Directive speech acts in Malay (Bahasa Melayu): an ethnopragmatic perspective

1. Introduction

Broadly speaking one can identify two approaches to the study of speech acts in cultural context: a mainstream approach known as ‘contrastive pragmatics’ and an alternative approach which I call ‘ethnopragmatics’. Contrastive pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, Danet and Gherson 1985; Blum-Kulka et al 1989; Blum-Kulka and Kaspar 1993; among other works) assumes that certain speech-acts or speech-act types — such as request, apology, and compliment — are found in all or most cultures, although they are “realised” differently from culture to culture. For example, requests may be realised with different degrees of directness or politeness, with an emphasis on positive or negative politeness, using different formal means of expression, e.g. imperatives, questions, modalised sentences, and so on. Many valuable studies have been produced in the contrastive pragmatics framework, but there are also some serious difficulties with its assumptions and methodology.

Many languages lack exact equivalents of English speech-act verbs such as request, apologise, and compliment. They may even lack equivalents of impressionistically more “basic” English words such as ask and tell (as will be shown soon, in relation to Malay). By choosing
to adopt such “non emic” (and more specifically Eurocentric) analytical categories, contrastive pragmatics foregoes the opportunity to represent the indigenous conceptualisation of speech-acts in many, if not most, cultures of the world. Likewise, the parameters it uses to describe culture-variable realisations, i.e. parameters such as ‘directness’ and ‘politeness’, usually do not correspond to any culture-internal descriptors. Despite its methodological commitment to cross-cultural neutrality, therefore, contrastive pragmatics unwittingly falls prey to terminological ethnocentrism. It is description from the outside, necessarily imposing an “outsider perspective”. Finally, by its lack of attention to the precise meanings of indigenous terms (symptomatic of a lack of an agreed method of semantic description), the contrastive pragmatics approach denies itself a rich source of information and insight into speech act phenomena. As I will show, indigenous terms can disclose a world of meaning if they are subjected to soundly-based semantic scrutiny.

The alternative approach, which I call ethnopragnatics (cf. Goddard in press a, b, c), was inaugurated by Anna Wierzbicka (1985) in her classic article ‘Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts’. Wierzbicka argued that the cultural shaping of speech practices runs much deeper than merely the external guise or “realisation” of putatively universal speech-act categories. She highlighted the dangers of terminological ethnocentrism and advocated a new approach to pragmatics which would seek to articulate an “insider perspective”, by taking as its starting point culture-internal categories and descriptors. This approach was adopted by Béal (1992, 1994), Ameka (1994), and Goddard (1992, 1997, 2000) in various descriptive studies, as well as by Wierzbicka herself (1991, 1996a, 1998, and other works); cf. also Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997).

Any quest for an insider perspective on pragmatics necessarily involves cross-linguistic lexical semantics, because the whole idea is to understand indigenous speech practices in terms of indigenous categories (speech-acts, values, social classifications, etc). Needless to say, this is no easy task precisely because of the cultural embeddedness of key ethnopragnatic concepts and the consequent problem of translation. For example, it may be true to say that Japanese ways of speaking are profoundly connected with the social ideal of wa ‘harmony’ or
that Malay ways of speaking are connected with the social emotion of *malu* 'shame’ — but simplistic glosses such as 'harmony' and 'shame' are hopelessly inadequate. How can culture-specific discourse practices be understood from an insider perspective, while at the same time articulating this understanding in terms which are clear and intelligible to cultural outsiders? In my view, the solution lies in the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach, i.e. by undertaking semantic explication in terms of simple, culturally-shared meanings.

The NSM approach is based on evidence supporting the view that all languages share a small but stable core of about 60 shared meanings (semantic primes), that these primes have concrete linguistic exponents in all languages, and that they share a universal grammar of combination, valency, and complementation. In short, that in any natural language one can isolate a small vocabulary and grammar which has precise equivalents in all other languages (Wierzbicka 1996a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, In press). Examples of semantic primes include the primary meanings of the English words: SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, SAY, WORDS, TRUE, DO, THINK, WANT, GOOD, BAD, IF, BECAUSE. A full list of semantic primes, in both English and Malay, is given in the Appendix. Unlike complex and English-specific labels such as ‘politeness’, ‘directness’, ‘dignity’, ‘power’ and ‘harmony’, the metalanguage of semantic primes can be safely used as a common code for cross-linguistic analysis, free from the danger of terminological ethnocentrism.

The fact that the same metalanguage can be used for both semantic and pragmatic analysis facilitates an integrated and particularistic approach to discourse in culture, similar in scope and character to Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description” in ethnography (see section 8 below). In the present study the focus is the semantics and ethnopragmatics of a set of Malay speech-act verbs.

**Semantics and ethnopragmatics of some English directive verbs**

Before turning to the Malay data, I need briefly to explain my general approach to explicating the lexical meanings of speech-act verbs. It is based on the approach of Wierzbicka’s (1987) book *English Speech Act Verbs: A Semantic Dictionary*, but with an expanded and improved metalanguage. The basic speech-act verb, and, according to
NSM research, the only universal speech-act verb, is the semantic prime \textit{SAY}. According to Wierzbicka, a speech-act verb depicts a speaker as saying something of a certain kind, the so-called dictum, while at the same time conveying certain intentions, assumptions or feelings which constitute the so-called illocutionary force. To depict illocutionary force components, one must rely on the semantic primes \textit{WANT}, \textit{THINK}, \textit{KNOW}, \textit{FEEL}, and other elements.

