

Speech-acts, values and cultural scripts: a study in Malay ethnopragmatics

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Abstract: The speech-act lexicon of any language provides its speakers with a ready-made “catalogue” of culture-specific categories of verbal interaction: a catalogue which makes sense within, and is attuned to, a particular portfolio of cultural values, assumptions, and attitudes. So it is that a microscopic examination of the semantics of speech-act verbs can shed a great deal of light on broader cultural themes, but equally the significance of any particular speech-act category can only be fully understood in broader cultural context. This study illustrates these contentions with the Malay speech-act verb *pujuk*, which can variously translated as ‘coax’, ‘flatter’, ‘persuade’, or ‘comfort’, but which really has no precise equivalent in English. Naturally occurring examples are given from Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia. The methods employed are the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach originated by Anna Wierzbicka, and its companion approach, the theory of cultural scripts. I propose a single semantic explication for *pujuk* which accounts for its diverse range with much greater precision than any normal dictionary definition; but the explication must be read against the background of several Malay cultural scripts reflecting the important role of feelings and “feelings management” in the Malay tradition, as reflected in expressions like *timbang rasa* (lit. weigh feelings), *jaga hati orang* ‘minding people’s feelings/hearts’, *ambil hati* ‘lit. get heart, be charming’, among others.

1. Introduction: The puzzle of *pujuk* (*memujuk*) [Note 1]

From the point of view of a speaker of mainstream English, the Malay verb *pujuk* (alternative form *memujuk*) presents an intriguing and elusive puzzle. Its range of use is very broad, sometimes overlapping with English perlocutionary verbs like ‘reassure’ and ‘comfort’, and at other times with directives like ‘coax’, ‘persuade’, and ‘suggest’. Some dictionary definitions are given in Table 1. As we will see shortly, an even wider range of translation equivalents is needed when a range of naturally occurring uses is considered.

Table 1: Dictionary glosses for *pujuk* (*memujuk*)

KAMUS LENGKAP (1986)	COOPE (1997) DAUD (1989)	KAMUS PELAJAR (1989)	KAMUS HARIAN FEDERAL (1995)
coax, wheedle, flatter, persuade by kind words	coax, flatter, persuade	<i>menurutkan kata yg manis-manis utk memikat (melembutkan hati dll)</i> ‘utter sweet words in order to enshare (soften etc. the heart)’	cajole, persuade; <i>nyatakan kata-kata yang manis supaya seseorang itu menurut</i> ‘express sweet words so that someone will comply’

The definitions in Table 1 exemplify several of the characteristic weaknesses of conventional lexicography, such as use of complex terms and/or figurative expressions in the definitions, failure to indicate whether one general meaning or several distinct sub-meanings are intended, and use of open-ended expressions like ‘etc.’ (Malay *dll*). It is not necessary to dwell on these problems here. Instead my purpose is to describe and contextualise the meaning of *pujuk* using the leading analytical

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technique of contemporary linguistic semantics, namely, paraphrase in terms of the semantic primes identified in the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) framework (cf. Wierzbicka 1996a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002, among other works).

2. Using semantic primes for describing meanings within and across languages

Briefly put, the key idea behind the natural semantic metalanguage approach is that any definition or explanation relies in the end on the clarity and simplicity of the language it uses. If the language of the definition is not clear and simple, the definition will get bogged down in circularity and obscurity. It will be difficult or impossible to test in any rigorous fashion; and from a practical point of view, it will not be very helpful to a language learner. The ideal metalanguage for describing meanings therefore would consist solely of simple basic meanings. That there must be a non-arbitrary set of simple meanings follows from the assumptions of the definitional enterprise itself. Arnauld and Nicole, among others, recognised this back in the 17th century.

