

INVESTIGATING *MAT REMPLIT*'S LINGUISTIC IDENTITY: ASSIGNING NEW MEANINGS TO STANDARD MALAY WORDS

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Abstract

This study looks at the different sets of words used by the local *Mat Rempit* community in Malaysia to construct and signal their own unique subcultural identity. These sets of words are often borrowed from the standard Malay language. New meanings or senses have been assigned to these words as a result of this phenomenon. The *Mat Rempit*'s linguistic practice of maintaining some borrowed word classes and changing others also creates a novel word and idiom. Data were collected from the Malaysian action films *Remp-it* (2006) and *Bohsia: Jangan Pilih Jalan Hitam* (2009) which deal with the subject matter of *Mat Rempit*.

Keywords: Language, *Mat Rempit*, Subculture, Identity

Subculture and Linguistic Identity

Members of a subculture often establish their identity through language, verbal patterns, dressings, activities, norms, and certain values which differentiate them from the other members of a society (Abdul Karim, Ismail, & Sukimi, 2009). Different subcultures differentiate themselves from the general society through their appearance, music preferences, rules of behaviour, norms, and symbol formation (Božilović, 2010). At the global level, some of the influential subcultures include punks, skinheads, ravers, Goths, and rockers. The Korean Wave or also widely known as *Hallyu* Wave, for instance, has become one of the significant subcultures in the Asian region and this trend is even witnessed in Malaysia. In order to feel 'closer' to their favourite idols and to understand the Korean culture as well as the shows on television, fans of the Korean Wave are willing to learn the Korean language (Chang, 2014). Hence, it can be said that K-Pop shows and music have somehow affected the language use among their fans.

Japan is another Asian country in which numerous subcultures can be located. One of the most famous is the Gothic/Lolita subculture, better known as *gosurori* in Japanese. According to Gagné (2007), this subculture is fashion-oriented and gender-performed, whereby young females wear elaborate, antiquated "long one-piece

dresses with bustles and panniers, corsets, bonnets, parasols, and Mary Janes and other (imagined) elements of Rococo and Baroque fashion” (p. 134). The female Japanese youth perceives becoming a princess differently compared to the Euro-American conception in which the preferred colour tone for clothing are reds, decadent blacks, and halcyon pastel shades resembling the antiquated aristocracy (Gagné, 2007). Significant differences between the members of this subculture from the general society can be seen not only through the way they dress up, but also in speech and action.

Members of this subculture speak their own “lady’s language” known as *shukujo no kotoba*. This unique speaking style actually emerges from the *jogakusei kotoba* (school girl speech) and *gyaru*; a hedonistic, vulgar, and man-like speech. The alternative linguistic practice distinctive of this subculture lies in between the two speaking styles. The “lady’s language” uses honorifics, the feminisation of certain words, and the creation of new words by truncation and combination. The abundance of new or specialised words identifiable to this subculture function to unite its members. The simplest example is in the name of the community itself – *gosurori*. This term emerges as a result of combining the English words ‘Goth’ and ‘Lolita’, which is shortened into “*GothLoli*” and eventually becoming *gosurori* in Japanese. According to Gagné (2007), other examples of neologism include contracting and combining Japanese and English morphemes such as *kurori* (black Lolita) and *shirorori* (white Lolita). In these two examples, the *gosurori* dropped the Japanese adjective indicator *-i* in order to signal a linguistic dissimilarity between its members and the non-*gosurori* community. Members of this subculture also hold onto three oaths in their “lady’s speech”, namely: “1) Speak slowly and politely; 2) Do not use elliptical words; 3) Be polite when answering in the positive and indirect when answering the negative” (Gagné, 2007). In short, this has shown that members of a subculture tend to use language that is markedly different in order to distinguish themselves from the ‘others’.