A special feature of the semantic structure of speech-act verbs is their “first-person format”. To see why this is necessary, suppose that person \textit{S} witnesses person \textit{X} say to person \textit{Y} \textit{Sit down}, and that person \textit{S} later describes what happened as follows: \textit{X ordered} \textit{Y to sit down}. In choosing the word \textit{ordered} to depict \textit{X}’s speech act, \textit{S} is attributing to the original speaker a certain illocutionary attitude (roughly: ‘I want you to do this; you know you have to do what I say’). If \textit{S} were to choose another speech-act verb, such as \textit{asked} (as in \textit{X asked} \textit{Y to sit down}), \textit{S} would be attributing a different expressed attitude (roughly: ‘I want you to do something; I don’t know if you will do it’). The choice of \textit{suggested} (as in \textit{X suggested that Y sit down}) would attribute yet another attitude (roughly: ‘maybe it would be good if you do this; I want you to think about it; I don’t want you to think you have to do it’).

Let us now consider these three English directives in more detail, beginning with \textit{order} (in contexts where the addressee appears as the direct object), as in the following examples.

(1) (a) I \textit{order} you to lay down your weapons.
(b) They \textit{ordered} her out of the room.

The dictum of an \textit{order} is ‘I want you to do this’, normally expressed as a bare imperative. The illocutionary component obviously includes the assumption that the addressee has no choice but to do it, and arguably also the addressee’s recognition or acceptance of this fact (Wierzbicka 1987: 37-38). This can be seen if \textit{order} is contrasted with \textit{command}, a speech-act which is expected to trigger an immediate, semi-automatic response. The difference is subtle, but it sounds more natural to speak of giving a dog or a horse \textit{a command} than \textit{an order}, which makes sense if \textit{order} implies an appeal to the addressee’s consciousness. Even in military contexts, where both verbs can be used
freely, order sounds better if there is any appeal to the subordinates’ consciousness of their own subordination; That’s an order, soldier! sounds far more natural than That’s a command, soldier!.

From these considerations we arrive at explication [A] below, where section (i) is the dictum and section (ii) contains the illocutionary force components. Notice that the dictum does not specify any precise form of words (note the phrasing ‘something like this’), but rather the gist or “semantic content” of what is said. The illocutionary components are introduced by the component ‘X said it like’ X was saying at the same time: “—.” This is intended to model, in the metalanguage of semantic primes, Searle’s (1969: 65) insight that the “performance of the [speech] act counts as an expression” of a particular psychological state.

[A] X ordered Y to do A = 
  i. X said something like this to Y: 
      “I want you to do this (A)” 
  ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time: 
       you know you have to do it because I say this

It is well-known that the use of imperative directives in English is highly restricted, in favour of a brace of so-called “whimperative” constructions by which the directive intention is embedded into an interrogative form: Will you do A?, Would you do A?, Could you do A? Would you mind doing A? and so on. Naturally enough, this kind of directive question can be described in English using the same speech-act verb — ask — which is used about information-seeking questions. In its directive sense, ask can be explicated as in [B]³:

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1. In some languages, one would have to say ‘as if’ (or something similar) instead of ‘like’ in this component. This could indicate that the apparent simplicity of ‘like’ is illusory in this context and that a more explanatory paraphrase is required, or it may be that ‘as if’ can be regarded here as an allolex of LIKE, i.e. a combinatorial variant with the same meaning (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka in press).

2. Ask can also take a nominal complement introduced by for, i.e. to ask for something. This frame requires a slightly different explication, including a “benefit” component, i.e. the speaker’s acknowledgement that ‘it will be good for me if you do this’.
[B] \( X \text{ asked} \ Y \) (to do \( A \)) = 

i. \( X \) said something like this to \( Y \):
   “I want you to do this (\( A \))”
   “I don’t know if you will do it”

ii. \( X \) said it like \( X \) was saying at the same time:
   I don’t want you to think that you have to do it because I say this

Wierzbicka (1991) has argued convincingly that the preference for interrogative directives in English, and the existence of so many specialised whimperative formulas, is linked with the Anglo cultural value of “personal autonomy”. Roughly speaking, this calls upon people to respect the right of others to make their own decisions about what they will and will not do. The attraction of using an interrogative directive (i.e. asking, rather than ordering or telling) is that it leaves open whether or not the addressee will comply, thus acknowledging the addressee’s autonomy and appearing to disavow any implication of compulsion.

The verb suggest is still more involved. Suggestions are usually made in a grammatically more complex fashion, using specialised formulas such as How about…? and Why don’t you…?, or combinations of interrogative and explicit modalising devices, as in the examples in (2).

(2) (a) “Well, then, supposing we go and call on him”, suggested the Mole.
(b) “Maybe you should just drop the whole thing and cut your losses”, she suggested.
(c) “Wouldn’t it be better just to go home dear?”, Aunt Petunia suggested timidly.

A suggestion is a mild, unassuming speech act. The speaker appears to think that it might be a good thing if the addressee did something and wants to get the addressee to think about it. From an illocutionary point of view, there is no assumption that the addressee will necessarily decide to follow the suggestion. On the contrary, the speaker distances him or herself from any idea that he or she personally wants the addressee to do it, reminding the addressee, as it were, that ‘you don’t
have to do it’. These observations can be summed up in explication [C] below.

[C] X suggested that Y do A =
   i. X said something like this to Y:
      “maybe it would be good if you do this (A)”
      “I want you to think about it”
   ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time:
      I don’t want you to think that you have to do it

Though I do not have time or space to fully justify these contentions, I believe that even in these three English verbs one can already see reflected certain recurrent themes of Anglo culture. Most obviously, there is a preoccupation with personal autonomy, i.e. the idea that ideally a person should be “free” to do as he or she wants. More subtly, there are hints of what one could perhaps call a kind of individual rationalism, i.e. a person can and should be able to “make up his or her own mind” about what it is good to do in his or her own interest.