I say it would be impossible to define every word. For in order to define a word it is necessary to use other words designating the idea we want to connect to the idea being defined. And if we wished to define the words used to explain that word, we would need still others and so on to infinity. Consequently, we necessarily have to stop at some primitive terms which are undefined. (*The Art of Thinking*, Arnauld and Nicole 1996[1662]: 64)

It was only in the closing decades of the 20th century, however, that systematic linguistic research managed to identify the “primitive terms” (now usually called semantic primes) with a high degree of confidence. They are about 60 in number. Examples include the primary meanings of English words like DO, HAPPEN, SAY, KNOW, THINK, FEEL, GOOD, BAD, BECAUSE, IF, and NOT (Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002). A considerable body of cross-linguistic research indicates that the same set of semantic primes can be found, expressed via words or word-like elements, in a diverse range of languages (see Map below). Semantic primes represent a bedrock of simple basic meanings which are shared across languages. In this respect they are unlike most of the other words in any language, because most of the other words in any language can be shown to be language-specific to some extent, in the sense that they lack precise equivalents in some other languages of the world. Even impressionistically “basic” items of English vocabulary such as *go*, *eat*, *break*, *hot*, and *tree* have been shown to lack equivalents in other languages (Goddard 2001a). A full table of semantic primes, with both English and Malay versions, is given in the Appendix.

The fact that semantic primes are shared across languages means that there is an additional advantage in using them as a metalanguage for semantic description, namely, that in this way we can avoid the danger of ‘terminological ethnocentrism’, i.e. the distortion which can occur when the meanings of one language are uncritically described in terms drawn from another, foreign language.

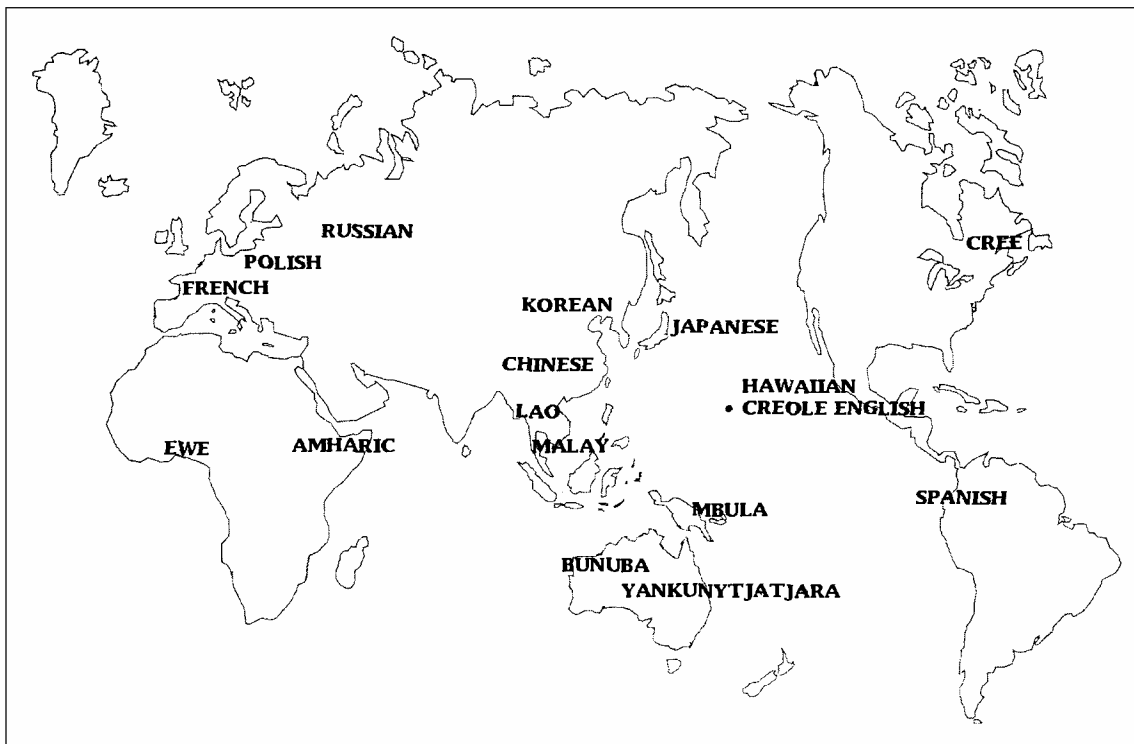
This kind of distortion occurs, for example, when the Malay word *pujuk* is glossed in terms of English-specific words such as ‘coax’ or ‘persuade’, which lack exact equivalents in Malay.