Mat Rempit – Underbone Illegal Racers

Mat Rempit is a term referring to both individuals and groups that are involved in illegal street motorcycle racings (Abdul Karim, Ismail, & Sukimi, 2009). It is considered as a Malaysian youth subculture, largely dominated by the Malays. Since

they are often involved in illegal activities, they are perceived negatively by the larger community. With their heavily modified underbone motorcycles, the *Mat Rempits* usually travel in large groups and race on public roads where it endangers other road users (Li, 2011). Aged between 15 to 28 years old, the majority of *Mat Rempits* do drugs and are notoriously known for making a living out of betting on money and girls.

Even though the term “*Mat Rempit*” is popular among the locals and often quoted in mainstream media and by the authorities, the term itself has never been acknowledged and documented in any standard Malay dictionary. A number of researchers have hypothesised that the term “*Rempit*” was possibly borrowed and naturalised from the English phrase “ramp it”. According to Islamil (2004), ‘ramp’ here refers to the riders and racers’ habit of extorting oil, which in turn produces very loud noise. Whereas Mia, Amin, Shuib, & Abdul Mannan (2013) come to conclude that the term “*rem*” refers to the English word ‘ramp’, Kamal Affendi (2006) suggests that “*pit*”, on the other hand, refers to the pit stop in a racing circuit.

One of the ways in which the *Mat Rempits* construct and signal their own unique identity is through language. The *Mat Rempits*’ linguistic feature is marked through a distinctive set of vocabulary (Ismail, Abdul Karim, & Mustapha, 2010). To the outsiders, this linguistic feature makes them appear mysterious and defiant. This includes a mixture of non-standard Malay, English, and Chinese dialects (Yong, 2013). The *Mat Rempits* often assign new meanings to standard terms (Abdul Karim, Ismail, & Sukimi, 2009). This is important as it keeps their transactions private and thus helps guard their members and activities against legal enforcement. This linguistic feature does not only construct their identity but is also important in maintaining solidarity among the members.

Some of the famous words commonly used by the *Mat Rempits* are “*lauk*” and “*barang*”. In standard Malay, the former refers to dishes, while the latter refers to things (solid). However, to the *Mat Rempit*, “*lauk*” refers to girls for sexual pleasure while “*barang*” refers to drugs or any illegal goods. Nevertheless, Abdul Karim, Ismail, & Sukimi (2009) found that the semantic meaning of a word may change according to the context or situation. The word “*barang*”, for instance, can refer to girls, drugs, or motorcycle parts depending on the topic of the conversation.

According to the same authors, interactions between members of one group and the other promote the growth of *Mat Rempit*'s unique vocabulary.

Drawing from the examples, this paper aims to: (i) list the words which have been assigned with new and unique meaning by the *Mat Rempits*; and (ii) identify the category of words involved in such process.

Research Methodology

Data for this research were collected from two Malaysian-produced movies – *Remp-it* (2006) and *Bohsia: Jangan Pilih Jalan Hitam* (2009). These movies were selected as they illustrate the everyday reality and lifestyle of the *Mat Rempits*. More importantly, the films depict the actual language usage among the *Mat Rempits*. This method was chosen mainly due to the fact that it is difficult to approach the *Mat Rempit* community as they often resist the presence of an outsider in the group. Equally, the *Mat Rempits* do not easily share information related to their identity and ways of life with others, as they see such act as a possible threat to their wellbeing and private life.

Newly-created words and standard Malay words which have been assigned with new meanings by the *Mat Rempit* community were identified and grouped according to word class. The word class of each word is determined by its relative position in the actual sentence produced by the speakers. The contextual meanings were later compared with the meanings listed in two standard Malay dictionaries; *Kamus Dewan* (4th Edition) and *Kamus Za'ba*. The similarities and differences in meaning are reported in the following section.

Results

A total of 22 words out of three word-classes have been assigned with new meanings by the *Mat Rempits* as evidenced in the films. The results are presented according to the word classes for adjectives, nouns, and verbs. Included is the additional use of idiom present in the data.

