

Towards a semantic analysis of the aspectual marker *dah* in Colloquial Malay

The morpheme *dah* is usually referred to as the colloquial counterpart of the aspectual auxiliary *sudah* in Standard Formal Malay (SFM) (e.g., Gan 1991: 29). However, unlike *sudah* in SFM which appears only pre-verbally (Koh 1990: 204), *dah* in Colloquial Malay (CM) may appear in three surface linear positions: pre-verbally, post-verbally and sentence finally (Soh 2011). *Sudah* in SFM has been noted to express complete or perfective aspect (Omar 1970, Salleh 1989, Soh 1994), and is often translated into English as *already* (e.g., Kader 1981: 36). The same meanings have been attributed to *dah* in Colloquial Malay (Koh 1990: 202). However, perfective aspect and English *already* have distinct meanings, and the question of whether *dah* in different linear positions share the same semantics has not been systematically explored. In this paper, I propose that preverbal *dah* does not have the same meaning as post-verbal and sentence final *dah*, and that the meaning of post-verbal and sentence final *dah* is more comparable to English *already* than pre-verbal *dah*. The evidence involves the co-occurrence of *dah* in different linear positions with downward entailing quantifiers (e.g., those introduced by *kurang dari(pada)* ‘less than’, *tak sampai* ‘less than’ and *baru...(sa)je* ‘only’).

A contrast exists between pre-verbal *dah* and sentence final *dah* in their ability to co-occur with downward entailing quantifiers in specific environments. While pre-verbal *dah* may occur with both downward and non-downward entailing quantifiers (e.g., those introduced by *lebih dari(pada)* ‘more than’) (1), sentence final *dah* may only appear with non-downward entailing quantifiers, but not with downward entailing quantifiers (2), patterning like English *already* (3) (Soh 2009).

- (1) a. Dia dah makan lebih dari(pada)/kurang dari(pada) dua biji ubat (tu).
3SG DAH eat more than less than two CL pill that
‘S/he has taken more than/less than two (of those) pills.’
b. Dia dah kerja lebih dari(pada)/kurang dari(pada) dua bulan.
3SG DAH work more than less than two month
‘S/he has worked for more than/less than two months.’
- (2) a. Dia makan lebih dari(pada)/*kurang dari(pada) dua biji ubat (tu) dah.
3SG eat more than less than two CL pill that DAH
‘S/he has taken more than/*less than two (of those) pills already’.
b. Dia kerja lebih dari(pada)/*kurang dari(pada) dua bulan dah.
3SG work more than less than two month DAH
‘S/he has worked for more than/*less than two months already.’
- (3) a. He has already taken more than/*less than two pills.
b. He has already worked for more than/*less than two months.

Post-verbal *dah* exhibits variable behavior with respect to its occurrence with downward entailing quantifiers that is prosodically conditioned. It may not occur with a downward entailing quantifier within the same Intonational Phrase (4), but may do so when the quantifier and *dah* appear in separate Intonational Phrases (5).

- (4) a. *Dia makan dah kurang dari(pada) dua biji ubat (tu).
3SG eat DAH less than two CL pill that
b. *Dia kerja dah kurang dari(pada) dua bulan.
3SG work DAH less than two month
- (5) a. Dia makan dah // kurang dari(pada) dua biji ubat tu.
b. Dia kerja dah // kurang dari(pada) dua bulan.

Thus, when prosody is taken into account, post-verbal *dah* patterns like sentence final *dah* in exhibiting a restricted distribution with downward entailing quantifiers. The pattern supports the claim that post-verbal *dah* and sentence final *dah* occupy the same syntactic structural position, distinct from that of pre-verbal *dah* (Soh 2011), and implies that *dah* in different structural positions corresponds to different (though possibly related) meanings.