What kind of cultural themes will emerge from a similar investigation into the lexical semantics of Malay directive verbs?

2. Malay directive speech acts in cultural context

My specific focus will be the following six Malay verbs: suruh ‘tell to do’, minta ‘ask for’, pesan ‘remind to do, give instructions’, ajak ‘encourage, urge’, nasihat ‘give counsel’, pujuk ‘coax, comfort’. These glosses are, of course, necessarily imprecise but they represent my own choice of the closest English matches. Table 1 (next page) gives an overview of the range of glosses found in three bilingual Malay-English dictionaries. As one can see, dictionaries offer a varied and partially overlapping range of English translation equivalents.

Other directives not discussed in this study, for reasons of space, include: perintah ‘direct, order, give a ruling’, bantah ‘tell not to do, oppose’, pelawa ‘invite, offer hospitality’, jemput ‘please do, invite’, mohon ‘petition, pray for’, rayu ‘appeal, beg’, pintu ‘insist, demand’.
Background on Malay culture

The main sources of contemporary Malay culture are the indigenous cultural tradition (adat) and the Islamic religion, which have coexisted for more than four centuries. Both are deeply concerned with promoting correct behaviour in all facets of life, with the result that moral and ethical themes are more prominent in Malay discourse than in contemporarv Western societies.

Table 1: Malay directive verbs considered in this study,
with glosses from three dictionaries

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<tr>
<td>sarah</td>
<td>ask, instruct, order, command, direct</td>
<td>order, instruct</td>
<td>ask, command, order</td>
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<tr>
<td>minta</td>
<td>ask for, request</td>
<td>request, apply for, ask for</td>
<td>ask, beg, request, apply for</td>
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<tr>
<td>ajak</td>
<td>invite, request, persuade, encourage, urge</td>
<td>invite, urge, persuade to action</td>
<td>ask, invite</td>
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<tr>
<td>pesan</td>
<td>remind, advise, give advice, instructions, etc.</td>
<td>give instructions</td>
<td>remind, tell, leave message, instruct, advise, give advice to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nasihat (memberi -)</td>
<td>(give) advice, opinion about what to do or how to behave</td>
<td>advise</td>
<td>advise, give advice to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pujuk</td>
<td>coax, wheedle, flatter, persuade by kind words</td>
<td>coax, flatter, persuade</td>
<td>coax, flatter, persuade</td>
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Important Malay cultural ideals include: the cultivation of kind, gentle behaviour (budi); being considerate and protective of other people’s feelings (timbang rasa ‘weighing feelings’; jaga hati orang ‘minding people’s feelings’); the mutual maintenance of personal dignity (maruah); and being well-mannered and well-spoken (sopan santun). Three aspects of particular importance to directive speech-acts are: the imperative to show respect and deference (hormat) to parents and other older people, teachers, royalty, and leaders; the importance of maintaining smooth and harmonious personal relations; and the practice

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3. I have adjusted some glosses for consistency, e.g. changing ‘to urge’ to ‘urge’, and in a couple of cases I have given a root form where the dictionary gives a suffixed form.

To these ends, Malays are trained from childhood to value and to cultivate “finesse” and refined (halus) behaviour. Speech etiquette is elaborate. It includes an array of alternative pronouns and other terms of address, using a soft tone, not saying too much, careful attention to choice of words, and avoidance of sensitive topics. As Wilson (1967) observes, the preferred idiom of personal relations is that of kinship, and specific kin roles (whether real or attributed) imply status relations:

an ideal pattern of interpersonal conduct, which includes both manner of acting and etiquette and expectations and responsibilities as well… All relations, as statuses, are accompanied by mutual respect such that the needs of the other should ideally be anticipated (p. 126, 130).

The price of not doing so is to face malu ‘shame, embarrassment’ and the prospect of being looked down upon as kurang ajar ‘ill bred, rude’ (cf. Goddard 1996, 1997).

As testimony to the orthodoxy of these attitudes in Malaysia, sociologist Geert Hofstede (1997: 28) found Malaysia to be the country which ranked highest of 53 countries and regions on his so-called “power distance index”, which indicates the extent to which the “less powerful” individuals in societal roles and relationships expect and are willing to obey authority. For comparison, the first European country — France — appears at rank 15/16 of 53 countries on the power distance index. The USA comes in at rank 40, and Australia at rank 36 on this scale. Hofstede’s study is also instructive in reminding us how different “outsider” and “insider” perspectives can be. In Malay society, one hardly ever hears roles and relationships discussed in terms of “power” (kuasa). Kessler’s (1992) reminder that power and politics do not pre-exist culture, but are culturally constructed, is pertinent here. As Kessler stresses (cf. Goddard 2001), the focus of cultural attention and elaboration is not any idea of power, domination or obedience, as such, but the key concept of hormat “the deference which is owed to a social position” (p. 148).

Within this cultural frame, expressing a “directive” message — i.e. saying plainly that one wants another person to do something — could
produce a threatening or sensitive situation, unless one is quite sure that the other person will not mind complying. It can be argued that Malay cultural scripts inhibit people from expressing explicit directive messages, at least when these are made in one’s own “self-interest” (cf. Goddard 1997). As a first approximation:

if I want someone to do something good for me
I can’t say to this person: “I want you to do this”
if this person could feel something bad because of it
I have to say something else

As we shall see, the inventory of Malay directive speech-act verbs seems largely to be tailored around an assumption of this kind.