(a) Word Class: Adjectives

Word	Standard Meaning	New Meaning
<i>Longkang</i>	Drainage, flow of sewage	Bad mouth, rudeness in speech
<i>Kerengga</i>	Weaver ant	Skinny, slim (for girls only)
<i>Sayur</i>	Vegetable	Weak, timid
<i>Sangap</i>	Sleepy (adjective), yawning (verb)	High, horny, allure for something
<i>Goyang</i>	Shaky, moving	Scared, nervous, coward
<i>Koyak</i>	Torn apart	Being emotional, sensitive
<i>Pishang</i>	-	Bored or boring

Table 1: Common adjectives used by the *Mat Rempit* community

Table 1 shows the adjectives used by the *Mat Rempit* in the movies. In standard Malay, the term “*longkang*” is a noun referring to drainage or the flow of sewage. The *Mat Rempit* however uses it as an adjective describing a person’s rudeness in speech and sayings.

In addition to the above, other nouns like “*kerengga*” and “*sayur*” were also used by the *Mat Rempit* as adjectives. *Kerengga*, which refers to weaver ant in standard Malay, is used by the *Mat Rempit* to describe a skinny or slim girl. Rather than a collective noun denoting vegetable, *sayur* by contrast is used to portray the weak and timid characteristics of a man.

As for the word “*sangap*”, *Kamus Dewan* (4th Edition) defines this adjective as the state of being sleepy. However, based on the observation, the *Mat Rempit* uses the word “*sangap*” to describe the state of being horny, high, or craving for something very badly.

Furthermore, the adjective “*goyang*” is used in standard Malay to describe the moving or shaky state of a noun. The new meaning assigned by the *Mat Rempit*, on the other hand, describes the condition of being scared, nervous, and timid. Similarly, the adjective “*koyak*” which literally means torn apart, usually used in reference to clothes and paper, has an extended meaning as describing a state of being emotionally unstable in the *Mat Rempit* culture.

Besides introducing new meanings to existing standard Malay words, the *Mat Rempit* also introduces a new word. The word “*pishang*”, which is not listed in the standard Malay dictionary, is used by the *Mat Rempit* to describe the state of being bored or to connote something as boring. Based on an almost similar pronunciation, it is hypothesised that the word “*pishang*” originates from the standard Malay word ‘*pisang*’, which means banana (food). However, the semantic and etymological connection between the two cannot be established.

It can be concluded that the *Mat Rempits* do not only borrow standard Malay adjectives and extend their meanings, but they also adopt standard Malay nouns and treat them as adjectives with a new set of meanings. Apart from that, the *Mat Rempits* also introduce new words to their vocabulary and this is a clear sign proving that this subcultural language variation is alive with a sizeable number of active speakers.

(b) Word Class: Nouns

Word	Standard Meaning	New Meaning
<i>Lauk</i>	Dishes served and eaten with rice	Girlfriends of the <i>Mat Rempits</i> , Girls for sexual purposes
<i>Barang</i>	Thing	
<i>Ayam</i>	Chicken	
<i>Kenduri</i>	Feast	Group sex activity
<i>Projek</i>	Project	
<i>Balak</i>		Males, <i>Mat Rempits</i> , Boyfriends
<i>Stok</i>	Stock	Drugs, stolen goods
<i>Barang</i>	Thing	
<i>Projek</i>	Project	
<i>Jamban</i>	Toilet bowl	Female intergluteal cleft
<i>Batang</i>	Rod	Male genitalia
<i>Payung</i>	Umbrella	Network
<i>Kencing (noun)</i>	Urinate (verb)	A lie

Table 2: Common nouns used by the *Mat Rempit* community

Table 2 displays the common nouns used by the *Mat Rempits* in their daily conversation based on the observation of the two movies. Evidently, the *Mat Rempits* use existing standard Malay nouns and extend new meanings to the words when conversing. This is evident when they use the nouns “*lauk*” (dishes served and eaten with rice), “*barang*” (a collective term for thing), and “*ayam*” (chicken) to refer to their girlfriends. The same nouns are used by members of this group when talking about girls that they want or bet for sexual purposes. Alternatively, the word “*barang*” is also used to refer to drugs and other illegally obtained goods. Besides “*barang*”, the words “*stok*” and “*projek*” are also used for the same purpose.