Semantic primes, then, can be used as a metalanguage to state meanings in a way which is maximally clear and explicit, and which can be transposed across languages with a minimum of distortion. A paraphrase of a meaning written entirely in semantic primes is known as a semantic explication. One of the goals of the present study is to produce an adequate semantic explication for *pujuk* using this method. Semantic primes can also be used for another, related purpose: to capture cultural norms, attitudes and assumptions in what are known as ‘cultural scripts’. In this paper I will also attempt to articulate some Malay cultural scripts relevant to the speech-act designated by the word *pujuk*. Semantic explications and cultural scripts open up greatly improved accounts of “ethnopragmatics”: the study of communicative practices from an “insider perspective” grounded in culture-internal notions (cf. Goddard 2002a, in press; Wierzbicka 2003[1991]).

A great deal has written about techniques for identifying semantic primes within and across language, about technical issues of semantic analysis such as how to distinguish generality of meaning from polysemy, and about the grammatical (combinatorial) properties of semantic primes. It is not possible to summarise this work here, nor to review the great number of detailed descriptive studies carried out within the NSM framework across many languages. An extensive bibliography is available at the NSM Homepage: [www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm]

Map: Some languages other than English studied in the NSM framework

Map: *Sample of Languages other than English studied in the NSM framework*



3. Uses and meaning of *pujuk*

Examples (1) - (6) below, which are taken from a corpus of contemporary Malaysian texts held by the author, illustrate *pujuk* used as a reportive speech-act verb, i.e. where it describes an act of speech whose wording is depicted as a direct quotation. As one can see, such an utterance can be imperative, declarative, or both. In any case, the apparent intention of the speaker is to get the addressee to calm down, to stop worrying, to feel better, etc. Translation equivalents for these examples include ‘say disarmingly’, ‘reassure’, ‘console’, and ‘comfort’. It is rather interesting that these extend beyond any of the ordinary bilingual dictionary glosses given in Table 1.

- (1) “*Dik... abang minta maaf kerana usik adik tadi. Abang bukan sengaja nak sakitkan hati adik. Abang senang hati tengok adik merajuk kemudian ketawa,*” **pujuk** Arfan.
“Sorry I teased you just now kiddo. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I just like to see you brood and then laugh,” said Arfan **disarmingly**.
- (2) “*Yalah, kami gurau aje. Muka macam Dura ni sekali imbas pandang, memang pangkat satu dalam tangan. Jangan risau sangat,*” kak Muna pula cuba **memujuk** dengan nada yang menjulang.
“Come on, we’re just joking. Anyone can tell that for someone like you Dura, getting the top grade is no problem. Don’t worry so much,” Muna tried **to bring her around** in a cheery tone.
- (3) “*Siti, selagi cikgu berada di daerah ini, cikgu berjanji akan terus membantu Siti,*” Syamsinar **memujuk** Siti yang seakan sudah jauh hati itu.
“Siti, as long as I’m in the area, I promise I will continue to help you,” her teacher Syamsinar **encouraged** Siti who was feeling disheartened.
- (4) *Pada mulanya, tikus berasa takut. Setelah dipujuk, tikus bersetuju menemui harimau. “Jangan takut, kamu akan selamat,” kata sang kancil.*
To begin with, the mouse was frightened. After **being reassured**, the mouse agreed to meet with the tiger. “Don’t be afraid, you’ll be safe”, said Sang Kancil.
- (5) “*Sudahlah bang. Itu semua tidak jadi perhitungan bagi kita. Kalau sudah bukan rezeki, manakan boleh jadi hak kita,*” **pujuk** Bedah pada Kudin.
“Let it be, dear. That’s not our concern. If it’s not meant to be, how could it be our concern,” Bedah **consoled** Kudin.
- (6) “*Sudahlah, kak. Yang mati tetap mati dan tak akan hidup kembali,*” **pujuk** Balkis sambil mengusap dahi Chantsa.
“Let it be, sis. Those who have died cannot return to life,” Balkis **comforted** Chantsa while stroking her forehead.

