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## Ambiguity on the Use of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun among Foreign Students

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### Abstract

The aim of the study is to explore the ambiguity that occurs through the use of Malay Language Personal Pronouns (PP) among foreign students. Hence, this study was carried out to identify and analyze ambiguity in the use of the reference personal noun 'We' among foreign students. This study is a field study and the study data was obtained using observation methods and interviews. Next, this PP usage data is recorded using a conversation recording tool. The location of this study is at the International Modern Arabic School, Putrajaya, Malaysia. A total of 24 samples were selected as respondents using non-probability sampling techniques. The findings found that there are several factors that cause the ambiguity of PP and the English translation of "we" also affect the understanding of foreign speakers.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Personal Pronoun, First Language, Second Language, Foreign Student

### Introduction

Ambiguity is a phenomenon that occurs at almost all levels of linguistic analysis (Piandotasi et al., 2012). Ambiguity also occurs in the use of Personal Pronouns (PP) in the Malay language. This is because PP in the Malay language is context-sensitive and has references that are not only diverse but require context sensitivity. According to Hamzah (2012), failure in the use of PP references that are context-insensitive will result in a situation of vagueness in communication. This is because PP needs to be properly understood and examined according to the context of status, age factors, and type of relationship between individuals to ensure their reference is accurate in terms of time and place (Jalaludin, 1992). Thus, the ambiguity in PP has the potential to be emphasised to avoid vagueness among foreign speakers who lack understanding of Malay culture.

For that reason, it is not surprising that the Malay language system that is quite difficult to master by students, especially foreigners, is the PP referral system. This difference occurs between the Malay language system and the L1 (First Language) of the student. For example, in the English PP, 'I' and 'You' are used by everyone because they have common traits (Johari et al., 2018), compared to the Malay language, whereby some of the first PP lexicons that refer to oneself are used according to usage contexts such as 'Saya' and 'Aku'. Thus, indicators of these similarities or differences should be identified by the study to avoid ambiguity when using them.

Furthermore, learning the Malay language as a foreign language is certainly interesting, but not easy (Mardian, 2018). This is because the selection of an appropriate PP in conveying information is important. If there is ambiguity and unsuitability according to context, messages and information will not be successfully conveyed. In a study related to PP through a dialect perspective in Sabah and Sarawak, Jalaluddin (1992) and Sintian (2016) explained that PP has a certain role and social factors in the use of dialects in a society. The role of context also plays an important role in avoiding ambiguity in PP. Thus, this study that emphasises PP among foreign speakers is due to ambiguity, especially when using and developing Malay language proficiency in accordance with the context of its use. The string of problems and exposures in aspects of these studies opens up opportunities and gaps for the researcher to analyse the ambiguity faced by foreign students in the context of the reference of the pronoun 'kami' through pragmatic aspects.

### **Objective of Study**

Based on the information that has been explained, this study was conducted to:

- Identify the ambiguity in the use of 'kami' as a Personal Pronoun among foreign students
- Analyse the ambiguity in the use of 'kami' as a Personal Pronoun among foreign students.

### **Literature Review**

Ambiguity in the Malay Language

Jaafar and Haron (2016) have conducted a study on ambiguity in the Malay language with the title "*Kesilapan Bahasa Melayu dalam Kalangan Pelajar-Pelajar Universiti Kebangsaan Yunnan di Akademi Pengajian Melayu*". The study focused on the aspects of writing among Yunnan National University students at the Academy of Malay Studies, University of Malaya. The objective of the study was to examine the aspects of Malay language errors in the student's final examination answer script, namely morphological, syntactic, and mechanical aspects. The findings of the study show that aspects of morphological errors that have been made involve the use of affixes, the use of prepositions, the use of alien words, violation of the law of the plural, the choice of words or terms, as well as the use of conjunctions. The analysis of syntactic errors involves sentence structure, incomplete sentences, phrase construction, and the presence of sentences whose meaning is incomprehensible, while the mechanical aspect includes spelling errors, the use of punctuation, and capitalisation. The ambiguity in mastering these three aspects of the Malay language system not only causes language errors and inaccuracies in defining meaning, but also inconsistency in the use of the language.

