

Idioms Are Created Everyday

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INTRODUCTION

There is a common false belief that we no longer use idioms in Malay. As such archaic and meaningless idioms continue being taught in schools. For instance we continue teaching “*kaki ayam*” (literally: chicken claws) to mean being barefooted. Of course this is not readily understood by our children as they have probably only seen frozen clawless chicken in the supermarkets. And as our standard of living goes up, not many people go around barefooted any longer. The possibility of our children seeing a barefooted person and claws of a chicken is rare. Thus, they fail to make sense of the analogy in such an idiom. Hence, they no longer use it.

This paper is a summary of a research paper entitled “Updating a Dictionary of Malay Idioms”, presented to a Seminar on Lexicography in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. However its examples are taken from more recent data gathered in an on-going project “Contemporary Malay Idioms”.

Old Idioms Fade Away as New Ones Are Created

In our studies, we looked into the use of idioms in two contexts. First, we examined the occurrences of idioms in Malay speakers’ conversations. Second, we looked into the occurrences of idioms in mass media such as in the electronic or print media such as *Bujang, Gila-Gila, Remaja, Mingguan Wanita, Anis*, etc. We also made a premise that idioms found in dictionaries of idioms published before 1965’s were considered old and those found in current media are considered new.

We were able to observe that while there are idioms that disappear from everyday use, new ones are being coined just as systematically. In our definition, when an idiom is no longer understood, it ceases to be current, and therefore not used. Statistics below indicate that young (40 and below) speakers of Malay find it difficult to understand old idioms, and elderly (41 and above) find difficulties in comprehending new idioms. We tested 25 young and 25 elderly Malay speakers. Results are shown below in Tables 1 and 2.

The following two tables show the degree of comprehension of old and new idioms by fifty respondents. It was found that old idioms (*harga mati, ringan sama dijinjing, berat sama dipikul, lepas tangan, titik peluh, tanda mata, darah muda, bahasa kesat,*

etc.) were readily understood by the old. The elderly also failed to make sense of new idioms asked to them (*macam transparensi, tangkap relaks, tomboi, ayam muda, dan lain-lain*).

Table 1: Comprehension of old idioms

Idioms	Elder speakers		Young speakers	
	+ Comp	- Comp	+Comp	- Comp
<i>Air muka</i> (one's honour)	22	3	19	6
<i>Alim-alim kucing</i> (pretending innocence)	25	0	20	5
<i>Bagai ayam dimakan tungau</i> (spoilt maiden)	23	2	10	15
<i>Berbulu mata</i> (unpleasant to the eyes)	23	2	20	5
<i>Cakap kosong</i> (empty talk)	19	6	18	7
<i>Cubit paha kiri paha kanan sakit juga</i> (What is sauce for the goose is sauce for a gander)	15	10	10	15
<i>Ekor mata</i> (corner of one's eye)	17	8	15	10
<i>Emak angkat</i> (step-mother)	25	0	25	0
<i>Kucing kurap</i> (a tramp)	20	5	10	15
<i>Malu-malu asam</i> (bashful)	18	7	0	25
<i>Carik bulu ayam, lama-lama bercantum juga</i> (blood is thicker than water)	25	0	25	0
<i>Sambil menyelam minum air</i> (killing two birds with one stone)	25	0	25	0
<i>Putih tapak kaki</i> (to escape in haste)	25	0	0	25
<i>Buruk siku</i> (taking back what has been given away)	25	0	0	25
<i>Bawah angin</i> (south of the wind, monsoon)	15	10	17	8
<i>Ringan sama dijinjing, berat sama dipikul</i> (through thick and thin)	25	0	25	0
<i>Seperti kera mendapat bunga</i> (unappreciative of something valuable received)	24	1	22	3
<i>Bendera putih</i> (to accept defeat)	20	5	14	11

<i>Makan suap</i> (taking a bribe)	25	0	20	5
<i>Pasang telinga</i> (to eavesdrop)	22	3	18	7
<i>Makin murah, makin menawar</i> (being stingy)	12	13	10	15
<i>Membesarkan kerak nasi</i> (unnecessary cost, wasteful)	19	6	10	15
<i>Bahasa kesat</i> (rough language)	25	0	25	0
<i>Berganti tikar</i> (to marry one's sister-in-law after the decease of one's wife)	24	1	22	3
<i>Dapat terpijak</i> (unexpected present, bounty)	19	6	0	25
<i>Batu bergolek, tidak berlumut</i> (rolling stone gathers no moss)	11	14	3	22
<i>Seperti rumput di tengah jalan</i> (lowly social stature)	24	1	20	5
<i>Bulat fikiran</i> (consensus)	25	0	25	0
<i>Quran buruk</i> (honourable but not recognized)	25	0	22	3
<i>Lebih pasak dari tiang</i> (expenditure exceeding the income)	17	8	10	15
<i>Kokok berderai, ekor bergelumang tahi</i> (a cowardice bluff)	12	13	1	24
<i>Sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga</i> (repeated misfortune)	25	0	25	0
<i>Marahkan nyamuk, kelambu dibakar</i> (throwing a bath tub and the baby)	25	0	23	2
<i>Tiada rotan, akar pun berguna juga</i> (improvising)	25	0	25	0
<i>Isi hati</i> (telling whole truth)	25	0	23	2
<i>Lepas tangan</i> (being irresponsible)	25	0	25	0
<i>Sejuk hati</i> (feeling at peace)	23	2	22	3
<i>Titik peluh</i> (one's hard work)	25	0	25	0
<i>Ibarat telur sesangkar, pecah sebiji pecah semua</i> (misfortune affecting all)	20	5	9	16
<i>Tanda mata</i> (souvenir)	25	0	25	0
<i>Bunga disunting, perdu ditendang</i> (ungrateful)	24	1	20	5