The following, second set of examples show *pujuk* being used in an apparently different fashion, for the purpose of persuasion or manipulation. Appropriate translation equivalents include ‘coax’, ‘persuade’, ‘talk around’ and ‘flatter (into)’. In these uses, the speaker seems to have an ulterior

motive, and indeed, it is grammatically possible to express the underlying purpose via a complement introduced by *agar* 'in order that', *supaya* 'in order that', or *untuk* 'for', as shown in (8) - (11).

- (7) *"Lebih baik kau tarik diri aja kalau nama kau dicalonkan. Kalau aku dapat jadi Wakil Rakyat nanti, jawatan Timbalan tu kau peganglah," pujuk Bakar dan Kudus pada Kudin tidak lama dulu.*

"It would be better if you withdraw your name if you are nominated. But if I manage to become the People's Representative, you'd be the obvious Deputy," Bakar and Kudus had *suggested* to Kudin recently.

- (8) *Aku terus berjalan untuk menghiburkan hati..., di samping memujuk diri agar dapat menerima kenyataan.*

I continued walking to cheer myself up..., at the same time *coaxing* myself into accepting the reality.

- (9) *Nit menyentuh pipi Tuk. Pipi Tuk basah. Nit pujuk Tuk supaya jangan menangis.*

Nit touched Tuk's cheeks. They were wet. Nit *coaxed* Tuk not to cry.

- (10) *Aku tidak lagi ke sekolah walaupun periksa S.R.P. semakin hampir. Mak memujuk aku agar ke sekolah.*

I wasn't going to school even though the S.R.P exam was getting close. Mum *talked me around* into going back to school.

- (11) *Katanya aku perlu memujuk keluargaku untuk dapat menerima dia.*

He told me I had to *persuade* my family to accept him.

Do the uses of *pujuk* shown in these two example sets represent a single meaning? It hardly seems so from the point of view of the English translations, but perhaps this impression is simply due to the mismatch between *pujuk* and any single English word. Perhaps the full range of uses can be brought under a single semantic explication once the various meaning components of *pujuk* are represented by means of components framed in semantic primes. Alternatively, if there is genuine language-internal polysemy, it will be necessary to posit two (or more) distinct but related explications.

I would like to propose a single semantic explication for *pujuk*, as shown in [A] below [Note 2]. The format and length of this explication will perhaps be surprising for those unfamiliar with previous studies of speech-act verbs in the NSM semantic literature (cf. Wierzbicka 1987, 2003[1991]; Goddard 1998: 136-164, 2002a, among other works). It should be evident, however, that both the length of the explication and the clarity of its phrasing are due to the fact that it is expressed entirely in terms of semantic primes. As for the general format of the explication, it is based on the idea, widely accepted in the literature on speech-acts, that speech-acts are constituted by an act of saying

² This is a revised and improved version of an earlier analysis which formed part of Goddard (2002a).

accompanied by a particular apparent or attributed mental state, which may include assumptions, intentions, and feelings. To give a simple example from English, the same dictum *Sit down* could be interpreted as either an ‘instruction’ or as a ‘request’, depending on whether or not the speaker appears to assume that the addressee is obliged to comply.

In the case of Malay *pujuk*, the claim of explication [A] is that ‘person X *pujuk* pada person Y’ means that X said something to Y, apparently with the kind of mental state spelt out in components (c) to (g). Specifically, X assumes that the addressee Y is thinking about something and feeling something bad because of it, views this situation as undesirable, and wants to shift the addressee’s thinking away from the current topic to something else, so that the addressee will not feel bad anymore. This particular combination of components makes sense and “fits” in all the concrete examples cited in (1) - (11) above. Needless to say, in this respect the explication differs markedly from any specific English speech-act verb, because no English speech-act word (‘reassure’, ‘encourage’, ‘coax’, ‘persuade’, etc.) expresses precisely this combination of semantic components.

