The Semantic Development of *Ter-*

Author(s): Lionel Wee


Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via [http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/](http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/).

*The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* is published online via [eLanguage](http://elanguage), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.
The Semantic Development Of Ter-
Lionel Wee
University of California, Berkeley

1 Introduction

Most discussions of Malay prefixes, while acknowledging their polysemous nature, make little attempt to show how the various meanings associated with a particular prefix are related to each other. The polysemy of a prefix, then, is usually presented in the form of a list and the question of how or why the prefix should have the kinds of uses that it does is never fully addressed. In this paper, I focus on the prefix ter-, which can be used in the following ways:

i) to indicate 'lack of volition' (with verbs)
ii) to indicate 'completed action' (with verbs)
iii) as a superlative/intensifier (with adjectives)

The aim of the paper is to account for the current polysemy of ter- by looking at its semantic development. Towards the end of the paper, I shall also speculate on the etymology of the prefix.

2 Preliminaries

2.1 Metaphor as a source of polysemy

In metaphor, our understanding of one domain of experience is mapped onto another. The use of the same expression for both domains leads to polysemy. For example, the metaphor LINEAR SCALES ARE PATHS maps the starting point of a path onto the bottom of a scale and distances travelled along the path onto relative measures of qualities or quantities (see Lakoff 1990 for details).

1 John is way ahead of Bill in intelligence

2 He’s almost through reading that book

As 1 shows, the phrase way ahead, which refers to the relative positions of two entities on a path (‘X is way ahead of Y’), can be used to indicate the relative degrees to which a quality is present. In our analysis of ter-, we shall be particularly interested in the situation exemplified in 2 where the word through, which refers to motion past a boundary, can be used to indicate the endpoint or completion of an action.

2.2 Metonymic inference as a source of polysemy

In metonymy, one meaning is contextually contiguous with another, possibly via a relation of conversational inference. The conventionalization of the inference then leads to polysemy (Hopper and Traugott 1993). Consider the metonymy ENDPOINT OF SCALE FOR NEAR ENDPOINT for which examples are given in 3-5 below.

3 The car is completely/*extremely wrecked (completed action)
4 The toast is completely/extremely burnt (completed action/quality)
5 That guy is completely/extremely nuts (quality)

Note that in 3, where wrecked refers to the result of an action, it is possible to use the form completely but not extremely. However, in 4, burnt is ambiguous between a completed action and a quality so that both completely and extremely are allowed. It is likely that the use of completely in situations such as 4 led to it being metonymically associated with an intensifier sense so that instead of only indicating the endpoint of a scale, completely is also able to indicate a point near the end of a scale. The conventionalization of this intensifier sense then licenses the use of completely in an example such as 5 where nuts clearly refers only to a quality.

3 The behaviour of ter-

We now come to the focus of this paper, the polysemy of ter-.

With verbs:
ter- indicates ‘lack of volition’
6 Ali ter-kejut
   Ali ter-aware
   Ali was startled

7 John ter-pukul Ali
   John ter-hit Ali
   John accidentally hit Ali

As 6-7 show, ter- can indicate that an action was accidental or involuntary. (The verb kejut, which literally means ‘to awaken’ is almost always used metaphorically to mean ‘be startled’.) Note that in 6, the use of ter- is intransitive so that the subject is both actor and patient. But in 7, the use of ter- is transitive so that the actor and the patient refer to distinct entities. An unsurprising but important constraint that ter- places on the subject and, if present, the object, is that both participants must lack volition. For example, in 7, neither John nor Ali can be willing participants in the hitting event. Thus, in a two-participant situation where the patient was willing to be hit, ter- cannot be used even though the actor may have acted non-volitionally. Some other prefix such as di- is used instead, as in 8 below. The choice of di- doesn’t necessarily mean that the subject is a volitional patient, it merely allows for such an interpretation.

8 Ali di-pukul (oleh John)
   Ali di-hit (by John)
   Ali was hit (by John) (where Ali wanted to be hit)

It is, however, possible to use ter- in a situation where the actor intentionally did the hitting as long as we have a non-volitional patient. The actor, in this case, must appear either in the oblique or not at all, as in 9.
Ali ter-pukul (oleh John)
Ali ter-hit (by John)
Ali was hit (by John) (where John intentionally hit Ali)

We can conclude that the requirement of non-volitionality placed by ter- on its participants extends only to the core argument(s) of the verb prefixed by ter-, that is, the subject and, if present, the object. An argument that appears in the oblique is able to escape this requirement. Since Malay lacks the equivalent of an antipassive construction, where the patient is either placed in the oblique or suppressed, a situation with a volitional patient can never take the ter- prefix. However, since Malay is able to place the actor in the oblique, and have the patient in the subject position, a situation where the actor is volitional can still be coded by ter-. Note that this gives the ter- clause the form of a passive, which brings us to the other use of ter- with verbs, that of indicating ‘completed action’.

With verbs:

ter- indicates ‘completed action’

10 Makanan ter-hidang di mejap
   Food ter-serve on table
   Food is served on the table

11 Tingkap rumah itu sudah ter-tutup
   Window house the already ter-close
   The windows of the house have been closed

We see that the ‘completed action’ use of ter- also takes the form of a passive, and differs from the ‘lack of volition’ passives (such as 9) mainly in the animacy of the subjects. The subject in 9 is human, while those in 10-11 are inanimate.

Actually, calling this the ‘completed action’ use of ter- is somewhat misleading since ter- doesn’t really indicate any kind of perfectivity. As 12-13 show, both the uses of ter- discussed so far, the ‘lack of volition’ and ‘completed action’ uses, can occur with the progressive marker sedang.