<i>Ular menyusur akar tidak hilang bisa</i> (humility does not reduce one's honour)	21	4	10	15
<i>Cari jalan</i> (to find a way, solution)	25	0	25	0
<i>Ibu keladi</i> (someone who positively influences his surroundings)	15	10	5	20
<i>Darah muda</i> (young blood)	25	0	25	0
<i>Bagai bulan di pagar bintang</i> (a perfect wedding ceremony)	25	0	25	0

Note that some idioms are equally understood by both old and young speakers indicating that the idioms are still taught in schools. Possession of such knowledge does not indicate ability to use them correctly.

Table 2: Comprehension of New Idioms

Idioms	Elderly speakers		Young speakers	
	+ Comp	- Comp	+ Comp	- Comp
<i>Mengancam</i> (attractive women)	5	20	24	1
<i>Ayam muda</i> (attractive young female prostitute)	7	18	25	0
<i>Skema</i> (a plan, scheme)	4	21	20	5
<i>Tangkap respek</i> (in high regard)	10	15	22	3
<i>Ada sen</i> (has low value)	15	10	19	6
<i>Seperti bangunan konkrit</i> (a stable character)	11	15	18	7
<i>Ada sambal ada belacan</i> (tell tale)	15	10	21	4
<i>Belum untung sudah berjoli</i> (spending ones fortune beforehand)	4	21	10	15
<i>Seperti sambal tidak berbelacan</i> (incomplete, not tasteful - food)	15	10	10	15
<i>Umpama minyak dengan air</i> (incompatible)	16	9	18	7
<i>Ibarat tanah pasir</i> (spendthrift)	1	24	19	6
<i>Lidah keju, kulit belacan</i> (a Malaysian speaking English with a foreign accent)	2	23	23	2
<i>Melawan</i> (responsive to flirtation)	0	25	24	1

<i>Gali lombong emas</i> (a fortune struck)	15	10	24	1
<i>Telinga berasap</i> (smoking ears – angry)	13	12	20	5
<i>Lima sen</i> (cheap, worthless)	5	20	15	10
<i>Surat saman</i> (unpleasant letter)	0	25	12	13
<i>Mulut laser</i> (sharp and hurtful comments)	22	3	24	1
<i>Radio Malaya</i> (a gossip – spreading gossips)	16	9	20	5
<i>Ayam tua</i> (an old women)	18	7	21	4
<i>Tomboi</i> (tomboy)	11	5	25	0
<i>Hujan turun</i> (to cry)	5	20	18	7
<i>Buang karan</i> (to let go one's frustration)	2	23	24	1
<i>Jatuh pokok ditimpa durian</i> (repeated misfortune)	19	6	19	6
<i>Diberi ikan hendak ayam</i> (continuously being on the take)	15	10	22	3
<i>Belum memasak hendak makan</i> (illogical)	16	9	10	15
<i>Macam transparensi</i> (revealing dress)	15	10	25	0
<i>Seperti permukaan bulan</i> (a pock-marked face, dotted with pimples)	16	9	23	2
<i>Tangkap leleh</i> (caught sleeping in class)	10	15	22	3
<i>Set</i> (pair)	2	23	24	1
<i>Tangkap relaks</i> (caught lazing)	5	20	25	0
<i>Potong stim</i> (stealing one's girlfriend)	2	23	23	2
<i>Ayam pencen</i> (meat of old chicken – leathery chicken)	10	15	20	5
<i>Pintu senja</i> (in the twilight zone)	15	10	19	6

Increase in Number of Idioms

Comparing two dictionaries of idioms published forty years apart, i.e. *Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu* by Abdullah Hussain (1965), and *Kamus Peribahasa Kontemporari* by Ainon & Abdullah (2004), Kamarziah Masri (2005) found that the latter had listed 6,194 new idioms not found in the former. Contrary to common beliefs, the number of

idioms has actually increased. Speakers of Malay continue to creatively generate new idioms. The chances are that these new idioms are not in the repertoire of those who feel that “new generation of Malays do not any longer use idioms”. There is, however, a pattern used in the coining of these new idioms. These new idioms are generated as follows. In the lists illustrated below, each new idiom is immediately followed by a word-to-word English translation and followed by its meaning in brackets.