- [A] X *pujuk* pada Y =
- a. X said something to Y
 - b. X said it because X was thinking like this about Y:
 - c. this person is thinking about something now
 - d. because of this, this person feels something bad
 - e. this is not good
 - f. I want this person to think about something else now
 - g. because I don’t want this person to feel something bad anymore

For the purpose of discussion, one could consider whether two additional components should be added at the end of explication [A].

at the same time, X was thinking like this:

I want Y to do something

These components would serve to depict an “ulterior motive” – that concurrent with X’s assumptions and intentions as portrayed in the preceding components, X also consciously wants X to do something. It will be apparent that these components could be appropriate for the “manipulative” or “persuasive” uses of *pujuk* presented in the second set of examples, i.e. examples (7)-(11), and perhaps (at a stretch) to some of the other examples as well, but they clearly would not be appropriate to all examples. They would not fit examples (2), (5) and (6), for instance. To say that these hypothetical extra components are needed in some cases but not in others would be to claim, in effect, that *pujuk* had two meanings, albeit closely related meanings. I do not want to make this claim. On the contrary, I would like to claim that explication [A] is fully adequate without any additional or optional “ulterior motive”

components. The possibility of “reading in” these components in particular circumstances arises easily in the Malay context, I will now argue, on account of certain Malay cultural scripts about “feelings management” in interpersonal interaction.

4. Cultural scripts for "feelings management" in the Malay tradition

There is abundant ethnographic and linguistic evidence that sensitivity to people’s feelings is one of the primary themes of the Malay tradition (cf. Goddard 1997, 2000, 2001b). Among the linguistic evidence, which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere, are common expressions and sayings such as *jaga hati orang* ‘mind people’s feelings (hearts)’, *timbang rasa* ‘weigh feelings’, and *memilihara perasaan* ‘protecting feelings’. Importantly, the emphasis on feelings does not imply that the direct expression of feelings is valued. The emphasis is rather on the “detection” of other peoples’ feelings via attention to their facial expressions, tone of voice, actions, and so on; direct or overt displays of feeling are unnecessary and disfavoured. Being attuned to other people’s wants and feelings is necessary, among other reasons, because it enables us to know what to say and how to speak to these other people. The themes of appropriate behaviour and verbal caution are also amply evidenced in the literature, though again the evidence cannot be reviewed here for reasons of space.

In the NSM framework, shared cultural understandings are modelled by means of ‘cultural scripts’, framed in the same metalanguage of simple cross-translatable words used in semantic explications. Cultural scripts are, in effect, an improved notation for what have been variously referred to in the literature as norms of interpretation, cultural norms, rules of speaking, and so on. The technique is not as well established as that of semantic explication, but there is a significant and growing literature applying the cultural scripts technique in a range of languages (e.g. Wierzbicka 1996b, 2003; Goddard 1992, 1997, 2000; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1997, in press; Ye 2004). As an example of what cultural scripts look like, the script in [B] below represents some of the characteristically Malay notions about sensitivity to one’s interlocutor’s feelings and wants in order to know how to speak appropriately, discussed above.

[B] *A Malay cultural script*

people think like this:

when I am with someone,

it is good if I can know what this person feels

it is good if I can know what this person wants

if I know these things, I can know what it is good to say to this person

if I know these things, I can know how it is good to say things to this person

To avoid misunderstanding, a number of caveats are called for at this point. Notice that script [B] is introduced by the frame ‘people think like this’. A cultural script is not intended as a description of actual behaviour, but as a depiction of shared assumptions about how people think about social

interaction. Individuals may or may not follow the cultural guidelines; they may follow them in some situations but not in others; they may defy, subvert or play with them in various ways; but even those who reject or defy culturally endorsed modes of thinking and modes of action are nonetheless aware of them. It is in this sense that cultural scripts can be regarded as part of the interpretive backdrop of actual social interaction.

