WCES 2012

A scientific study of language through the human communication system notion

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Abstract

This paper proposes a notion that in order to analyse and describe a language reasonably and scientifically is through a framework that recognises language as a human communication system and utilises discourse as data, and not as an abstract competence system, structural-oriented, or based on a personal-idioloectal created and context-independent sentences framework. One of the frameworks that recognise language as a human communication system is Halliday’s functional grammar. According to this notion, language is a medium for people in modelling and representing their world of experience that is manifested by the element of ‘process’ in a clause. This paper will show how a scientific grammatical analysis method is done that is based on functional grammar framework and utilises a real data of creative text with a special reference to the Malay language of Malaysia. The focus will be on the element of processes because it is the core element in the notion of language as the human communication system.

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Keywords: language, human communication system, functional grammar, discourse, process, Malay language;

1. Introduction

Linguistics is the scientific study of language. Congruent with that principle, this paper is based on the belief that the way in which to analyse and describe a language scientifically and reasonably is through the notion that recognises language as human communication system, and at the same time, utilises real data. This should not be as an abstract competence system, whether structural-oriented or based on a personal-idioloectal created and context-independent framework of sentences.

One of the frameworks that recognise language as a human communication system is Halliday’s functional grammar. According to Halliday (1994: 37), “in all languages the clause has the character of a message: it has some form of organization giving it the status of a communicative event”. This grammatical conceptual framework is designed to account for how language is ‘used’. It is based on the belief that the fundamental components of meaning in language are organized around two main kinds of elements, namely ‘ideational’ and ‘interpersonal’. An ideational element is concerned with representing an ‘experience’. According to this notion, language is a medium for people in modelling and representing their world of experience that is manifested by the element of PROCESS in a clause (Halliday 1994). Furthermore, Halliday states “… the clause plays a central role, because it embodies a general principle for modelling experience – namely, the principle that reality is made up of PROCESSES” (p.106).

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Based on a functional grammar ideational (experience) perspective, a clause is made up of three main elements, namely ‘process’, ‘participants’, and ‘circumstances. The most salient view is that the functionalization of a human’s world of experience is represented or communicated by the element of PROCESS in a clause (see also Thompson 2004). In other words, ‘process’ is a way in which people rising, model, and represent their world of experience patterns by a clause. Hence, in order to understand how man risings, models, represents, and acts out his world of experience through language, identifying the ‘process’ element is vital. According to Halliday (1994: 106), “our most powerful impression of experience is that it consists of ‘goings-on – happening, doing, sensing, meaning, being and becoming. All of these goings-on are sorted out in the grammar of the clause. Thus, as well as being a mode of action, of giving and demanding goods and services and information, the clause is also a mode of reflection, of imposing order on the endless variation and flow of events”. The grammatical system that makes this possible is ‘transitivity’. The system of transitivity forms the world of experience into a manageable set of ‘process type’.

Secondly, to be a scientific study, linguistic analysis should be based on real usage of language as data. Thus, this study is also based on the belief that the description of language had to be started, employed, and based on discourse. This is because a discourse is a manifestation of a real, complete language in use that is larger than a sentence. So, employing discourse means investigating language in use and language in social contexts (Wetherell et al 2001). Halliday (1994) as well as Chafe (1992), and Longacre (1996), etc. also recognises discourse as valid data for grammatical description. Wetherell et al (2001: 1) state that, “Discourse analysis provides a range of approaches to data and, crucially, also a range of theorizations of that data”. Meanwhile, according to Chafe (1992), discourse provides a ground focus and convergence for all types of research about the nature of language. Its diversity implies the variation of language and our mind. The diversity is a challenge to the rigidity of linguistics toward parochial matters.

Nevertheless, the current ‘reference grammar’ of Malay is found to not impinge on the scientific and reasonable values required in describing language. This is because in the description, language was not considered as a human communication system and the data for the analysis was not a discourse. The reference grammar, namely Tatabahasa dewan by Karim et al (1996), which is recognised by the government agency for national language development, describes the sentence based on an abstract competence system and structural-oriented, or based on a personally created idiolect and framework of context-independent sentences. These can be traced by their definition of a sentence that is summarized here as that which can be formed from a single word or organisation of several words that began and ended with silence. There are two types of sentences. One is a basic sentence (e.g., 1 and 2) and the other is a transformation sentence (e.g., 3). Sometimes, other sentences, so-called transformational sentences can be generated from the basic sentence (p. 414). Below are examples of the sentence excerpts from the Tatabahasa dewan (p. 415) that are believed to be personally-created and context-independent sentences that are based on an abstract competence system and structurally-oriented framework.

1. Ali guru.
   ‘Ali is a teacher’.
2. Anak itu lapar.
   ‘The boy is hungry’.
   ‘Ali is a teacher but his brother is a clerk’.

2. A scientific study of language through the human communication system notion

Our discussion is limited to a single aim. It is to identify, classify, and explain the element of ‘processes’ in the Malay language of Malaysia. This is related to the notion that process is a key aspect in the concept of how and why the experience of humans is represented or communicated through language by means of a clause.

