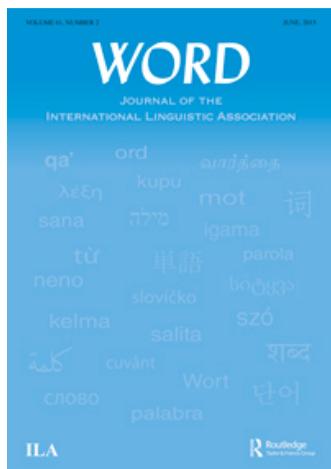


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## Cultural literacy in Chinese and Malay

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The discussion suggests that there are many meaningful ways of making important messages beyond lexical meaning. Speakers of Malay and Chinese have been applying meaningful linguistic systems consistently by accentuating meaning at subword levels to communicate, preach, scorn, and interact with members in their respective speech communities. Such cultural-specific verbal styling in speech, however, is not accounted for in language standardization. The word is commonly accepted as the basic meaning unit conducive to language planning and lexicography. Nonetheless, effort to understand meaningful linguistic units below the level of a word stem is relevant to both cultural literacy and group cohesion. The failure to understand and participate in the production of meaning in subword level sounds is a form of cultural autism. This results in a loss of interactive essence which is conventionally signaled subtly in native speech style. By highlighting versatile meaning-making in the selected language data, the discussion complements the focus on current lexical expansion in standard written literacy.

**Keywords:** Malay genre; Malay cohesion; Cantonese interactivity; rhyme; secondary onomatopoeia

### 1. Introduction

Language is the dominant resource that fuels other kinds of intelligences. Linguistic intelligence is the basis of all intelligences in human interactivity because we communicate through language. For instance, the comprehension of spatial concepts like *left* and *right*, is contingent on linguistic intelligence. Listening and speaking abilities are of paramount importance for engaging in intelligible human interaction. Kinesthetic intelligence, for example, is dependent on the accurate decoding of the instructions provided by the leader. When a soccer coach shouts ‘To your left!’, the trainee combines both linguistic and visual spatial intelligence to execute the psychomotor command.

The ability to grasp the meaning of semiotic signs such as words very much defines one’s intelligence. There are eight intelligences identified in the Multiple Intelligences (cf. Gardner 1993). Intelligent manipulation of linguistic signs in digital and conventional forms is significant to creating intelligent verbal styling. Speech styles which encourage interactivity enhance interpersonal cohesion. The other seven intelligences identified include logical, visual spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, rhythmic, musical, and naturalist.

Formal linguistic intelligence is contingent on a rich and growing vocabulary. Tham Seong Chee records the progress of lexical development as an expansion of Malay

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Table 1. Comparison of current and passé Malay words.

Current Malay term	Context-bound term
Telefon	<i>talipon</i>
Matematiks	<i>ilmu hisab</i>
Hospital	<i>rumah sakit</i>
Artis	<i>seniman</i>
University	<i>menara gading</i>
Radio	<i>tetuang udara</i>
Helicopter	<i>kapal terbang menaik</i>
Maus	<i>tetikus</i>

cognition. By observing the evolution of Malay corpus, Tham notes that the Malay vocabulary has grown and transformed via a prospective model. The introduction of context-bound words to represent the following meanings is illustrated with current Malay vocabulary (Tham 1990: 133–34).

The Malay words listed in Table 1 are ubiquitous in daily verbal communication. In terms of orthography these words share a striking semblance with their English counterparts because they are transliterated from English. The adoption of English terms into Malay is indeed congruent with certain principles of language standardization. Asmah Haji Omar (1992: 219) identifies efficiency, adequacy, and acceptability as the rules of thumb in language standardization. The practice of standardizing Malay indicates a large corpus of up-to-date western vocabulary adopted for contemporary communication. The current Malay corpus incorporates a large amount of transliterated English terms as a semiotic extension into modernity. This development is a cause for concern to educated Malay speakers of Generation X who are grappling with the rapid globalization of Malay language but not to Generation Y, which is more comfortable with the digitalized world (Sew 2010). Developers of customized software in African languages find the use and demand of localized web pages do not correspond with the supply. This clearly indicates that the younger generation is less indigenous with regards to language use (Djite 2008: 144, see below).