Returning now to the subject matter of the present study, it is regarded as culturally important in the Malay tradition not to induce bad feelings in one's interlocutors, and especially to ensure that others do not feel bad towards one. There are multiple motivations for this emphasis, not all of them altruistic. One powerful inducement to avoid incurring bad feelings in others is to avoid possible retaliation (cf. Goddard 1997, 2000, 2001c). Another is that sensitivity to other people's feelings can help us with "managing" those other people. Many Malay sayings suggest that by skilled use of words, we can soften a person's attitude so that they will end up doing as we wish. Conversely, there is a wealth of sayings which caution against the dangers of being misled by "sweet words" (*kata-kata manis*) or a "sweet mouth" (*mulut manis*). Some of the more prominent of these sayings and expressions are listed in Table 2 (next page), along with explanations given for them in various dictionaries and compendia of traditional sayings used in Malaysian schools. The explanations are not always particularly successful in capturing the exact meanings of the original expressions but they are instructive in their own right, insofar as they too attest to what can be regarded as cultural "common knowledge" about people and social interaction.

From an "Anglo" cultural point of view, the sayings and expressions listed in Table 2 are rather striking in their emphasis on efforts to verbally influence other people's feelings, and on the potential for "sweet words" to induce good feelings in others. I believe that they are indicative of a thick web of cultural assumptions and attitudes which one can begin to describe by the cultural scripts given in [C] and [D] below. Script [C] expresses the notion that a person is likely to be resistant to another person's wishes (figuratively, hard of *hati* 'heart') if they are feeling something bad. Naturally then, when we want to get someone to do something, it would be ineffective to raise the matter at such a time, as spelt out in script [D].

[C] people think like this:
 when a person is feeling something bad
 if someone else wants them to do something
 this person will not do it

[D] people think like this:
 when I want to say something to someone
 because I want this person to do something
 it is not good to say it if this person feels something bad at this time

The relevance of these scripts to the speech-act *pujuk* should by now be evident. To *pujuk* someone, as explicated in section 3, means (roughly speaking) to say something to them in order to get their mind off something negative, so as to shift them away from feeling something bad. In view of the cultural scripts in [C] and [D], it makes sense that this can be done, and presumably often is, done, as a preparatory “move”, prior to trying to get the other person to do something. This explains the occurrence of *pujuk* in “manipulative” contexts such as those presented in the examples in section 3. The fact that *pujuk* can be used with an ulterior motive is simple commonsense in terms of Malay “ethno understandings” of social interaction.

Table 2: Some Malay expressions and conventional explanations (see References for sources)

Expression	Explanations
<i>ambil hati</i> ‘win (lit. get) heart’	<i>Menyenangkan hati orang supaya disukai</i> ‘Calming someone’s heart so as to be liked’ (A&A 1995) <i>Pandai membuat orang lain supaya setuju dengan kita</i> ‘Skilled at getting other people to agree with one’ (HMA)
<i>Mulut manis mematahkan tulang</i> ‘Sweet words can break bones’	<i>Tutur kata yang manis boleh melembutkan hati yang keras</i> ‘Speaking sweet words can soften a hard heart’ (A&A)
<i>Kail berumpan, berkata bertipuan</i> ‘A baited hook, speaking with deception’	<i>Kalau pandai menjaga hati orang, tentu dapat apa yang dihajati</i> ‘If one is skilled in minding people’s feelings, we will surely get what we desire’ (A&A)
<i>Bertanam tebu di bibir mulut</i> ‘Planting sugarcane on the lips’	<i>Mengeluarkan perkataan yang manis-manis untuk memujuk atau memuji</i> ‘releasing sweet words in order to coax or praise’ (MAAAH)
<i>Lemak manis jangan detelan, pahit jangan dimuntahkan</i> ‘Sweet sauce is not be swallowed, bitter not to be vomited’	<i>Jangan lekas percaya pada kata-kata orang yang manis dan jangan cepat membuang yang pahit</i> ‘Don’t hastily believe people’s sweet words and don’t too quickly discard the bitter ones’ (MAAAH)
<i>Mati semut kena gula (or: di gula)</i> ‘Ants die on account of sugar’	<i>Seseorang yang binasa kerana terpengaruh mendengar kata-kata manis atau pujuk rayu</i> ‘Someone who suffers due to the influence of sweet words or flattery’ (SMA, CCB)
<i>Manis mulut</i> ‘sweet of mouth’	<i>Orang yang mempunyai tutur kata yang bersopan santun dan tidak menyakit hati orang lain</i> ‘People whose words are well-mannered and gracious and give no offence to other people’ (ZS)