Making Analogy of Appearance

A characteristic of an object is compared to that of another object with similar feature.

Examples:

- menara Petronas* – the Petronas twin towers (inseparable couples)
- transparensi* – a transparency (thin and see-through dress)
- tsunami* – tsunami (a traumatic event)
- dapat bonus* – receiving a bonus (receiving something pleasant and unexpected)
- buta muzik* – music blind (illiterate in music)
- buta seni* – art blind (ignorant of any form of art)
- buta komputer* – computer blind (computer illiterate)
- buta statistik* – statistics blind (ignorant of statistics)

Adoption of New Meanings

Some words acquire new meanings and then used as new idioms. Examples:

- ibu kota* – town mother (town adopted as centre of administration)
- ibu negara* – mother state (state capital)
- ibu pejabat* – mother office (headquarters)
- ayam daging* – meat chicken (an oversized and slow woman)
- ayam muda* – young chicken (an attractive young woman)
- ayam tua* – old chicken (an old unattractive woman)
- harga pasaran* – market price (market price, fair price)
- tangkap boring* – caught bored (feeling bored)
- tangkap makan* – catch eat (to go out for food)
- tangkap muat* – catch and load (to simply accept any candidate as boyfriend)

Using Dialects and Slangs

Words from dialects and slangs are also commonly adopted to become new idioms.

Examples:

- cun* – cute (beautiful)
- awek cun* – girl cute (beautiful teenager)
- benda alah* – that thing (human genital)
- bias* – astray (not making sense)
- cintan maut* – deadly love (deeply in love)

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kebulur melaram – hunger display (to eat a lot)
melangut – looking up (doing nothing)
membedal – to bash (to eat hastily)
memerut – to stomach (to eat)
mengancam – threatening (attractiveness of a woman)
songeh – making many unnecessary requests (fussy)
jiwang-jiwang – in the air, souls (in love)
edan kasmaran – intoxicated love (madly in love)

3.

Loan Words

Even in traditional books of idioms like *Kitab Kiliran Budi* by Shellabear (1929) and *Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu* by Abdullah Hussain (1965), loan words from Sanskrit and Arabic were recorded as a creative source of idioms. Examples of Sanskrit words used were: *mengenal manikam* (wise and knowledgeable), *mestika embun* (beautiful and delicate princess), etc. And from Arabic we had: *berhakim kepada beruk* (unfair judge), *sumbang mahram* (incest), *nikah gantung* (suspended marriage), *gila talaq* (longing for ex-spouse), *ada fulus* (rich), etc. The borrowing process is still actively employed and a source of many new idioms. Examples of such idioms are:

geng – gang (a group)
dada moniter – chest of the monitor (screen of monitor)
ada power – having power (having a special feature)
ada kick – has a kick (tasty, effective)
macam transparensi – like a transparency (see-through dress)
minah chatting – chatter Minah (girl who is addicted to email chatting)
potong stim – cut steam (to steal someone else's boy or girl)
gadis glamour – glamour girl (a girl who likes to dress up)
kontrol smart – smart control (to look after one's decorum)
posing maut – deadly pose (daring pose to attract boys)
budak reformasi – reformation youth (youth for reform)
frust senonggeng – frustrated and fallen head over heel (utterly frustrated)
over – over doing (over acting)
over age – over aged (spinster)
projek – project (an opportunity, plan to attract a lover)
ulat chatting – chat worm (one who is addicted to email chatting)

18.

Important and Significant Events

Important and significant events are also used as comparisons and analogies in new idioms coined. Examples:

jualan mega – mega-sale (mega sale)
operasi sulung – first-born operation (maiden operation)
projek kediaman – project for residential houses (a housing project)

ekonomi global – global economy (global economy)
saham melonjak – surging share market (market shares doing well)

Modification of Old Idioms

Old idioms are sometimes modified, using contemporary and more readily understood analogies. However, their meanings are often kept unchanged. Examples:

Membuka pekung di dada – exposing one's chest full of sores. (Exposing one's dark secret) is modified as *Carik baju di dada* – tearing-shirt-on-chest (same meaning).

Akal geliga – Brain-like-crystal-ball (intelligent) is modified as *Otak komputer* – brain-computer (same meaning)

Pagar makan padi – fence-that-eats-rice-it-protected (untrustworthy) is modified as *tin makan biskut* – tin-can-that-eat-biscuits-contained (same meaning)

Kecil tapak tangan, nyiru saya tadahkan – If my palm is too small, I will use a winnowing pan (more than willing to accept) is modified as *Kecil tapak tangan, padang bola saya tadahkan* – If my palm is too small, I will use a football field (same meaning)

Concluding Remarks

These are just a few of the findings made. A full version of the findings will be incorporated into the updated *Kamus Peribahasa* to be published end of this year. It is obvious that new idioms are created regularly by speakers of Malay. The creative processes are briefly described above. These are the processes that can be gainfully taught in schools, rather than teaching crystallized expressions.