Further, the study of ambiguity in the Malay language has been conducted by Said, Jannah and Suhaila (2014) with the title "*Analisis Gender dalam Bahasa Melayu dari Sudut Leksikal dan Makna*". Aspects associated with the ambiguity of the Malay language in this study involved lexical vagueness. The focus of the study was lexical gender in language. The objective of the study was to identify, elaborate, and classify the Malay language lexicon based on gender elements. The study shows that there are differences in meaning for lexical items that are characterised by the female gender. For data analysis purposes, The Analysis of Meaning Components by Katz and Fodor (1963) and extended by Lyons (1994) was used for data collection purposes. The findings prove that the Malay language vocabulary has a gender lexical. Gender lexical refers to the male or female gender and has a natural nature

that is neither male nor female. This study is seen as interesting because there is a female gender that does not refer to the gender of men or women.

Finally, Bustamam and Yusof (2011) also discussed the ambiguity in the Malay language through the title *"Kata Kerja Semelfactives Dalam Bahasa Melayu: Satu Analisis Aktionsart"*. The study aims to solve the problems and issues present in semelfactive verbs as well as classify the semelfactive verbs found in the Malay language. Semelfactive is a practise that is repetitive and has no change in circumstances. Thus, the verb has no finishing point. However, many issues are present with this verb. The Theory of Role and Reference Grammar (Van Valin, 2005) and Susan Rothstein's approach (2004) were used in the study. Through the study, ambiguity of semelfactive verbs is present in the Malay language. In fact, there is a disagreement on the characteristics of semelfactive verbs as well as accomplishment verbs. According to the study, the aspect of ambiguity in classifying semelfactive verbs in the Malay language should be examined to obtain a solution.

Evidently, the focus of this study has been on explaining the ambiguity inherent in the Malay language, as well as on examining the ambiguity associated with it.

#### A Study on Malay Language Personal Pronouns

The study of PP in the Malay language can be identified through several aspects, namely politeness, dialect, age, grammar, and medium of use. The study of PP was conducted by Dawi et al (2019), with the title *"'Aku' dalam Norma Interpretasi Masyarakat di Lahad Datu, Sabah"*. The objective of this study is to identify the use of 'Aku' based on the context among addressers and addressees as well as to discuss the differences in use among the community in Sabah. The qualitative method acts as the research approach, and observational methods are used for the data collection process. According to the study, the use of "Aku" among the community in Sabah is not limited to addressees of different ages and status, but also to new acquaintances. This situation does not exhibit impoliteness in communication but rather cultural factors as its use is associated with language divergences based on culture. The results of the study showed that the use of "Aku" among the people in Lahad Datu, Sabah has a variance with the presence of politeness, intimacy, friendliness, a sense of belonging and even eloquence in its use.

A study on PP was also done by Abdullah et al (2017) with the title *"Tafsir Pimpinan Ar-Rahman: Tinjauan Terhadap Unsur Kesopanan Dalam Sociolinguistik Melayu"*. The tafsir is a translation of the meaning of the Quran into the Malay language, produced by Sheikh Abdullah Basmeih. This study was conducted by examining the translation of Arabic PP into Malay with the selection of several verses from the Quran, which is a dialogue conversation between father and son. This selection is to adapt the translation method to the context and sociolinguistic aspects of the Malays. Interest is given to the element of politeness in interacting. The researcher explained that PP in textual linguistics is an important element that has a role in the formation of text balance, i.e., blending or cohesion in the text. It is also emphasised that the process of transferring messages from the source language to the targeted or L2 (Second Language) must use the correct PP as well to ensure the message transition is accurate and easy for the readers to understand.

Furthermore, Sintian (2016) has conducted a study on PP in the Sabah dialect with the title *"Kata Ganti Nama Diri dalam Dialek Bunduliwan"*. The focus of this study involves the elucidation of the first, second, and third PP in the Bunduliwan dialect. Studies using observation methods, interviews, and analysis of this document show that PP in the Bunduliwan dialect has various functions, namely as subject, object, and owner. In fact, PP

also acts as a subject that cannot be used interchangeably in the same sentence. This uniqueness, at the same time, proves that the study of PP needs to be explored from various aspects and dimensions.