4. Concluding remark

This short paper has been a micro-study in Malay ethnopragmatics. The task of ethnopragmatics is to identify, describe, and explain culturally preferred speech patterns from an insider perspective, i.e. in terms of local systems of categorisation, local cultural values, and local understandings about “how people tick”. Speech-act verbs like *pujuk* provide a convenient stepping off point for ethnopragmatic inquiry because the speech-act lexicon is itself a cultural “catalogue” of categories of verbal interaction. Semantic explication using the techniques of NSM semantics can allow us to unpack the meanings of speech-act verbs with clarity and precision. Further, as we have seen with *pujuk*, particular speech-acts are often attuned to certain shared cultural assumptions and attitudes, which can be captured and described using cultural scripts.

Appendix: Table of semantic primes – English and Malay exponents (Goddard 2002b)

Substantives

I – AKU
YOU – KAU
SOMEONE/PERSON – SESEORANG
SOMETHING/THING – SESUATU/BENDA
PEOPLE – ORANG
BODY – BADAN

Mental predicates

THINK – FIKIR
KNOW – TAHU
WANT – MAHU
FEEL – RASA
SEE – NAMPAK
HEAR – DENGAR

Speech

SAY – KATA
WORD – PERKATAAN
TRUE – BENAR

Actions, events, movement

DO – BUAT
HAPPEN – TERJADI
MOVE – BERGERAK

Existence and possession

THERE IS (EXIST) – ADA
HAVE (BELONG TO) – ADA

Life and death

LIVE – HIDUP
DIE – MATI

Determiners and quantifiers

THIS – INI
THE SAME – (YANG) SAMA
OTHER – LAIN
ONE – SATU
TWO – DUA
ALL – SEMUA
MANY/MUCH – BANYAK(RAMAI)
SOME – BEBERAPA

Time

WHEN/TIME – BILA/WAKTU
NOW – SEKARANG
BEFORE – SEBELUM
AFTER – SELEPAS
A LONG TIME – LAMA
A SHORT TIME – SEKEJAP
MOMENT – SAAT

Space

WHERE/PLACE – DI MANA/TEMPAT
HERE – DI SINI
BELOW – DI BAWAH
ABOVE – DI ATAS
INSIDE – DI DALAM
ON (ONE) SIDE – DI SEBELAH
NEAR – DEKAT
FAR – JAUH
TOUCH (CONTACT) – SENTUH

Logical concepts

BECAUSE – SEBAB
IF – KALAU
NOT – TIDAK
MAYBE – MUNGKIN
CAN – BOLEH

Evaluators and descriptors

GOOD – BAIK
BAD – BURUK
BIG – BESAR
SMALL – KECIL

Intensifier and augmentor

VERY – SANGAT
MORE – LAGI

Taxonomy, partonomy, similarity

KIND OF – JENIS
PART OF – BAHAGIAN
LIKE – MACAM

Notes: • exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • they can be formally, i.e. morphologically, complex • they can have different morphosyntactic properties, including word-class, in different languages • they can have combinatorial variants (allolexes) • each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

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