## 2. Sound meaning in Asia Pacific

Sound-symbolic elements are particularly relevant in the Asia Pacific with the official time of the Beijing Summer Olympic Games' Opening Ceremony set at 8.08 pm on the 8 August 2008. The association of auspicious meaning with select sound segments, that is, eight, is anything but trivial. Symbolically speaking, the numeral eight resonates with the word *expand* only in terms of tonal phonetics. The numeral further becomes a cultural metaphor for luck and prosperity at tone level. The phenomenon of associating a sound with some other disparate reference based on sound symbolism may be regarded as secondary onomatopoeia. Various forms of secondary onomatopoeia encapsulate rich cultural meanings below the word level (Sew 2005). The rich interplay of sounds as communicative elements seem unaccounted for in language standardization. Language standardization may be an advanced approach in language planning but it is at the risk of creating an atrophied variety where the keenness of senses in the original becomes purblind and tone-deaf (Wilkinson 1936: 88).

Although tone and sound symbolism do not generate recognition in language planning they thrive in local interactivity, the analyses of cultural-specific speech styles via phonesthetics cluster contain a rich spectrum of meaning at subword level (Waugh & Newfield 1995; Householder 1946). This form of phonetic resonance in verbal styling is a manifestation of cultural intelligence among native speakers. This discussion suggests that an aspect of cultural intelligence is lost with language engineering whenever lexical expansion replaces obsolete terminology. Cultural intelligence is broadly defined as an understanding of the unique characteristics of each person. In relation to business management, cultural intelligence encompasses three major components, namely, cultural strategic thinking, motivation, and behavior (Earley et al. 2006: 23, 121–22). The introduction of current vocabulary, while instrumental to lexical development, dilutes cultural intelligence.

### 3. Global blend of Malay discourse

The significance of maintaining cultural literacy increases with time as we enter a contemporary digital world which emphasizes adequacy and efficiency in terms of presentation. Glocalization, a term denoting the balance of local and global forces, is understood as the act-local-and-go-global approach. The concept is invoked as a strategy for Tsung Yeg Arts Village in Taiwan in a documentary aired on Channel NewsAsia on 13 February 2009. Concrete forms of glocalization include the digital effort of software localization in African languages. In this respect, software computer packages are customized, ranging from translating, resizing, testing, bug-fixing to source code changes, re-engineering of format, layout of screen, to accommodate different local language requirements in Africa (Djite 2008: 139).

If the influx of English terms in the Malay corpus indicates language attrition, the use of English words in formal spoken Malay suggests rapid globalization (Sew 1996a, 2014). A quick study of this verbal phenomenon is carried out with an examination of a Malay television program entitled BLOG@1. BLOG@1 is a weekly Malay segment aired on Radio Television Malaysia 1 (RTM1) every Friday night in January and February 2009. The web log to this show is at [www.blogd1.blogspot.com](http://www.blogd1.blogspot.com). The show has a Malay host analyzing the trend of blogging current affairs with a guest, who may be a blogger, news editor, academic, or new media specialist. The episode studied was aired on 13 February between 0930–1000 pm on RTM1. The host invited Zabidi Saidi, the blogger-cum-editor of a Malay tabloid called *Watan* to discuss the contemporary political change in Perak, Malaysia. The focus of this discussion is on the English words appearing in the spoken discourse of formal Malay befitting the language standard of national television.

The English words are categorized into three clusters, namely the essential English words as Malay reference, the optional English words as global reference, and English-Malay conjugation in the verbal Malay exchange on the current affairs either by the host or the guest.

There shall be no evaluation of the data in Table 2. The language sample serves to distinguish global and local verbal interactivity among Malay speakers. The data suggest that this discussion on the loss of local cultural intelligence is a valid concern in this academic contemplation. Following the segment was an advertisement alerting home owners to be vigilant and responsible against dengue fever in well-edited spoken Malay

Table 2. Global blend in Malay discourse in a 30-minute television segment.