The diversity of aspects that have been studied and examined by past researchers has led to this study, which emphasises the PP aspects. This multi-faceted study will add and disseminate more knowledge and information on the Malay language as well as smooth out its development process to all corners of the world. Finally, also presented in the highlights of this research is a study conducted on the Malay language among foreign speakers. Mahamod et al (2019) have conducted a study on attitudes towards the Malay language and its level of proficiency among foreign students. This study is titled *“Attitudes and Motivation towards the Malay Language and the Level of Mastery among the Lower Secondary School Students in Pattani, Thailand”*. This study was carried out to examine the level of proficiency among students who attend Malay language courses. This qualitative study also used questionnaires for data collection purposes. A total of 100 Form Three students from two selected schools in Pattani, Thailand acted as respondents to the study. The data was analysed using the T-Test and Correlation Test, and guided by Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model. The findings showed that the students’ attitudes towards learning the Malay language are at a moderately high level. In fact, the results of studies based on student motivation also showed the same level, which is moderately high. Clearly, the motivation of Malay language students in southern Thailand will increase if their skills and mastery of the Malay language increase in the learning sessions.

### **Methodology**

The restrictions of this study led to the situation and the use of PP references in the Malay language among foreign speakers. The study was limited to 24 foreign students who spoke Arabic. These respondents were foreign students who took Malay language subjects. The location of this study is at the International Modern Arabic School, Putrajaya. The Malay language is a compulsory subject at this school. The study materials used are recording aids, namely voice recorders and interview question lists. The recording lasted 40 minutes and the results of the recordings were transcribed.

### **Findings**

The Personal Pronoun (PP) of ‘kami’ refers to the first-person pronoun, which is plural and exclusive, that is, excluding the second person. ‘Kami’ has been literally translated into English as ‘we’. Learning and teaching strategies that inculcate a language translation approach are important to overcome problems, assist in understanding learning and use information to achieve effective communication goals, especially for foreign students at the primary level.

However, there are weaknesses in the direct translation approach from L1 to L2, as it may cause problems and does not provide comprehensive assistance in the development of L2 skills among foreign students. In this context, Tuan Mat and Ahmad (2014) have explained that in the context of language teaching, translations involving the language system are known as grammatical-translation methods. This method is one of the initial methods used in language teaching and involves both the issues or polemics in L2 teaching and learning. In this respect, there are some criticisms that the grammar-translation method with the presence of L1 is seen to interfere with the teaching and learning process of foreign languages, having a negative influence as well as causing confusion in the translation of L1 to L2 (House, 2009). It

turns out that ambiguity can still be identified when foreign speakers are found to be less confident in using 'kami' PP when conversing.

The first data to analyse on 'kami' PP is shown in the table below:

Data	Line No.	Speaker	Conversation
1	70	CK	I (CK speaks in Arabic) Understand? Okay, next I want you to copy <i>and</i> then Muksin, come (CK speaks in Arabic) Come here Next is [ka[
	71	MM	=mi
	72	CK	[ka[
	73	MM	=mi

**Table 1: Ambiguity on the Reference of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun (Data 1)**

Based on the table above, the researcher used the abbreviation MM to refer to the class students and CK to the class teacher. The Malay, English, and Arabic languages are the mediums of delivery in the classroom. The use and selection of language depends on the needs and context of teaching and learning in the classroom.

The findings of the first data through Table 1 above show that there is ambiguity based on the Malay language teacher's questions to foreign speakers. Foreign students still expect help from teachers to answer questions and require more attention from Malay language teachers. The ambiguity, i.e., vagueness, however, is seen as a good indicator towards the development of Malay language verbal skills among students. The question and repetition activities that have been implemented have opened up opportunities for foreign students to eliminate ambiguity and use 'kami' PP reference. Speech and pronunciation of words in the Malay language should receive guidance from the teacher to enable the influence of the phoneme sounds of the native language to be eliminated in the speech of students who speak a foreign language.

Data	Line No.	Speaker	Conversation
3	82	CK	<i>Kami mahu pergi ke tandas.</i> What is the meaning of this sentence? I repeat::: <i>Kami mahu pergi ke tandas</i> :::What is the meaning of this sentence? Yes, Sarah.
	83	SMM (mungkin Sarah)	()
	84	CK	No ((makes the quiet sound)) Yes?
	85	SMM	We want to go to the loo
	86	CK	Yes, we want to go to bathroom or toilet Okay, " <i>kami ialah</i> " means?
	87	SMM	We

**Table 2: Ambiguity on the Reference of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun (Data 2)**

Next, the data is scrutinised as per Table 2 above. The SMM in the table refers to one of the students. There are two conditions based on it, which are the presence of 'kami' PP ambiguity and the absence of significant ambiguity. This situation is proof that not all students who speak foreign languages experience ambiguity in using 'kami' PP. In addition, there are those who have a higher level of Malay language proficiency. The above data explains that there are students with syntactic skills in the Malay language through the sentence "*Kami mahu pergi ke tandas*" (line 82) and "*We want to go to the loo*" (line 85). The above linguistic capabilities are consistent with Carroll's statement (1981), which categorises such an ability as grammatical sensitivity. The four categories of human ability in learning a new language are phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, memorisation ability and inductive learning ability. In fact, this data proves and shows that children are not capable of remembering many words, phrases, as well as sentences they have received if they have little basis in exploring abstract meanings (Dani, 2017).