2.1. The data

Since this study recognises language as a human communication system, the data for the analysis is a creative narrative text. The text is a novel of a Malaysian laureate, A. Samad Said (1997) – Sungai Mengalir Lesu (The River
Flows Wearily) published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Narratives are congruent with data because there are real utterances and sentences in the language used here, whether monologue or dialogue or comprehensive or complete meaning. In addition, narratives are able to provide evidence for the nature of the mind (Chafe 1990). Chafe (1990) also sees narratives as overt manifestations of the mind in action - as windows to both the content of the mind and its ongoing operation. For this study, only Chapter 1 (pp. 1-28) is used. However, as a complete chapter, it is also congruent with the meaning of the discourse, because it used a complete set of language used. Hence, the sentences are valid. This chapter was constructed from 69 paragraphs and 360 sentences that comprise more than 360 clauses.

2.2. Method of analysis

The text is sorted into paragraphs, sentences, and clauses and each of the foregoing is numbered systematically for future reference. For example, ‘16.1a’ shows a paragraph, sentence, and clause unit in that order. After that, every process and other sentence/clause element was identified with guidance supplied by the functional grammar framework (Halliday 1994). Then, their types were determined on the basis of contextual, grammatical, and common sense factors (Thompson 2004). Halliday (1994) classifies a clause in three main elements, namely ‘process’ (verbal group), ‘participants’ (nominal group), and ‘circumstances’ (adverbial group or prepositional phrase) as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the lion</th>
<th>chased</th>
<th>the tourist</th>
<th>lazily</th>
<th>through the bush</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal group</td>
<td>Verbal group</td>
<td>Nominal group</td>
<td>Adverbial group</td>
<td>Prepositional group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guided by Halliday (1994), and based on the nature of the real discourse, the analysis of the sentence is refined further by adding more columns in order to insert other elements of the sentence. They are two circumstances and a complement, if any. After that, every grammatical element of a sentence is placed into a column according to its type and then its function is labelled. Thus, the process and its type can be identified. The process element is written in uppercase. An example of the analysis appears in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRAMMATICAL ELEMENT</th>
<th>Circumstance</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant/Complement</th>
<th>Circumstance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SENTENCE</td>
<td>23.8 Dalam hatinya</td>
<td>Dia</td>
<td>MENGUTUK</td>
<td>sikapnya yang kurang adil itu.</td>
<td>‘In his heart’</td>
<td>he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNCTION</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>Senser</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Phenomena</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. ‘Process’ and representation of the world of experience for the Malay language

From the analysis of the creative narrative discourse, seven (7) types of processes for the Malay language were found and identified. The seven processes are action, mental, situational, existence, relational, description, and verbal. This means that the way in which Malay speakers rising, model, and represent their world of experience is through these seven main processes via the clause. A summary of the seven processes features appears in Table 3.

### Table 3. Processes in Malay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>PROCESS FEATURES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Represents physical action (including metaphors)</td>
<td>mencari ‘searching’ menunduhk ‘bowed’ dimarahi ‘scolded’</td>
<td>● Actor (explicit / implicit) ● Goal or Beneficiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Represents mind, thought, emotion, etc.</td>
<td>tahu ‘know’, fikir ‘think’, teringat ‘remembered’, dipendam ‘cherished’, memikirkan ‘thinking of’</td>
<td>● Senser; Phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Represents situation</td>
<td>tenggelam ‘sink’, kaku ‘freeze’, kecut ‘shrink’</td>
<td>● Experiencer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1. Action process

The process of action is the process of doing what involves physical force for Malay speakers in rising, modelling, and representing their world of experience. Among the action processes found in the text are berjalan ‘walking’, melomjak-lonjak ‘jumping’, memusingkan ‘to turn’, dimarahi ‘scolded’, ketawa ‘laughing’, ternaunik ‘saw’, and memaki ‘to curse’ etc. Action also can be in metaphorical form. The implementation of an action process to represent a world of experience involves an ‘actor’ or ‘doer’ (explicitly or implicitly) and ‘goal’ (tentatively), and/or ‘beneficiary’. Some of the processes found in the discourse are shown below.

(4) 3.1 Dalam keadaan lesu yang seperti itulah / Dalim keluar MENCARI Sukon.

‘Tired as he was / Dalim went out SEARCHING for Sukon.’

(5) 5.4a Dia MENUNDUK

‘He BOWED’

(6) 3.2 Dia telah DIMARAHI oleh Tuminah, kakaknya, supaya jangan ke sungai waktu hujan-hujan begitu.

‘He was SCOLDED by Tuminah, his sister, to not go to the river when it is the raining season.’

3.2. Mental process

A mental process is a process of sensing what is related to the mind, such as feelings, thought, perception, cognition, attitudes, intentions, and so forth. There is no physical action involved. Among the mental processes found in the data are tahu ‘know’, fikir ‘think’, teringat ‘remembered’, dipendam ‘is cherished’, and memikirkan ‘thinking of’, etc. The representation of mental experience involves a participant, namely a ‘senser’ with or without a ‘phenomenon’. Below are some examples found in the data.