It is interesting in this connection to take note of remarks by the eminent Malay linguist Asmah Omar (1995), who observes that “indirectness” is a general, but “hardly documented”, rule of speaking among the Malays. Asmah uses several domestic anecdotes to illustrate culturally preferred alternatives to “direct requests”. For example:

When a Malay child wants something from his parents, he does not make a direct request. He will relate to his parents that his friend next door has a beautiful watch or bicycle. Because this friend has a watch, he is able to time himself in answering his test papers in the school, and because he has a bicycle he is able to go to his music tuition on his own without bothering his parents to drive him to and from the tuition place. In all this narrative there may not be a single word or sentence that directly says “Buy me a bicycle, etc. please !”. This may be a universal trait of children, but I think that if this trait is indeed universal, it is enhanced and encouraged by cultural conditioning in the case of the Malay child. (pp. 48-49)

Anecdotal as it is, this little vignette (and Asmah’s own comments on it) illustrate very nicely that the Malay cultural “stance” towards the expression of personal wants differs markedly from that of English and other European languages.
Background on the Malay language

The Malay language is spoken, in different varieties, in Malaysia, Indonesia, and neighbouring countries. This study is based solely on Malay (Bahasa Melayu) as spoken in Malaysia, where it is the national language. As far as its basic syntax is concerned, Malay resembles English in many ways. There is a preference for Subject-Verb-Object order. Aspectual, modal, and negative particles immediately precede the verb; and there are prepositions and clause-initial subordinating conjunctions. With the exception of quantifiers, however, nominal modifiers (adjectives, genitives, demonstratives and relative clauses) follow nouns. On account of these similarities, and in view of the semantic focus of this study, I have not provided interlinear glosses in the example sentences.

The Malay language has no inflectional morphology, but it has some complex and productive derivational morphology, including a set of polyfunctional verbal prefixes which can indicate grammatical “voice”. Verbal affixation also has a stylistic function, being much more frequent in Standard Malay (SM) than in Colloquial Malay (CM). The colloquial language also differs in lexis and pragmatics, using shortened forms and “low” style variants of many common words and more familiar forms of address. For descriptions of aspects of Malay grammar, see Asmah (1986), Koh (1990), and Mintz (1994).

The main contrast between SM and CM which is relevant to this study is the greater tendency in SM for directive speech-act verbs to bear the transitive or active prefix meN-. This prefix has a complex set of allomorphic realisations, the mechanics of which need not concern us here. Depending on the initial segment of the root, ajak ‘to urge’, for example, can occur as mengajak, and minta ‘to request’ as meminta. Sometimes there is a process of phonemic merging between the underlying nasal and the initial segment of the root, so that suruh ‘tell to do, order’, for example, can occur as menyuruh. These differences do not affect the lexical semantics of the verbs, and will not be considered in this paper.

4. Until a few years ago, the language was officially known as Bahasa Malaysia, but this has now changed to Bahasa Melayu. It is largely mutually intelligible with Bahasa Indonesia, the national language of Indonesia.
The example sentences come from a corpus of contemporary informal Malay writing, held by the author, representing a variety of styles, genres and registers.

3. SURUH ‘tell to do’

When the verb suruh occurs with a direct speech complement, this is typically in bare imperative form. Consistent with this, to suruh someone means (in part) to express explicitly to them the message ‘I want you to do this’. To express such a direct message would be potentially sensitive if there was any real possibility that the other person might object, so it is not surprising that the illocutionary components of suruh contain a strong expectation of compliance. In practice this expectation is usually based on the relationship statuses of the people concerned, but this in itself does not necessarily mean that suruh contains any semantic components about relationships. According to explication [D] suruh focuses only on the speaker’s (subjective) certainty about the outcome, without appeal to any particular kind of reason.

The verb suruh has a very broad range of use. In my corpus of texts the speaker is most commonly a parent, but may also be a spouse (either husband or wife), other older family members, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or a boss.

[D] X suruh Y (to do A) =
   i. X said something like this to Y:
      “I want you to do this”
   ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time:
       I know you will do it because I say this

The choice of an appropriate-sounding English translation — ‘say to do’, ‘tell’, ‘ask’, ‘order’ — is strongly influenced by Anglo expectations about context.
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(3) “Mak suruh ikut ayah,” kata Muhamad Jusuh […] “Mak suruh balik kalau malam,” kata Muhamad Jusuh sambil mengibas-ngibas tangan di seluarnya.

“Mum told me to come with you (father),” said Muhamad Jusuh. […] “Mum said to come back by nightfall,” he said, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets.

(4) Tuk ambil lima ekor pekasam ikan puyu. Tuk suruh Nit nyalakan api.

Tuk took out five perch fish pickled in brine. She told Nit [her granddaughter] to light the fire.

Sometimes there is a more formal senior-junior or employer-employee relationship; cf. the expression orang suruhan = orang gaji ‘a person on wages’.


“I was talking with him just yesterday evening. He asked me to arrange the Hari Raya meeting,” Kudin said wearily.

(6) Tapi bapak… mengapa tak suruh orang yang menorah kebun ni membersihkannya? Bukankah kita upah dia untuk menjaga kebun?

But father… why not have (≈tell) the man who looks after this plantation clean it up? Don’t we pay him to look after it?

Sometimes the expectation of compliance is based on the specifics of the context. Example (7) takes place at a funeral. The speaker is annoyed that his colleagues are chattering away.

(7) “Tadah tangan! Orang sedang baca doa!” suruh Kudin dengan nada suara yang agak meninggi.

“Hold your hands in position! The man is still praying!” Kudin told them in a sharp tone.

The expectation of compliance is also situationally based in (8). The speaker (Chan) has just said that she will “treat” her boyfriend Ar
(Arfan) to a snack. In this context no English verb really seems appropriate, but explication [D] fits well; i.e. ‘what are you going to say to me that you want me to buy you, knowing that I will do it’.

(8) Ar nak suruh Chan belanja apa?
What are you going to get (=tell) me to buy you?