Essential English term	Optional English term	English-Malay conjugation
Politik	Highway	Dibankan (banned)
Chauvinistic	Jam	Chan (chance)
Opportunist	Limit	Inter-kelas (interclass)
Pragmatist	Vocal	
Realist	Perfect	
Idealist	Perspektif	
Blog	Pro-kerajaan (pro-government)	
Ekonomi		
Exploitasi		
Demonstrasi		
Anarki (anarchy)		

unadulterated with any transliteration of English. The Malay varieties available in televised media indicate that the Malay content on national television does not form a homogeneous production in terms of language usage.

#### 4. Cultural-specifically appropriate expression

The following analysis maintains a rich view of language incorporating linear and nonlinear analyses of word clusters. A folk window is open, as it were, to the pleasure of daily meaning-making. Interactivity is indeed a gregarious human enterprise if it is performed appropriately. *Yusheng*, a mix of fish and salads, for example, is tossed high on a plate as the Chinese way of celebrating Lunar New Year in the first 15 days of the year. However, this festive gesture is never a silent or a solemn activity. Many secondary onomatopoeic words are uttered by the Chinese in the belief that metaphorical meanings of the words would eventually materialize in the coming months.

Producing good discourse involves empathizing with particular ethnic speech styles. Cultural empathy is part of discourse performance in daily interaction and an empathizing speaker takes into consideration the style of presenting a verbal motion by observing language-cultural routines in interaction. In other words, performing appropriately styled verbal discourse is attempting interpersonal bonding. And by adopting cultural-specific styles of speaking, a person re-enacts the social process of relation-building (Shi-xu 2005: 30). Meaning seekers in different cultures are competent enough to understand different verbal styles. American politics is a good place to identify argument culture according to Deborah Tannen (1999). Based on her observations, reporters, politicians, and most of the public members of the United States seem to think that by pitting two sides against each other the truth will surface. The argument culture could and had at times caused much distress. This is especially true when the argument mode dominates the paradigm of inept political leaders, thereby placing adversarial resolution as the first resort in international relations.

Words, both figurative and literal, are vehicles of thought regardless if they are activated either at mental, spoken, or written levels. While there are semantic universals, the production of meanings are mostly culture-specific. Cross-cultural conflicts of global proportions are easily sparked with nonliteral varying notions of good or bad between peoples with different beliefs, economic interests, and social orientations. A failure of

literal meaning, that is, the meaning of words as prescribed in a dictionary, suggests that verbal interaction is never straightforward. Meaningful utterances comprise the interplay of literal and nonliteral meanings. A current work suggests that literal and nonliteral meanings need not be two separate modes of thinking but they are parts of a dynamic thinking process (Gibbs & Colston 2012). The dynamic thinking pattern allows any utterance to carry metamesages that constitute the sum total of a complex interplay of intentions behind the utterance (Tannen 2001).

Amongst various Chinese dialectal discourses, Southeast Asian spoken Cantonese is known to have many argumentative idioms. An example would be *if you do first I will do fifteen* (first and fifteen refer to the particular days of a lunar month where older Cantonese folks would pray to the spirits for safety, this saying is similar to the English idiom *tit for tat*). Another one would be the Cantonese saying *a copper oil jar can never be a flower oil flask* (a leopard will never change its spots). Apart from these, there are many pejorative Cantonese compounds like *mong pai pai* (silly billy), *sor kang kang* (very foolish), and *kau si kau phang* (stir-up a situation with bad intention).

The significance of colors is transformed through words in the Chinese culture. There are three significant colors that denote two contradictory meanings in Cantonese. Red *hung* is the positive color that symbolizes good meanings as in *hung si* (red matters), which designates all happy occasions including birthdays, marriages, first-month celebrations of a new-born, and the winning of a lottery. Other good red meanings are *hung sing* (red star) referring to famous performing artists, *hung pai* (red card) referring to popular personnel in a service industry like night-clubs, massage parlors, and so forth. In the Teochew community there is a popular phrasal expression that affirms one's preference for red that rhymes in this way *ang ang, bo hai lang* (redish red, harms no one).

The other two colors in Cantonese are white and black. White or *pak* in Cantonese is not an auspicious color if *pak si* (white matters) is used. Here, *pak si* refers to a funeral and is acceptable as a cultural-specific indicator. Black or *hak* in Cantonese is used in the idiomatic expressions such as *hak tim* (black shop) to refer to unruly expensive shops, *hak sum* (black heart) as in wicked souls, *hak pok* as in ill-treatment, *hak sing* (black star) as in unlucky persons, *min hak hak* (face black black or sour face) as in an angry face. In contrast, the Malays use black *hitam* to designate certain less favorable references such as *senarai hitam* (black list), *sejarah hitam* (black history), *barang gelap* (dark goods) as in smuggled goods (Sew 1998).

