noun + Adjective

The *simpulan bahasa* in this group consist of three-word expressions. Some examples for this group are '*mendukung biawak hidup*', '*berlindung di balik telunjuk*', and '*melepaskan anjing tersepit*'. The structure of verb + noun + adjective can be seen in the literal translation -'carry an iguana/ a monitor lizard alive, 'to hide behind the index finger' and 'to release a trapped dog'. These *simpulan bahasa* figuratively mean 'to be kind to an evil person', 'to depend on an irresponsible person' and 'to help an ungrateful person' respectively. This is illustrated in the table below.

Table 4 · Verb + Noun + Adjective

<i>Simpulan bahasa</i>	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
<i>Mendukung biawak hidup</i>	To carry an iguana /a monitor lizard alive	To be kind to an evil person
<i>Berlindung di balik telunjuk</i>	To hide behind the index finger	To depend on an irresponsible person
<i>Lepaskan anjing tersepit</i>	To release a trapped dog	To help an ungrateful person

In the Malay language, most *simpulan bahasa* are two-word expressions and so they fall into the first three groups i.e. noun + noun, verb + noun and adjective + noun or noun + adjective. Furthermore, most three-word expressions are classified as similes or proverbs in the Malay language.

The Categorization of *Simpulan Bahasa*

The world view of a society is defined as the way it perceives life, and this perception may be reflected in or influenced by various factors, one of which is language, which in turn is an index to culture. Halliday defines language as “*the ability to mean in the situation or social contexts that are generated by the culture*” (quoted in Leckie-Tarry, 1995:18). This means that language reflects the culture of its speakers, that is, the way of life they lead and their social environment. A society will conceptualize the things that it sees and experiences in the language and this phenomenon can be seen in the growth and development of the Malay language and culture.

The *simpulan bahasa* is a linguistic manifestation of Malay culture in its many facets - the life and daily activity of the Malays, their beliefs and physical environment. For example, the *simpulan bahasa* ‘*rendah diri*’ (low self), which means ‘to be humble’, and ‘*ringan tangan*’ (light hand) which means ‘to be helpful’, reflect the behaviour and attitude encouraged among the Malays which is influenced by Islam, the religion of most Malays. In addition, ‘*buah tangan*’ (hand’s fruit) meaning ‘little gifts that one brings when visiting friends and relatives’ has always been part of the Malay tradition of being generous. *Simpulan bahasa* like ‘*mati seladang*’ (to die together on one’s farm) which means ‘to be faithful to one’s spouse’ and ‘*makan tanah*’ (eat soil) which means ‘to be very poor’ show that most traditional Malays work as farmers. As farmers they also rear sheep and poultry and this can be seen in the *simpulan bahasa* ‘*kambing hitam*’ (black goat) which means ‘a person regarded as a disgrace or a failure by family members or a group’, and ‘*otak lembu*’ (cow’s brain) which means ‘a fool’. As such most *simpulan bahasa* are influenced by or are related to the culture and surroundings of the Malays, their beliefs, daily activities, their livelihood and the people around them. Therefore, *simpulan bahasa* can be categorized based on these aspects that Malays identify with in their culture.

1. *Simpulan bahasa* that refer to parts of the body

The parts of the body include the hands, legs, face, heart, head, mouth, finger nails, nose and eyes. In this category, we have *simpulan bahasa* like '*panjang tangan*' (long hands) or '*berat tangan*' (heavy hands), '*kaki bangku*' (leg of a chair) and '*patah kaki*' (broken leg) which mean 'a person inclined to steal', a person who is not helpful', 'one who cannot play football' and 'a helpless or weak person' respectively. Other widely used *simpulan bahasa* in this category are '*rambang mata*' (random eyes), '*putih mata*' (white eyes), '*kuku besi*' (iron fingernails), '*berat hati*' (heavy liver) and '*patah hati*' (broken liver). These *simpulan bahasa* mean 'to be unable to make the right choice', 'to regret or cry over spilt milk', 'a dictator', 'to be heavy hearted' and 'to have a broken heart' respectively.

2. *Simpulan bahasa* that use animals to express an idea

Some of the animals referred to are the chicken, dog, crocodile, monkey, frog and cockroach. The Malays will not accept an invitation if it is '*ajak-ajak ayam*' (invite chicken) but will '*senyum kambing*' (smile goat) if they see an '*ibu ayam*' (mother hen). This is because the expressions mean 'one is not invited sincerely', and 'one smiles cynically' when one sees 'a pimp'. Other *simpulan bahasa* that fall under this category are '*buaya darat*' (land crocodile) which means 'a swindler or a womanizer' and '*hati tikus*' (liver of a rat) which refers to 'a coward'. In addition, the *simpulan bahasa* '*lipas kudung*' (maimed cockroach) means 'a quick or fast worker' and '*mati katak*' (dead frog) means 'to die for an unworthy cause'. In fact, quite a number of *simpulan bahasa* fall under this category. It appears that in the early days the Malays, to a certain extent, depended on animals for their livelihood. Some animals, however, like the dog and the pig are perceived negatively because of the influence of Islam. For example, the pig in the *simpulan bahasa* '*membabi buta*' (blind pig) means 'to barge in or to work on something clumsily, whereas the dog in '*anjing kurap*' (ringworm dog) refers to 'a bum'

3. *Simpulan bahasa* that use the names of food to express an idea

Some of these are '*tangkai jering*' (the stalk of a plant with horrible smelling pods), '*asam garam*' (tamarind salt), '*miang keladi*' (itchy yam) and '*makan chili*' (eating chilli). These *simpulan bahasa* figuratively mean 'a mean per-

son', an experienced person', 'a cheeky and mischievous person' and 'to feel insulted' respectively.