Explication [D] is also consistent with implicitly critical rhetorical questions like the one below. The speaker is reacting to the appearance of his room-mate dressed in the speaker’s favourite dressy shirt. The usage makes sense because it conveys the assumption that the addressee wouldn’t or shouldn’t use the shirt unless someone (i.e. the owner) had said to him that they wanted this. (That is, the usage depends on the implicational relationship between a causal statement and a negative counterfactual, i.e. ‘X did A because someone said something’ => ‘if someone hadn’t said something, X wouldn’t have done A’).

(9) Siapa suruh engkau pakai baju aku?
Who said you could wear my shirt?

4. MINTA ‘ask for’

The verb minta (colloquial variant: mintak) depicts a much less self-assured speech-act than suruh. Grammatically the two verbs differ in that whereas suruh normally occurs with a direct speech complement or an S-complement, minta cannot be used with a direct speech complement at all. It normally occurs not with an S-complement (though this is possible), but with a direct object. Common collocations are minta tolong ‘ask for help’, minta restu ‘ask for blessing, i.e. approval to do something’, minta izin ‘ask permission’, and minta duit ‘ask for money’. There are also lexicalised expressions minta maaf ‘ask forgiveness, say sorry’ and minta diri ‘ask to leave (lit. ask self)’. Incidentally, despite the translation ‘ask for’, minta cannot be used to describe an information-seeking question (for this, the verb is tanya ‘ask’).

According to explication [E], in the dictum of minta the speaker says that he or she ‘wants something to happen’, while at the same time
implying that the addressee is able to do something to satisfy this wish and acknowledging that it would be ‘good for me’ if the addressee chooses to do it. The primary focus of the dictum is on the desired outcome, rather than on the addressee. This dictum structure corresponds rather closely to one of the definitions for minta given in the monolingual KPBM dictionary: menyatakan mahu akan sesuatu, memohon ‘express wish for something, appeal for’ (KPBM 1989: 447).

In most examples, the speaker’s ‘wish’ is to do something, but there are also examples like (14) in which the speaker’s wish is that something happen (or not happen). The phrasing ‘I want something to happen’ accommodates both possibilities. Even more importantly, it provides a phrasing which avoids expressing directly the message ‘I want you to do something (for me)’, which was decisively rejected by Malay-speaking consultants. This message is plainly implied in [E], while not forming part of the message as such, either in the dictum or in the illocutionary components. Some examples follow.

(10) Nol, tidak ada gunanya kita minta tolong orang kampung ni, lebih-lebih lagi Pak Ngah Hussin tu.

Nol, it is no use to ask for help from the villagers, especially Pak Ngah Hussin.


All my life have I ever asked anything of you before? Try to remember carefully, have I ever asked anything? [father to son]
(12) “Dari dulu lagi Dura sudah menyimpan hasrat untuk ke sana. Apa yang Dura minta cuma restu dari umi dan ayah,” lemah saja suara itu menuturkannya. “I have had this intention to go there for a very long time. I only ask for your blessing, father and mother,” she said softly.

(13) Kalau dapat pangkat tiga macam mana, ya? Ya Allah, mintak disimpanlah. What if I get grade three? Dear God, I ask (= hope) that will not happen.

(14) Amran terus duduk di sisi Bedah tetapi baru dia teringat belum minta izin. “Boleh I duduk?” Amran just sat down next to Bedah but then he remembered he hadn’t asked permission. “Can I sit?”

It is noticeable that minta is often used as a performative, as in examples (12) and (13). This makes sense if, as in explication [E], the illocutionary force of minta is something like “asking for a favour”, i.e. expressing a wish and putting oneself in the other person’s hands, so to speak. Another common strategy is to formulate a “minta” request using an interrogative with boleh ‘can’, as in (14).⁵ As one might expect from explication [E], the preference is for the frame ‘Can I…?’, rather than ‘Can you…?’. For example, at badminton one could seek to use a friend’s racket: Boleh saya pinjam racket (kamu)? ‘Can I borrow (your) racket?’ A boleh-question can be elaborated in a couple of ways. For example, one can say Boleh minta…? ‘Can (I) ask…?’ (e.g. Boleh minta kirim barang di pasar? ‘Can I ask (you) to get me something at the market?’), thereby re-casting what would have been a request for ‘you’ to do something into a request as to whether ‘I’ can do something, i.e. ask for something.

The point here is that preferred strategies for formulating speech-acts are closely tied in with the meanings of the speech-act categories themselves. There is scope for a much expanded study of this aspect of directive strategies in Malay.

⁵ In Indonesian, the equivalent expression uses bisa ‘can’, though boleh ‘may’ exists as a more deferential alternative (Hassall 1997).
5. AJAK ‘invite, encourage, urge’

Bilingual dictionaries of Malay (see Table 1) usually list ‘invite’ as one of the main meanings of *ajak*, and for a newcomer to the culture it certainly seems that “inviting” is one of the main situations about which the verb *ajak* is used; as in (15), (16) and perhaps (17) below. But as subsequent examples show, there are also contexts in which something like ‘encourage’ or ‘suggest’ seems more appropriate. In principle this could be due to polysemy, but actually there is no need to posit polysemy. The use of *ajak* in “inviting” contexts is simply due to the Malay cultural assumption that people would normally be “shy” about accepting an offer — any offer, even to join in eating or to share a drink — at first mention, and therefore need to be encouraged a couple of times before they will accept.

According to explication [F], in the dictum the speaker attempts to influence the addressee’s willingness to do something. The speaker wants the addressee to decide to do some prospective action (“I want you to think: ‘I will do this’”), which, furthermore, will be done in the speaker’s presence. As for the illocutionary force components, they express the speaker’s assumption that the addressee may well want to undertake the action him or herself, but may not go ahead with it unless the speaker says this.

