

## Constructing Meaning in Novel Malay Rhythmic Reduplications

The process by which Rhythmic Reduplications (1)—henceforth known as RR—are created in Malay is perceived to be highly idiosyncratic. Despite being described as synchronically unproductive, many scholars have attempted to employ various rigid phonological and morphological frameworks to analyse their structure and evolution (Soh, 2011; Yip, 1995). Nomoto (2012), in particular, proposed four phonological generalizations regarding consonant behaviour (2). In this work, we assess the strength and semantic implications of these proposed generalisations by investigating the production and interpretation of novel RRs in Colloquial Singaporean Malay through native speaker judgments while employing a network-based approach within the Construction Grammar framework (Kay & Fillmore 1999, Goldberg 1995, Fillmore et al. 1988).

On this approach, we propose that RR is embedded in a hierarchical system of inheritance with respect to prototypical full reduplication. Within this system, core interpretive properties such as multiplicity may be derived from this prototypical node, while additional idiosyncratic features can be acquired via phonological network links that ultimately give rise to specific RRs and their semantic interpretations. This paper discusses findings from an investigation into the production and interpretation of three novel RRs (3), independently coined and used in specific speech communities, which were introduced to 13 native speakers from the larger Singapore Malay-speaking community who were then tasked to derive a semantic meaning from them.

Our analysis confirmed several key findings. As expected by a network-based approach, when speakers were unable to extract clear semantic meaning, they tended to revert to a prototypical interpretation. For instance, *gerak-geri* ‘pattern of movement’ was interpreted with the default pluractional meaning of *gerak-gerak* ‘continuous movement’ typical of regular full reduplication. Furthermore, an interplay between phonological change and semantic interpretation emerged. Speakers would modify these novel RRs to achieve semantically acceptable forms (4), particularly when deviations from Nomoto’s (2012) generalizations occurred, as with the novel RR, *rambut-rambi*. In instances where meaning was accessible, both the base form and the shape of the modified reduplicant proved crucial in generating a semantic interpretation, a finding that challenges previous analyses that overemphasize the base (Yip, 1995). Finally, speakers would seek additional senses from the reduplicant by drawing analogies with similar lexemes in their repertoire, a process that would sometimes lead to semantic interference or contamination, blending overlapping meaning to arrive at a semantic interpretation. For example, alternative interpretations of *gendang-gendut* emerged when speakers associated *gendut* with the popular Malay dance genre *dangdut*, leading them to understand it as a ‘catchy drum beat’.

In sum, our findings suggest that deriving semantic meaning from novel RR constructions is more complex than previously assumed. While earlier work tended to emphasize the role of the base word, our study reveals that the reduplicant plays a critical role in shaping contextual meaning as well. Notably, the exact phonological form of the reduplicant appears to influence the range of available semantic interpretations, challenging the notion that phonological constraints alone, applied only to the base, can predict the form change involved in RR.

- (1) a. Gunung-ganang ‘Mountain ranges’  
b. Lauk-pauk ‘A variety of dishes’  
c. Pindah-randah ‘To keep relocating (eg.changing houses) from one place to another’
- (2) a. Only consonants native to Malay participate in consonant alternation.  
b. Corresponding consonants in the reduplicant are strictly constrained with regard to their manners of articulation and voicing.  
c. If a coda alternates, then the preceding vowel also alternates.  
d. Codas cannot be altered independently, but they can undergo epenthesis or deletion, unlike consonant alternation, which targets onsets.

(3)

Base	Meaning of Base	New RR
*Gendang	(Drum) Beat	Gendang-gendung
		Gendang-gendut
*Pukul	Hit	Pukul-pukau
		Pukul-pakau
Rambut	Hair	Rambut-rambi

\*New RRs with *gendang* and *pukul* as their bases were originally used interchangeably.

(4)

New RR	Semantic Interpretations	Repaired RR Forms	Semantic Interpretations
Gendang-gendung	Loud & grand beat		
Gendang-gendut	Soft & delicate beat		
Pukul-pukau	A powerful hit causing a knockout		
Pukul-Pakau	Chaotic strikes leading to a decisive end		
Rambut-rambi	Tangled hair	Rambut-rambu	Loose hairs scattered across the floor
		Rambut-ramba	

#### References

- Fillmore, Charles. J., Kay, P., & O’Connor, M. (1988). Regularity and Idiomaticity Grammatical Constructions: The Case of Let Alone on JSTOR. *Language*, 64(3), 501–538. <https://doi.org/10.2307/414531>
- Goldberg, A. E. (1995). *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. In *Google Books*. Chicago University Press.
- Kay, P., & Fillmore, C. J. (1999). Grammatical Constructions and Linguistic Generalizations: The What’s X Doing Y? Construction on JSTOR. *Language*, 75(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/417472>
- Nomoto, H. (2012). Consonant-change reduplication in Malay as identity avoidance. *Proceedings of the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Austronesian Formal Linguistics Association*. 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Austronesian Formal Linguistics Association.
- Soh, H. L. (2011). Phonological opacity in Malay: Its relevance for constraint evaluations in the Optimality Theory. In H. Nomoto (ed.), *Isamu Shoho: Tinta kenangan: Kumpulan esei Bahasa dan linguistik*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Yip, M. (1995) *Repetition and its Avoidance: The Case in Javanese*. <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/227280>