Data	Line No.	Speaker	Conversation
4	268	SMM	I ((CK writes on blackboard)) And then <i>kami</i> means we <i>Kita</i>
	269	CK	() wrong Alright

**Table 3: Ambiguity on the Reference of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun (Data 3)**

Next, the ambiguity of 'kami' PP can be identified through a quiz, where students have to write on a whiteboard to test their speed in producing answers. As shown in Table 3 above, SMM explains that 'kami' PP means 'we' then changes it to 'kita' PP. This situation clearly

shows that there is ambiguity or uncertainty when giving answers. The answers given are inaccurate and confusing.

Data	Line No.	Speaker	Conversation
2	76	CK	Good Okay, <i>kami</i> and <i>kita</i> <i>Saya</i> mean I or me Okay, how to differentiate between <i>kami</i> and <i>kita</i> Okay, this is () and this is () and this is Mukhsin Okay (CK speaks in Arabic) all of us that is <u>we</u> We must differentiate between them. Between two of these. Okay, <u>kami</u> for example, this is <i>Cikgu</i> ::aa:: Sanada right?
	77	MM	()
	78	CK	Sara ((laugh)) () Okay Sara, <i>sit up, stand</i> ((sound of chair being pushed)) Okay, <i>Cikgu Sarah</i> , say yes

**Table 4: Ambiguity on the Reference of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun (Data 4)**

Table 4 shows the ambiguity of the 'kami' PP, which clearly occurs when a Malay language teacher asks a question about the difference between the PP of 'kami' and 'kita'. In fact, a poor reaction has taken place, which is silent without a word. The silence that occurs is not a new thing in L2 acquisition, and various causes as well as assumptions can be the factors that triggered this silence. Thus, the researcher proceeded with a brief semi-structured interview. According to the interview, a student who speaks a foreign language, Sara Osama, stated that she was confused or forgot the difference between 'kami' and 'kita' PP, hence triggering silence in the conversation. This situation is deemed true as it proves that the ability of foreign speakers who may still process two languages simultaneously and the latent learning makes them choose silence (Dani, 2017).

Data	Line No.	Speaker	Conversation
5	309	SMM	<i>Kami</i> means you
	310	CK	No... Wrong ((MM makes noise)) () Hands down 3,4 Muhammad (maybe?) ((MM makes noise)) No no come come What is the meaning of :: <i>kami</i> ::?

**Table 5: Ambiguity on the Reference of 'Kami' Personal Pronoun (Data 5)**

The data analysis on 'kami' PP ends with the data in the table above. Table 5 shows data describing the ambiguity among foreign students stating the first 'kami' PP as the second PP of 'awak'. Based on the above data, there is a new discovery in the study. The ambiguity involves the aspect of the PP category in the Malay language and not just ambiguity in the first PP category.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Findings and Discussion

Through observation of this data, the researcher have formulated that the ambiguity of 'Kami' PP involves three situations, which are:

- 1- Uncertainty on the meaning or concept of 'kami' PP
- 2- The first PP of 'kami' is regarded as the same as the first PP of 'kita'
- 3- The first PP of 'kami' is regarded as the same as the second PP of 'awak'

This research is a linguistic study that covers the acquisition and learning of the Malay language as an L2 among foreign speakers. In addition, the study also highlighted the significance of pragmatic knowledge among foreign speakers. The findings showed that there are five conversation data sets in classes that have shown aspects of ambiguity in the use of 'kami' PP. The influence of the English language, translated into 'we', also affects the understanding of foreign speakers. It took them a long time to choose a suitable PP that corresponded to the meaning in the Malay language and did not contradict the actual answer. In addition, the researcher have concluded that there are three factors of 'kami' PP ambiguity among foreign speakers. Thus, the ambiguity highlighted is a manifestation of the development of the level and indicators of L2 acquisition among foreign speakers who use L2 in their speeches and conversations. The use of context and the impact of high context on information are also very important in interpreting meaning to help increase the relevance of a conversation as well as smoothen the process of communication.

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