

The Status of Schwa in Kuching Malay

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Some Malay/Indonesian linguists have noted the near complementary distribution of schwa (/E/) and the mid-front vowel (/e/) in Malay dialects (Johari 1989, Lapoliwa 1981). However, a few crucial near-minimal pairs have forced the conclusion that the /E/ and /e/ might be best analyzed as underlyingly distinct.

In this paper, we aim to document the alternations that schwa appears in to re-evaluate the conclusions of previous research, in the context of Kuching Malay, with respect to the schwa in other Malay dialects. In particular we look at mono-morphemic words, and their interaction with the affixes /bEr-, /sE-, and /kE- X -an/.

We feel breaking down the question into two smaller questions will show more clearly the exact nature of schwa:

- a. Question I: What is the status of schwa in roots?
- b. Question II: What is the status of schwa in affixes?

Two crucial pieces of data bear directly on the status of schwa in roots: there are no schwas in word-final syllables (which are always stressed), and there are no /E/-V(owel) sequences within morphemes. These two observations are most amenable to an epenthesis analysis wherein schwas are inserted between underlyingly adjacent consonants. Furthermore, the epenthesis rule, while obligatory within morphemes that would otherwise surface as subminimal words (< 2 syllables), is optional in other contexts (1).

In certain poly-morphemic environments, however, an epenthesis analysis of the sort discussed above fails to capture the distribution of schwa that is observed. Specifically, we find schwas adjacent to vowels (2). Such sequences cannot be accounted for by the aforementioned rule. Drawing from observations made from a separate rule of glottal stop insertion in hiatus situations (3), we argue that affixal schwa in these cases is more insightfully analyzed as derived from an underlying low vowel /a/. Recourse to a historical analysis of the facts will introduce redundancy in the lexicon - there will be multiple correspondents to the prefixed roots (to account for the optional presence of the glottal stop). The other possibility of accounting for the alternation by proposing a natural class including both /a/ and /E/ (for the rule to apply) is equally suspect as it is not immediately clear what the natural class would be.

This paper argues that schwas in Kuching Malay are best analysed as non-phonemic vowels. The surface occurrence of schwas is accounted for by epenthesis and reduction rules. The paper further argues that the rules discussed above are synchronic in nature. Though this analysis simplifies the phonemic inventory of Kuching Malay, it raises the intriguing question of how such an inventory would be acquired by a child – especially in the absence of obvious surface alternations.

Data

(1) a. Obligatory (2σ)

| | | |
|---------------|----------|---------|
| i. [kE.ciq] | *[kciq] | “small” |
| ii. [gE.moq] | *[gmoq] | “fat” |
| iii. [lE.lah] | *[llah] | “tired” |
| iv. [kE.ping] | *[kping] | “piece” |

b. Non-obligatory:

| | | |
|------------------|-------------|--------------|
| i. [sE.mang.ka:] | [smang.ka:] | “watermelon” |
| ii. [sElu.a:] | [slu.a:] | “pants” |

| | | |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| (2) a. sE+orang | sE.qorang, s(E)orang | <i>a person</i> |
| b. sE+eko(r) | sE.qeko(r), s(E)eko(r) | <i>an animal</i> |
| c. kE + ibu + an | kE(q)ibu(w)an, kEibu(w)an | <i>motherly</i> |

- (3) a. kE-ibu-an ———> kE(q)ibu(w)an, * kE(q)ibuqan
b. kE-rame-an ———> kEramean, *kErameqan
c. kE-pandaian ———> kEpandayan, *kEpandaqan
d. kE-suka-an ———> kE-suka-qan, *kEsukaan

References

- Johari, Madzhi. 1989. *Fonologi Dialek Melayu Kuching (Sarawak)*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
- Lapoliwa, Hans. 1981. *A Generative Approach to the Phonology of Bahasa Indonesian*. Pacific Linguistics. Series D- No, 34.