These cultural meanings may be associated with human visual-spatial intelligence in the Multiple Intelligences (Lazear 1999). Universal meanings are prescribed to at least three colors in contemporary world knowledge. Green, yellow, and red in the traffic lights are comprehended in much the same way throughout the world. Green is a sign for progress in both traffic and finance.<sup>1</sup> While green is the color indicating upward trend of a stock market, the color term is sound symbolic to the meaning, *being emptied* in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Hokkien, red, on the other hand, takes a totally different meaning. Contrary to Chinese culture, red represents danger and signals for stop in traffic and to pedestrians in the western world. A company which is in the red is actually running a loss.

## 5. Meaningful units

A phonetic segment within a word is a meaningful unit indicating that the smallest unit of meaning is submorphemic. Even as early as Sapir (1929), psychological testing has

shown regular patterns of meaning association with sound contrasts. Through paradigmatic lexical contrast, Keith McCune (1985) illustrates that Indonesian sound clusters symbolize recurrent meaning. In the study of sound symbolism, [i] symbolizes the smallness, weakness, and triviality (Jespersen 1933). It is observed that this high front vowel is closely associated with female names and feminine description in European languages. In a research by Gordon and Heath (1998), sound symbolism is said to be inherent in biology as women have a shorter air tract than men. Therefore, a high-pitched articulation is a sound typically associated with the female. Interestingly, the high front vowel [i] is a feminine marker in select Malay orthography. A parallelism between the Malay [i] and the Malay female terms may be drawn. The following comparison shows that Malay female words have more [i] than the male counterparts (cf. Sew 1996b):

Table 3. Minimal contrasts of sound-symbolic Malay words.

Female terms in Malay	Male terms in Malay
<i>puteri</i> (princess)	<i>putera</i> (prince)
<i>pramugari</i> (air stewardess/female model)	<i>pramugara</i> (air steward/male model)
<i>mahasiswi</i> (female undergraduate)	<i>mahasiswa</i> (male undergraduate)
<i>angkasawati</i> (female astronaut)	<i>angkasawan</i> (male astronaut)
<i>permaisuri</i> (queen)	<i>sultan/raja</i> (king)
<i>seniwati</i> (actress)	<i>seniman</i> (actor)
<i>datin</i> (female aristocrat in Malaysia)	<i>datuk</i> (male aristocrat in Malaysia)
<i>isteri</i> (wife)	<i>suami</i> (husband)
<i>ibu</i> (mother)	<i>ayah</i> (father)
<i>bini</i> (mistress)	<i>laki</i> (male partner/male)
<i>gundik</i> (maid of palace)	<i>hulubalang</i> (soldier)

Another form of meaning at the subword level is rhyme. Rhyme is the alignment of sound across word syllables creatively deployed as a sound method for transferring meaning in many Asian cultures. Furnishing a poetic role in language use at word level, rhyme can be defined as an effective sound harmonic that usually strikes a chord of understanding in the ears of Malay and Chinese listeners. The similar sounds of two separate syllables seem to poetically justify the message of a phrase within an aesthetic structure (Scott 1994). Consider this Hokkien rhyme used in the Chinese cultural practice on the fifteenth day of the first month in Lunar New Year:

Tim ping koh; Than sui boh  
Tim sui kam; Than sui ang

The first line means ‘dunk apples and earn pretty wives’, while the second line means ‘dunk nice mandarin oranges and earn handsome husbands’. Many Chinese still throw mandarin oranges by Gurney Drive on Penang Island in conjunction with Chinese New Year celebrations although the practice has begun to fall from favor in recent times. On the other hand, if a child in a Cantonese family still claims to be sick after consulting the doctor a couple of times, ointment may be rubbed on the sore area while repeating two Cantonese rhyming phrases simultaneously. The following utterances are uttered as possible soothing sounds to enhance the perceived healing effect:

*Cau cha cau san, em tou yet si kan*  
 Immediately gone when applied, need not wait a second  
*Cau cha cau hou, em tou thing chew chou*  
 Immediately recovered when applied, need not wait till tomorrow.