[F]  
\[ X \text{ ajak } Y \text{ (to do A)} = \]
  i. X said something like this to Y:  
     “I want you to think: ‘I will do this (A)’”  
     “I will be with you when you do it”  
  ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time:  
     I think maybe you want to do this  
     I think maybe you will not do it if I don’t say this

Such an explication is naturally well suited to contexts where the prospective action involves doing something pleasant together, but, as we shall see, it is also applicable to other contexts in which *ajak* is used.

In the following examples, note that *mari* means ‘come to/with me’, that *kita* ‘we’ is a 1pl-inclusive form, and that *ikut* ‘follow’ also implies
being together. Where these items do not occur, one often finds sama ‘together’ being used.


“Chan, come eat with us,” Arfan’s father urged. “Yeah, come join us. The food tastes better when we all eat together,” Arfan’s mother added encouragingly.


“He said that he wanted to invite me and Muna out walking after his exams. At that time he’s on holidays,” Sofi Aidura explained amidst giggles.

Notice that the proposed action is not necessarily something which the addressee would undertake “jointly” with the speaker. For example, in (17) there is no necessary implication that Balkis would change clothes at the same time. Consider also an example like (18). The protagonist has been evicted from her flat and is walking along the road with her luggage.


“Come to my room, sis. Change into some fresh clothes,” suggested Balkis.

(18) Kerapkali juga dia diajak menaiki kereta yang dimiliki oleh lelakielaki yang tidak ternampak kejujuran, dia menolak.

When from time to time she was invited to get into cars driven by men who didn’t look trustworthy, she declined.

In many examples, the proposed course of action involves the addressee and speaker going somewhere together (in order to do something there), but this is not invariably so, as shown by (18). Also, ajak can readily be used about encouraging a guest to eat or drink something in your home, after they have already been seated. Some other examples of ajak follow.

“Let us go to the madrasah (religious school). We shall pray together,” Arfan’s father suggested and without much fuss Arfan followed his father.

(20) Ada juga sorang dua member ajak aku cari kerja…

There were two friends who encouraged me to go looking for work (with them)…

6. PESAN ‘give instructions, remind to’

In my corpus pesan is typically used to describe a dictum delivered in the imperative by a parent to a child, and occasionally from an older to a younger sibling. It is also possible between husband and wife (or vice versa); for example, Lin pesan Ali beli sebotul susu ‘Lin told Ali to buy a bottle of milk’. The content of the message can vary from a simple domestic matter like the example just mentioned, or (21) below, to serious long-term advice, as in (23). Common to all examples, however, is that the message is delivered as the speaker and addressee are parting, and that the speaker wants the addressee to remember and follow the injunction at some time in the future. If not — the implication clearly goes — the consequences could be bad. These notions are expressed in explication [G].

[G] \[ X \text{ pesan } Y \text{ (to do A)... } = \]

i. X said something like this to Y:

“I want you to think: ‘I have to do this (A)’”

ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time:

I want you to think about this later (i.e. some time after now)

I want you to think: it will not be good if I don’t do it

The phrasing of the dictum (I want you to think: ‘I have to do this’) indicates a desire to implant a certain prescription for action in the addressee’s mind. It corresponds roughly to one monolingual dictionary definition (KPBM 1989: 513) for the nominal form pesanan: sesuatu (seperti perintah, nasihat, dll) yang mesti dilakukan atau mesti
disampaikan kepada orang lain ‘something (such as an order, advice, etc.) which has to be done or attained for someone else’. It is consistent with consultants’ perceptions that pesan is not nearly as “strong” as suruh ‘tell to do’ — because although the dictum for pesan is clearly “pressing” in one sense, it does not express directly the personalised and culturally sensitive message ‘I want you to do this’, as does suruh. The illocutionary components of pesan present the speaker’s intention to provide a precautionary direction for the future. The importance of the message can vary (for example, an injunction to pray hard sounds “heavier” than one to study hard), but in all cases the implication is that there will be negative consequences if the instructions are not followed.


“Later, when you leave the house, shut all the doors. I am going to the garden. I’m helping your father plant the carrot seedlings,” her mother instructed (her).

(22) “Cermat sikit pandu kereta tu, Arfan,” pesan ayahnya.

“Drive the car carefully, Arfan,” his father told him.


“Study hard. Don’t neglect prayer,” were Encik Eman (parting) instructions as Sofi Aidura kissed her father’s hand.

(24) Mak selalu pesan… “Jaga adik kat sekolah.”

Mum always insisted… “Look after your brother at school.”

7. NASIHAT ‘advise, give counsel’

I have argued elsewhere (Goddard 2000) that nasihat ‘advice, counsel’ has a special place in Malay culture, springing from the shared concern, both in Islam and in traditional Malay adat, with knowing how to behave in particular circumstances; i.e., with knowing what is patut ‘proper’ or sesuai ‘appropriate, fitting’ to do. Islam is noted for offering
its followers a complete code of conduct for behaviour and morality. In the adat the guidelines were embodied in hundreds of peribahasa ‘proverbial sayings’ and pepatah ‘maxims’.

There is no shortage of nasihat in Malaysia. Within the family, orang tua ‘old people’ such as grandparents and other older relatives, and one’s ibu bapa ‘mother (and) father’, are the premium source. Religious leaders (imam) and Islamic scholars (ulama) deliver it weekly at the mosques, and through newspaper columns and TV programs. Government leaders regularly dispense guidance for the public, continuing a historical tradition of “the ruler as teacher” (cf. Milner 1982). Malay writers have long concerned themselves with providing advice, counsel and didactic messages (cf. Banks 1987).