4. *Simpulan bahasa* that are associated with family and kinship

Traditional Malays place a lot of emphasis on family and relationships. The family is very important and most ceremonies, religious and traditional rites involve the family and relatives. Important decisions on marriage and inheritance are made together. Some examples of *simpulan bahasa* from this category are '*anak buah*' (child fruit), '*anak panjang*' (child long), '*orang rumah*' (house people), '*anak angkat*' (child lifted), and '*orang baru*' (new people). These *simpulan bahasa* mean 'one's niece or nephew', 'the fourth child in a family', 'one's spouse', 'adopted child' and 'a baby or newly married couple' respectively.

5. *Simpulan bahasa* that refer to natural elements or phenomenon

This is an important category of *simpulan bahasa* as language is the "product of man's perception of his environment" (Asmah: 113). The Malay's perception of nature is conceptualized in *simpulan bahasa* such as '*batu api*' (fire stone) which means an instigator; '*bunga dedap*' (a kind of foul smelling flower) which means 'an attractive but mean-hearted person'; '*diam ubi*' (silent tapioca) which means 'a hardworking but quiet person', '*tahi minyak*' (oil faeces) which means 'one who is boastful but is actually useless' and '*tangkap angin*' (catch wind) which means 'to work hard unnecessarily'

6. *Simpulan bahasa* that refer to action and behaviour

The actions and behaviour which the Malays see and experience are conceptualized into *simpulan bahasa* like '*makan cuka*' (eat vinegar), '*pasang badan*' (fix body), '*beralas cakap*' (layer the speech), '*curi tulang*' (steal bones), and '*makan pakai*' (eat wear). These action words (verbs) when used as *simpulan bahasa* mean 'to be hurt', 'to be dressed to kill', 'to be tactful', 'to be lazy' and 'to look good in anything' respectively.

7. *Simpulan bahasa* that are associated with the monarchy, government and administration

The 'Suitans' or Malay kings have always been an important part of Malay society as they are the heads of state, religion and custom. Some of the *simpulan bahasa* in this category are '*bahasa dalam*' (language inside), '*mahkota negeri*' (crown nation), and '*raja sehari*' (king for one day) and these expressions mean 'a royal language variety or register', 'the king' and 'the bride and bridegroom' respectively.

8. *Simpulan bahasa* that reflect foreign influence in trade and colonization

The Malay states especially the Malacca Sultanate were the center of trade for the Southeast Asian region before the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511. Naturally, many words and phrases were borrowed mainly from Arabic and Indian traders and assimilated into the Malay language. More words and phrases were borrowed and assimilated with the expansion of foreign power into the Malay states. Some of the *simpulan bahasa* that fall under this category are '*berbulan madu*' (honey moon), '*kapak Eropah*' (European dagger), '*Keling karam*' (sinking Indians), '*ayam Belanda*' (Dutch chicken) and '*gunting Inggeris*' (English scissors). These expressions figuratively mean 'to be on a honeymoon', 'to be paid for what is worth doing', 'to be noisy and chaotic', 'to take something that does not belong to one' and 'to be a spy' respectively.

9. *Simpulan bahasa* that are associated with Islam

Islam is the religion of most Malays, and, therefore, it has influenced the Malay language. It has also brought with it influences from its country of origin, Saudi Arabia. These influences were easily accepted by the traditional Malays who perceived anything associated with the Arabs as sacred. Examples of *simpulan bahasa* that fall under this category are '*Abu Jahal*' (an Arabic name), '*anak Adam*' (Adam's child) and '*Quran buruk*' (old Koran). The figurative meaning of these expressions are 'to be merciless', 'mankind' and 'to show deference to one's parents even though they are old' respectively.

10. *Simpulan bahasa* that refer to common things and concepts used by the Malays in their daily lives

Among the *simpulan bahasa* that fall under this category are '*gulung tikar*' (roll a mat which is made from coconut leaves), '*atas pagar*' (on the fence), '*kasut buruk*' (old and worn out shoes), '*peti kosong*' (empty box or chest) and '*pisau cukur*' (shaving knife). The meaning of these expressions are 'to close down a business', 'to be neutral', 'one who is neglected or ignored' 'an arrogant fool' and 'to con or swindle' respectively. Most of the *simpulan bahasa* that fall under this category refer to things used by the traditional Malays in their daily lives.

In conclusion, the structure and categories described in this paper establish the fact that *simpulan bahasa* can be categorized systematically. Most of these expressions are related to body parts and the anatomy. This indicates that the Malays, like many other cultures, place a lot of emphasis on the anatomy, especially the 'liver' which is equivalent to the 'heart'. The concept of '*hati*' (heart) is taken to represent one's innermost feelings and this sentiment is also used in the English language in an idiomatic way. Examples of English idioms which make use of this concept are 'after one's own heart', 'break somebody's heart', 'heart of stone' and 'in good heart' which mean 'exactly the type one likes best', 'to make someone feel very sad', 'a pitiless and unfeeling nature' and 'in good condition or spirits' respectively. Although the categories listed above may not be comprehensive, it is hoped that more research can be done on *simpulan bahasa* as these are expressions widely used in Malay literary writings and conversations and they are also peculiar to the Malay language.

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