Good rhyming phrases are very important on auspicious Chinese occasions like Lunar New Year, Chinese weddings, birthday of elderly grandparents, and the opening ceremony of business. All these *red* matters require red as a visual metaphor to symbolize goodness.

Additionally, on the eve of a wedding the Chinese bride needs to comb her hair according to a Chinese ritual. There will be three gestures of combing, and on each stroke a rhyming phrase is uttered with the hope that the bride may be blessed with a fortunate marital life. This is an important language performance that requires verbal styling carried out correctly because the parents of any bride would not wish for a broken marriage to befall their daughter. In accordance with the importance of face in Chinese culture, it is a disgrace to the family to have a daughter who winds up with a failed marriage. The traditional rhyming phrases currently in use for a fruitful and long-lasting union are as follows:

Yet sor sor tou mey  
 First comb brings with it a completion until the end  
 Ee so pat fat chai mey  
 Second comb brings on your grey hair to the brows [as an everlasting marriage would]  
 Sam so yi suin mun tey  
 Third comb brings aplenty children and grandchildren

Rhyme is perceived as a euphemistic mode for expressing one's intentions. The diaphoric effect in the rhyming is very much alive in many Asian speech communities including speakers of Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew. The diaphoric effect is a process where metaphoric transformation takes place with the meaning of diaphor toward the purely non-referential irrational pole of language (Brown 1983). This is an intuitive and affective resource of cultural intelligence styled with verbal music. The meaning-making process marks a cultured speech community at least in accordance with values of the elderly.

Likewise, the function of rhyme between word segments is properly capitalized in the Malay verbal communication. The meaning transfiguration of rhyme is easily noticeable in Malay literary genres. Most saliently, rhyme may be traced in *pantun*, the Malay quatrains; and *peribahasa* the Malay proverbs. A *pantun* may express the love of a couple in this structured form (Hamilton 1982):

*Hilang dadu di dalam dadih*, Within the curds the dice are lost,  
*Dadih bercampur minyak lada*; Sweet curds with oil of pepper fixed;  
*Hilang malu kerana kasih*, Fond love my sense of shame has lost,  
*Rindu hati bercampur gila*. For love was e'er with madness mixed.

The first two lines of the Malay quatrain, are *pembayang* or the concealed meaning that contains metaphorical meanings, which is followed by the actual messages intended by the person reciting the *pantun*. The alternate rhyming of the last syllables in the first and third lines with the second and the fourth lines generate the aesthetic trademark of *pantun*. This rhyming pattern in the quatrain creates great fascination for the Malay genre among

European scholars from France and Britain. The French believed that no Malay studies could be considered complete without the study of *pantun* (Daillie 1988). A Malay scholar notices the category of erotic and semi-pornographic quatrain in his analysis of *pantun* (Moain 2008: Ch. 7).

The reciprocal harmonics of the rhyme mechanism enhance Malay proverbs with melodious interactivity. Simultaneously, the rhyming creates a considerable euphonic attraction to the listeners while the phonetic harmony symbolically accentuates the message to enhance aural persuasion. This rhyming inclination in the following Malay literary examples may be considered as a linguistic representation of the poetic structures in the Malay mind (Salleh 2006; Gibbs 1994). Observe and listen to the harmony of sound in these Malay maxims recorded by A. W. Hamilton (1987):

*Ada beras semuanya deras; Ada padi semuanya jadi*

Money makes the world go round

*Orang berdendang di pentasnya, orang beraja di hatinya*

On his own couch a man may sing, In his own heart a man is king

*Ada hujan ada panas, ada hari boleh balas*

There is fine as well as wet, someday I'll get even yet

Malay sayings form an important cultural institution of Malay values. Within the rubric of the Malay worldview, each Malay saying is an iota of ancient wisdom that may offer guidance to its listeners. The world is fast becoming a global village with digital media forms disseminating certain dominant cultures at the metamessage level. As a result, local cultures are encountering rapid displacement. Cultural institutions such as Malay sayings and Malay *pantun* may be a part of social cultural planning in glocalization, a topic of discussion in the next section.