Behind all this, there is an underlying assumption — not shared in modern Anglo culture, or in European culture generally — that there is a “right way” to act in whatever the particular circumstances may be. There is little talk of individuals “finding their own way” or finding what is “right for them”. What it is good or bad to do in particular circumstances has, in the mainstream Malay view, an objective or factual quality. Hence it makes sense that people look to those who are older and wiser, or more learned, to find out how they should act. People who do not follow (ikut), or more colloquially, “eat” (makan) nasihat, are viewed as foolish in the extreme, especially if the advice comes from older, senior people.

[H] | X (memberi ‘gave’) nasihat pada Y =
---|---
i. | X said something like this to Y:
   | “it will be good if you do this”
   | “it will not be good (i.e. be bad) for you if you don’t do this”
ii. | X said it like X was saying at the same time:
   | I say this because I want you to know it
   | everyone knows it is good if someone can say
   | things like this to other people

Nasihat typically has a familiar, formulaic quality. Often it comes with reference to traditional sayings or truisms, or to commonly accepted religious precepts, e.g. cautions against impulsiveness, remind-
ers to accept God’s will. *Nasihat* is also commonly framed in a “we-inclusive” mode using the 1pl inclusive *kita*, e.g. *kita mesti... ‘we have to...’*, *kita jangan... ‘we shouldn’t...’*. For example, *Kita jangan menggulah dengan nasib ‘We mustn’t stand in the way of fate’*. Needless to say, this is a far cry from the individualised, personalised advice style common in English, with its favourite ‘If I were you,...’ formula and its emphasis on individually tailored options which the addressee can think over and decide on for him/herself (cf. Belyaeva-Standen 1996).

(25) “Dura, ikutkan hati mati, ikutkan rasa binasa,” *nasihat* Siti Salabiah pada teman yang dilanda duka itu.

“Dura, follow your heart and die, follow your feelings and suffer [a traditional saying],” Siti Salabiah *counselled* her friend who was worn down by sadness.


“Be calm. Don’t be too nervous or later you won’t be able to answer,” *advised* Puan Anum.


“That question shouldn’t be discussed at this time. We must respect the funeral of the Honourable Member and his grieving family,” *advised* Kudin with annoyance.

8. **PUJUK ‘coax, comfort’**

The verb *pujuk* is perhaps the most intriguing and elusive of the set considered in this study. Its range of use seems very broad from an Anglo point of view, sometimes overlapping with English directives (e.g. ‘coax’, ‘persuade’, ‘suggest’) and at other times with perlocutionary verbs such as ‘comfort’, ‘calm’, and ‘flatter’ (see Table 1).

6. *Jangan* is usually glossed as ‘don’t’ (negative imperative), but perhaps ‘shouldn’t’ (“injunctive”) would be more accurate. Note that *jangan* is common in impersonal maxims of behaviour; and that it occurs freely with agentless verbs marked with the “passive” prefix *di-, as in (27).*
Though the dictionaries do not usually say so, some uses of *pujuk* apply to situations in which in Anglo culture it would be appropriate to ‘apologise’.

It is possible that *pujuk* is polysemous, so I will deal first with the clearest class of examples, namely those in (28)-(32) below. These show *pujuk* as a reportive verb with a direct speech complement. The dicta of these sentences can be declarative or imperative, but either way the apparent intention is to get the addressee to calm down, to stop worrying and to cheer up. Explication [I] interprets the illocutionary attitude as, essentially, an attempt to get the addressee to stop thinking about something which has been making the addressee feel bad and to think instead about what the speaker is saying — so that the addressee will not feel bad any more.

[1] X *pujuk* pada Y =
   i. X said some good things to Y
   ii. X said it like X was saying at the same time:
       - I know you were thinking about something else before
       - I know you felt something bad because of this
       - I want you to think about this now
       - I don’t want you to feel something bad any more

Explication [I] does not attempt to characterise the content of the dictum, presenting it as simply ‘some good things’ said to the addressee. This is because I cannot see any more specific content pattern. In particular, despite the translations ‘flatter’ and ‘wheedle’ offered by some dictionaries, the dicta are not necessarily (or even usually) complimentary remarks about the addressee.

   “Sorry I teased you just now kiddo. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. (But) I like to see you brood then laugh (again),” said Arfan *disarmingly*.

(29) “Yalah, kami guru 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.

“Yes, 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 an cheery tone.)

(30) “Siti, selagi cikgu berada di daerah ini, cikgu berjanji akan terus membanntu 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.


“Let it be, dear. That’s not our concern. If it’s not meant to be, how could it be ours,” Bedah consoled Kudin.

Example (32) needs some comment. It describes a situation following the death of the addressee’s boyfriend in a motorbike accident. She is being “comforted” by the deceased’s sister. From an Anglo perspective, it seems strange that words such as “those who have died cannot return to life” could be regarded as comforting, but in the Islamic view death is something to be accepted as the will of God. Recognising the finality of death can help us to accept it.


“Let it be, sis. Those who have died cannot return to life,” Balkis comforted Chantsa while stroking her forehead.

In a second kind of example, the speaker seems to have an ulterior motive. These are contexts in which translations such as ‘suggest’, ‘persuade’ or ‘flatter (into doing something)’ seem appropriate. For example, in (33) the speakers are clearly trying to influence the addressee to do something, i.e. to withdraw his name if he is nominated.
“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 both suggested to Kudin recently.

The question is: In an example like (33) is pujuk being used with a distinct (but related) meaning to that proposed in explication [I] or is it adequately covered by explication [I], augmented by some pragmatic or situationally-based inferencing? Against polysemy, it can be argued, firstly, that explication [I] appears to fit the context perfectly, as far as it goes: the speakers are trying to get Kudin to stop thinking about something (the possibility of standing for candidature) which could have been worrying him, and trying to get him to think instead about something more congenial (i.e. the prospect of becoming deputy without any effort). The ulterior motive, it can be argued, is just implied.