Apart from that, the *Mat Rempit* community also speaks a lot about sex and drugs. When talking or referring to explicit words, the members use existing standard Malay nouns, but allocate new meaning to them in order to create a new hype in their subculture. The words “*kenduri*” (feast) and “*projek*” (project) are used to represent group sex while “*jamban*” (toilet bowl) and “*batang*” (rod) are used to denote female intergluteal cleft and male genitalia respectively. On top of that, the *Mat Rempit* also uses the standard Malay nouns “*balak*” (log) and “*payung*” (umbrella) to signify a close male friend and one’s network. In addition to the standard Malay nouns, the *Mat Rempits* also borrowed a standard Malay verb, “*kencing*” (urinate), and changed it into a noun which means “a lie”.

(c) Word Class: Verbs

Word	Standard Meaning	New Meaning
<i>Mengular</i>	Lazy to work, play truant	Find opportunities, try to seek chances
<i>Kenduri</i>	Feast	To have group sex
<i>Payung</i>	Protecting someone from the rain	To treat someone, to sponsor
<i>Kencing</i>	To urinate	To lie
<i>Langgar</i>	Hit or crash	Cross somebody’s area
<i>Palau</i>	Act of managing	To ignore someone

Table 3: Common verbs used by the *Mat Rempit* community

Table 3 lists the common verbs used in the *Mat Rempit* subculture in Malaysia. These words have been assigned with many new meanings which are different from the standard Malay. For example, the verb “*mengular*” in the context of *Mat Rempit* means the act of finding opportunities and chances for themselves. Likewise, the verb “*langgar*”, which originally means to hit or crash into something in standard Malay, is in its new sense refers to the action of crossing somebody’s area. This is an important verb as the *Mat Rempits* often identify themselves with a particular group which is based at a specific location. Likewise, the same situation is observed in the word “*palau*”. In standard Malay, the word “*palau*” refers to the act of managing. Nevertheless, the *Mat Rempit* uses the word “*palau*” when referring to the act of ignoring someone.

Moreover, nouns like “*payung*”, “*kencing*”, and “*kenduri*” which have been discussed earlier are also used as verbs by the *Mat Rempit*. “*Payung*” as verb in standard Malay is an act of protecting someone from the rain. However, the *Mat Rempit’s* “*payung*” refers to the act of treating or buying someone something like lunch or a gift. “*Kencing*” on the hand refers to the act of lying to someone and the verb “*kenduri*” refers to the action of having group sex.

(d) Idiom

Word	Standard Meaning	New Meaning
<i>Makan asap</i>	Eat the smoke	Defeated, lost in a game

Table 4: Common verbs used by the *Mat Rempit* community

Apart from the above, the *Mat Rempit* does not only borrow and introduce new senses or meanings to existing standard Malay words, but also come up with an idiom-like phrase “*makan asap*”. Literally meaning “eat the smoke”, “*makan asap*” is used to mock losers in a race or describe the state of being defeated, or to signify lost in a game.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the ways in which the *Mat Rempit* subculture differentiates itself from other youth subcultural groups is through the language used. This linguistic feature helps the members to separate and stand out from the rest of society. It also functions to include and exclude people into their interaction. Language is not only a medium of communication; it is also seen as a tool in constructing and maintaining the subcultural group identity. The *Mat Rempits* not only borrow standard Malay words and extend their meanings and word class, but also creates new words and idiom. These morphological processes of borrowing, extending meaning, and neologism are important to ensure the vitality of this subcultural language variation. It justifies the claim that this language variation is alive and is actively being used by a sizeable number of people.

Henceforth, it can be concluded that the findings of this research support the earlier research findings such as that by Abdul Karim, Ismail, & Sukimi (2009), which stated that members of the *Mat Rempit* community need to frequently update their vocabulary as their language variety keeps on expanding through the formation of new words and the extension of meanings to existing words. All in all, the *Mat Rempit* subculture has established its identity through language use, which is also similar to what has been observed within other subcultures around the world.

It is recommended that further research should be carried out in this area as there are other parts of speech which have yet to be analysed and examined, made more vital by the active and rapid expansion of vocabulary and creation of new words witnessed in this subculture.

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