A collection of Malay sayings transliterated and explained in English may be a pointer to social cultural transition in the Malay speech community. The collection of Malay proverbs produced by Kit Lee (2001) sees a hundred Malay sayings depicted in an interesting combination of contemporary interpretation and existing meanings. The Malay sayings are categorized into eight themes, namely Kampung Life, Vegetarian Food-For Thought, Crawling, Hopping, Buzzing & Ambling Things, Of Pachyderms & Microbes, Anatomical Anomalies, Tools of the Trade, and Fishy Business. These Malay sayings are cultural treasures that hold imprints of Malay tradition learned in school as opposed to natural acquisition by young modern Malays.

There are at least 4000 recorded Malay sayings (Hussain 1991). The possibility of studying Malay sayings as cultural relics might be fulfilled in time to come. There are close to 50 illustrations in Lee's collection and all the illustrations are presented in comic form. Beyond serving as a repository of wisdom inherited from the forefathers, Malay sayings are a font of moral values. The apprehension of these sayings would enable one to understand the dynamics of traditional Malay values, which uphold the importance of benevolence and filial piety. Malay sayings may be a further reference that provides an additional eastern perspective to the study of Eastern family relations.

The illustration provided to the Malay saying, *bulan jatuh ke riba* transliterated as the moon falls into one's lap (Lee 2001: 85), is a creative sketch loaded with meaningful ideas. The provided meanings include unexpected good fortune, and happy coincidences. The illustration depicts a seated Muslim woman veiled from head to toe in black, holding a crescent moon with smacking lips on her lap. There is a little bearded man in a turban gazing

from behind a tree in the background. The depiction might provide a skewed impression of the Malay saying, which was originally understood as synonymous to the Malay proverb *durian runtuh* (falling durians), that is, windfalls (cf. *Kamus Dewan* 1997).

From the educational viewpoint, the illustrator has indirectly applied the Multiple Intelligence approach to offer a more vigorous and rounded presentation of Malay sayings. The depictions tap into the readers' visual spatial intelligence to facilitate and enhance their linguistic intelligence. This is a good way of combining different intelligences to make sense of the maxims since Malay sayings are rich with graphic imagery. The Malay saying, (*seperti*) *tulis di atas air* transliterated as 'like writing on water', is a case in point. The proverb denotes futile gestures and useless efforts, cutting no ice, and whistling in the wind (Lee 2001: 96). The meaning is cleverly sketched with a man in uniform writing the words, 'We're looking into it' on the surface of a river with a villager watching from behind.

## 6. Sense and sensibility

Rhyme creates new meaningful relationships through interplay of sound. In addition to this, rhyme may reinforce the existing meaning correlates between the phrases and provide a univocal quality to the discourse. The alignment of the acoustic processing makes the Malay proverbs above more compelling communicatively. According to K. David Harrison (2007: 157), speech genres in a given culture must provide human memory several easy entry points of poetic retention in order for the verbal arts to be remembered and passed on to the next generation of the speech community. Rhyme in this discussion is, thus, considered as a significant mental strategy toward a robust flourish of Malay and Chinese verbal art similar to the case of poems in the Western tradition as mentioned in Harrison (2007). Interestingly, the following example of Malay classical poem shows that rhyme is a poetic technique for inscribing Malay verbal arts onto the collective memory of Malay speakers. Furthermore, by capitalizing on rhyme, a light-hearted sense is instilled to an otherwise more controversial issue. This classic pantun records Malay desire through rhyme (Karim 1990: 31):

*Rumah kecil pintu ke laut,  
Tempat orang menggesek biola;  
Tubuh kecil, bagai diraut,  
Di situ tempat hati ku gila.*

The author's translation of the above pantun:

Small house with sea-facing entrance,  
In which plays the merry violin;  
Petite body crafted to appearance,  
With it comes the passionate rendering.

From the Multiple Intelligences perspective, rhyme taps on the rhythmic intelligence by enhancing one's sensitivity to a message at the phonetic level. Rhyme accentuates interactivity by adding consonance to meaning (Williams 2014). By synchronizing speech sounds in alternate sequences, the literary Malay rhyme in *pantun* not only fascinates but entices a hearer to the intended message. By the same token cultural values

and beliefs are phonetically infused into expressions that can then be recalled and recited easily.