In this connection it is striking that many Malay expressions and sayings suggest that by “playing one’s cards right” verbally, we can soften a person’s attitude so that they will end up doing as we wish. There is a common expression mengambil hati (lit. get heart), which means something like ‘to charm someone’. Abdullah and Ainon (1995: 13) explain it as menyenangkan hati orang supaya disukai ‘calming someone’s heart so as to be liked’. The same compendium of peribahasa explains the traditional saying Batu pun empuk, jangankan hati manusia ‘If even a rock can be softened, so why not a person’s heart’ as follows: Tutur kata yang manis boleh melumbutkan hati yang keras ‘Speaking sweet words can soften a hard heart’. The maxim Kail berumpam, berkata bertipuan. ‘A baited hook, speaking with deception’ is explained in these terms: Kalau pandai menjaga hati orang, tentu dapat apa yang dihajat ‘If one is skilled in minding people’s feelings, we will surely get what we desire’. As one might expect, there is also a wealth of sayings cautioning people against the danger of being misled by “sweet words” (kata-kata manis) or a “sweet mouth” (mulut manis).

With all this cultural scaffolding providing a basis for inference, it seems unlikely that polysemy is required to explain the apparently
“persuasive” or “manipulative” uses of *pujuk*. On the monosemy account, *pujuk* always has the meaning indicated in [I], but in appropriate contexts the implication of an ulterior motive can be easily “read in” on account of associated cultural scripts. Without trying to state these scripts in precise detail here, it seems to me that they involve the idea that a person is likely to be resistant (figuratively, hard of heart (*hati*), like a rock) to the influence of other people if he or she is feeling something bad or thinking negative thoughts. Therefore to get someone to be receptive (figuratively, to soften their ‘heart’ (*hati*)) one must do something to get their mind off the negative thoughts and to make them feel good.

One argument that could still be raised in favour of a polysemy analysis is the apparent existence of a specialised grammatical frame associated with the putative “manipulative” meaning, namely, a construction in which *pujuk* apparently appears with an infinitival “to-complement”, as in (34) and (35) below. These appear to show a construction which, to render it in English, speaks of “pujuking” someone into doing something.

(34) 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.

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

If these truly were “to-complements”, I would see this as evidence for an additional meaning component for *pujuk* (in these uses), such as ‘X did this because X wanted Y to do something’. In this way, the complement would be linked with an underlying WANT in semantic structure. However, true “to-complements” in Malay appear without any complementiser, whereas the subordinate clauses in examples (34)-(35) do have complementisers: *agar* ‘in order that’ and *supaya* ‘in order
that’. This suggests that the relevant clauses are purpose adjuncts rather than “subcategorized” complements of pujuk.

9. Concluding remarks: ethnopragmatics as “thick description”

“Ethnography”, said Clifford Geertz (1973) is “thick description” — the task of “sorting out the structures of signification” while at the same time “determining their social ground and import” (p. 9). The same can be said of ethnopragmatics. And just as ethnography, in Geertz’s vision, proceeds through the microscopic explication of “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another” (p. 10), so too with ethnopragmatics. Lexical meanings, grammatical structures, discourse patterns and cultural scripts are all intertwined in the complex texture of discourse. As we attempt to unravel and to understand these complexities, what we are attempting is not to reduce the complex to the simple, but rather — and here Geertz concurs with Lévi-Strauss — to substitute “the involved but comprehensible for the involved but incomprehensible” (p. 33). Hence the importance, for ethnography at large and for ethnopragmatics in particular, of a comprehensible metalanguage for formulating interpretations of conceptual structures.

In an obvious sense the focus of the present study has been very narrow — the meanings and uses of a small set of Malay speech-act verbs, but I hope it can be read as a slice of “thick description”. At several important points, the lexical-semantic and cultural-pragmatic aspects of the analysis have proved to be mutually reinforcing and mutually informative. For example, cultural-pragmatic facts allowed us to discount polysemy for ajak ‘encourage, urge’ and pujuk ‘coax, comfort’, while lexical-semantic analysis of suruh ‘tell to do’ and mina ‘ask for’ highlighted the Malay cultural constraints against explicitly expressing the message ‘I want you to do this’. The conceptual structure and presuppositions of nasihat ‘advice, counsel’ proved to be strongly congruent with its characteristic forms of expression. In these and other ways, I hope to have shown not only that lexical semantics and cultural pragmatics are tightly intertwined in Malay, but also to have demonstrated the value of an ethnopragmatic approach to speech acts in general.
Appendix: Proposed semantic primes (English/Malay)

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<th>Substantives</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<td>YOU — KAU</td>
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<td>A SHORT TIME — SEKEAP</td>
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<td>Mental predicates</td>
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<td>WANT — MAHU</td>
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<td>Speech</td>
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<td>Actions, Events, Movement</td>
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<td>Existence and possession</td>
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<td>Determiners and Quantifiers</td>
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<td>OTHER — LAIN</td>
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<td>ALL — SEMUA</td>
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<td>MANY/MUCH — BANYAK(RAMAI)</td>
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<td>SOME — BEBEGERAPA</td>
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The listing above relates to the primary meanings of the words involved. Individual words may have secondary meanings which are
different in the two languages; for example, Malay *rasa* can mean 'taste', as well as *FEEL*; English *want* can mean 'need' as well as *WANT*. For a full description of a Malay-based natural semantic meta-language, see Goddard (In press d).

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Directive speech acts in Malay (Bahasa Melayu): an ethnopragmatic perspective