(7) 9.2b tetapi / Tuminah tidak sedikit pun kelihanat RUNSING.

‘But / Tuminah doesn’t look WORRIED at all.’

(8) 16.1a Dalim tahu kakaknya MARAH,

‘Dalim knew his sister was ANGRY,’

3.3. Situational process

A situational process is a representation of the speaker’s world of experience that is related to a situation or condition. Among the situational processes found in the discourse are tenggelam ‘sink’, kaku ‘freeze’, kecut ‘shrink’, terlekap ‘stick’, and gelisah ‘anxious’, etc. The participant who is involved in the representation of a situational process is called the ‘experiencer’. He is not an actor, but a participant who experiences the process. In other words, a situational process concerns the situation of an experience. Experiencer can be human or non-human.

(9) 1.1 Pagi itu / hujan masih RINTIK-RINTIK lagi.

‘That morning / it was still DRIZZLING.’

(10) 4.2a Seperti biasa / dia TIDAK BERBAJU,

‘As usual / he DID NOT WEAR a shirt,

(11) 9.2a Tuula hijau itu tersangkut KOYAK / bila ditarik juga kuat-kuat,

‘The green towel that hung was TORN / when it was forcefully pulled,’
3.4. Existence process

An existence process is a pattern in the world of experience that represents existence. Among the existence processes found in the discourse were **ada** ‘exist’, **tidak ada** ‘no more’, **tinggal** ‘left’, **bukan** ‘not’, **siapa** ‘who’, and **entah** ‘nowhere’, etc. The participant in the existence process is called the ‘introducer’. He introduces the process, but is not an actor.

(12) 8.3a Rotan ADA di sebalik pintu,
   ‘The rattan WAS behind the door,’
(13) 18.3 Duit dalam tangan sudah TIDAK ADA.
   ‘There was NO MORE money in hand.’
(14) 35.3a Hari itu / Sukon ENTAH ke mana
   ‘On that day / Sukon was NOWHERE to be found.’

3.5. Relational process

A relational process is a process that enables speakers to relate or to equate the two elements of participants in representing their world of experience. The first participant is called as the ‘identifier’ and the second is known as the ‘identity’. Normally, a relational process is construed from a noun group. Examples are shown below.

(15) 42.1 Tompang baru 16 TAHUN umurnya.
   ‘Tompang is only 16 YEARS old of age.’
(16) 51.8a Baginya / sungai TEMPAT mencari rezeki
   ‘For him / the river is a PLACE to find luck’
(17) 60.3b terutama kerana anak ini memang RAKAN baik Dalim,
   ‘Especially because this boy is really the best FRIEND of Dalim,’

3.6. Process of description

A process of description is how Malays describe their world of experience. Only one occurrence is found in the data (i.e., **adalah** ‘is’). This is due to the narrative type of discourse factor. A participant in the description process is called ‘introducer’ or ‘value’. Value refers to the described introducer.

(18) 43.6a Mereka tahu / itu ADALAH maklumat-maklumat yang ditaburkan dari B24 dan B29,
   ‘They knew / that IS the information distributed from B24 and B29,’

3.7. Verbal process

A verbal process is a process of ‘speaking’. The function of a verbal process is to transfer a message by means of language. There are two kinds of verbal projections – ‘quoted’ (e.g., 19; 20) and ‘reported’ (e.g., 21). Among the verbal process found in the data were **kata** ‘said’, **bersuara** ‘voice’, **tambah** ‘add’, and **bertanya** ‘asking’. A participant in the verbal process is called a ‘speaker’. Sometimes, there is also a ‘listener’ or ‘target’. Below are examples of verbal processes.

(19) 24.1a “Semalam / tiga jam dia bom.” KATA Giap Hong,
   ‘Yesterday / they bombed for three hours.’ Giap Hong SAID,
(20) 64.1a “Berapa kali aku kata tak usah datang malam-malam gini,” KATA Tuminah sambil merasa-rasa parut di bawah dagunya.
   ‘I have said many times, not to come at night’ SAID Tuminah while rubbing the scar under her chin.
(21) 13.3a Ada orang MENGATAKAN dia patah cinta,
   ‘Some people SAID that he was frustrated in love,’

4. Conclusion

Malay speakers communicate their world of experience through seven types of processes - action, mental, situational, existence, description, relational or verbal. This shows that process is the ‘stake’ of the language in the notion of the human communication system. With the element of process in a clause, people can model and
represent their world of experience. Identifying the process is the first step in exploring functional Malay grammar. An analysis shows that linguistics who are employed with real data of discourse, and consider language as a communication system notion help, with the guidance of functional framework, to make a description of grammar more reasonable, scientific, and functional, and social life more possible.

Acknowledgements

This paper is generated from UKM-SK-05-FRGS0073-2010 research project.

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