## 7. Malay idioms

Metaphor is another meaningful tool to express one's intention indirectly. In fact, the Malay rhyming quatrain *pantun* and maxims are metaphorical either in their structures of presentation or style of alluding meaning with symbolic statements. If a native Malay speaker informs that he is undergoing a period of uneasiness of his liver (*hati kurang senang*), it should be taken to mean that he is not feeling happy as opposed to imminent liver failure. Although the Malay term for heart is *jantung*, matters close to heart is related with the term liver or better known as *hati* (Sew 2007).

All expressions of feelings are collocated with *hati* in Malay, namely *sakit hati* (pain liver = angry or rage), *kecil hati* (small liver = disappointed), *besar hati* (big hati = hopeful), *busuk hati* (smelly liver = wicked), *iri hati* (sore liver = jealous), *senang hati* (easy liver = carefree), *susah hati* (difficult liver = sad), *ada hati* (have liver = have an intention for something), *hati-hati* (liver liver = be careful), *baik hati* (good liver = kind), and *tawar hati* (bland liver = to give up).

Animals are frequently used to represent human attributes. The cat is one of the more popular creatures across different languages. In English, there are phrases such as catty, tomcat, sex kitten, copycat, cat burglar, cat out of the bag, cat and dog fight, to skin a cat, and so forth. In Malay, on the other hand, there are idioms such as *kucing biang* (horny cat/person), *kucing kelung* (brave and outrageous cat/person), *kucing kurap* (rotten cat/person), *menanti hingga kucing bertanduk* to wait till the cat grows horns (things that will not happen), *kucing dengan panggang* (cat and the roast/like a lustful man with a woman) just to list a few. The Cantonese cat *mau* comes in different collocations like *sek si mau* (eating a dead cat = to be a scapegoat), *mau li koung* (cat come with ill-fortune), *mau mau chi yi* (catty intention = vested interest), and *gor mau* (hungry cat or a greedy person). The Hokkien Chinese speakers use *ngeow* (cat) as the metaphor for miser (Sew 2009a).

The idiom *crocodile tears* is found in Chinese, English, and Malay. The 'crocodile' is a popular metaphor for bad lustful males in Malay and a person is described as a crocodile face in Malay if he is believed to have bad intention. The creative deployment of animal in Malay idioms equips the speakers with indirect ways of meaning-making. Being a part of nature we are sensitive to the environment that consists of living creatures. Beasts naturally become logical foils in describing inhuman behavior. The parallels between creatures and humans may be related to the naturalist intelligence with which humans are endowed (Sew 2009b).

## 8. Concluding remarks

Many Asian languages continue to supply intelligent symbolism to form a repertoire of cultural intelligence which hides beneath the standard word reference. While much has been said about language shift and debasement in local Malay and Chinese sociopolitical context, this discussion highlights the semiotics of sound meaning in words. Be they rhymes, metaphor, proverbs, color terms, or Malay quatrains the Asiatic expressions designate meaning and metamessages in everyday encounters. The substandard Malay

and Chinese idiomatic expressions continue to describe, decorate, and enrich the lives of many in Southeast Asia at various stages of cultural and daily interactivity.

The pertinent meaning-making features presented in Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, and Teochew form part of the unique verbal styling in Southeast Asian speech communities across time. There is no guarantee that all these cultural-specific terms and idioms will remain meaningful as we progress further into the twenty-first century. Digital files in the forms of video clips stored and shared around in YouTube will definitely compete with conventional literary forms that are scripted in printed texts or narrating minds. Similar to the case studies reported in Harrison (2007), unique cultural expressions in Malay may be at risk of being forgotten by the younger speakers in the current age of globalization, leaving the speech community poorer in terms of cultural-specific linguistic intelligence. This discussion further suggests that the loss of cultural-specific expressions and folk knowledge is not merely an isolated sociocultural problem pertinent to the extinction of minority languages, not least because the issue of language erosion is an accumulative social linguistic threat that concerns any language competing for a functional existence in the globalizing world.

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### Note

1. In the financial news, however, China Business Network represents the gains and losses of all equities in red and green, respectively. The media report affirms that red is the auspicious color most appropriate for Chinese business.

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