12 John sedang ter-jatuh
   John PROG ter-fall
   John is falling

13 Makanan sedang ter-hidang di mejap
   Food PROG ter-serve di mejap
   Food is being served

12 can be uttered felicitously if John happens to be falling from a very high cliff so that it would take him a couple of minutes to hit the ground. However, it is true that uses of ter- with a progressive marker are rare, and that there is a strong tendency to associate ter- events with perfectivity. This can be explained by assuming that the association of ter- with perfectivity is simply a default consequence of the fact that ter- marks ‘lack of volition’ since ‘the difference between an accidental and a purposeful act is precisely in whether the actor is aware of all phases or only of the act’s termination’ (DeLancey 1981:490). This close association of ter- with perfectivity has not only led some analysts to treat ter- as indicating ‘completed action’, more importantly, native speakers also tend to
perceive *ter-* as marking ‘completed action’. And as we shall see, this perception on the part of the speakers plays an important role in the semantic development of the prefix. For this reason, I continue to use the term ‘completed action’ in this paper.

With adjectives:

*ter-* is a superlative or intensifier

14 Rumah Suyin ter-besar
   House Suyin ter-big
   *Suyin’s house is the biggest/extremely big*

15 Gunung itu ter-tinggi
   Mountain the ter-high
   *The mountain is the highest/extremely high*

Finally, as 14–15 show, *ter-* can be used as a superlative or an intensifier when prefixed to adjectives. The distinction between the superlative and intensifier use is usually context-dependent. For the purpose of this paper, I will simply refer to this as the ‘intensifier’ use of *ter-*. 

4 Classical Malay (The Hikayat Hang Tuah)

We begin our investigation of the semantic development of *ter-* with an analysis of a text, the Hikayat Hang Tuah, taken from the period of Classical Malay. This was probably first written down around the 16th century though this is not uncontroversial. For our purposes, however, the precise date of the text is not as crucial as the relative development of the various uses of the prefix. In the Hikayat, out of the 218 tokens of *ter-* present, only three are with adjectives. The rest are with verbs. On the other hand, we find a *ter-lalu* construction which is used mainly as an intensifier. Thus, out of the 153 tokens of *ter-lalu*, only eight are used with verbs. The rest are with adjectives. The details are given in Figure 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With verbs:</th>
<th><em>ter-</em></th>
<th><em>ter-lalu</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>senyum ‘smile’ (20)</td>
<td>ingat ‘remember’ (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kejut ‘startle (lit. awake)’ (15)</td>
<td>ber-tuah ‘lucky’ (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dengar ‘hear’ (14)</td>
<td>ber-bahagia ‘be-happy’ (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ber-hainya ‘be-sorrowful’ (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>me-nangis ‘be-crying’ (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>me-rompak ‘be-looting’ (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With adjs:</th>
<th>banyak ‘many’ (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>berat ‘heavy’ (1)</td>
<td>sukacita ‘joyful’ (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utama ‘excellant’ (1)</td>
<td>baik ‘good’ (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>banyak ‘many’ (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1

The parentheses indicate the total number of tokens for a particular type of verb or adjective. To save space, I have included only the three most frequent types of verbs or adjectives for *ter-* and *ter-lalu* respectively. We can see that *ter-* is mainly
used with verbs, and rarely with adjectives. The ‘intensifier’ sense is mainly conveyed via the ter-lalu construction, an example of which is shown in 16.

16  ... kita sekalian kerjakan, kerana kebaktian saudara hamba kelima itu we all work, because devotion friend-servant all-five the
   pun ter-lalu besar
   FOCUS ter-lalu big

   *we all work together because the devotion of all five confidantes is very
great

It appears then, that in Classical Malay, the ‘intensifier’ use of ter- is only beginning to be developed. On the other hand, the ‘lack of volition’ and ‘completed action’ uses of ter- are already relatively well-established. This suggests that we first attempt to account for the latter two uses of ter-, and leave aside for the moment, its ‘intensifier’ use.

5  Relating ‘lack of volition’ and ‘completed action’

   We first note that, according to Figure 1, the most frequent uses of ter- are with verbs which are low in transitivity. For example, the verbs senyum and kejut are intransitive verbs, and the verb dengar is a verb of perception. We can therefore begin our anlayasis with ter- sentences such as those given below in 17-19.

17  Maka Hang Tuah ter-senyum
    And Hang Tuah ter-smile
    *And Hang Tuah smiled

18  Hang Mahmud pun ter-kejut
    Hang Mahmud FOCUS ter-aware
    *Hang Mahmud was startled

19  ... ia ter-dengar guruh di langit
    he ter-hear thunder in sky
    *he heard the thunder in the sky

Note that although all the above uses of ter- are relatively low in transitivity, the construction in 19 allows ter- to take a direct object. 19 indicates that ter- is already beginning to be extended to verbs that are higher in transitivity since there are now two distinct participants in the ter- event. Further increase in the transitivity of the verbs gives us sentences like 20 below and 7 above.

20  Lelaki itu ter-minum racun
    Man the ter-drink poison
    *The man accidentally drank poison

   But some of these transitive verbs, though particularly suited to ter-
   prefixation because they involve non-volitional patients, cannot take ter- in an active
transitive construction because it is not easy to construe the actor as acting non-volitionally. An example of such a verb is *tawan ‘capture’.

*Orang Melaka ter-tawan anak Raja Kelantan yang perempuan itu People Melaka ter-capture child Raja Kelantan REL woman the ketiga-nya all-three-POSS

The people of Melaka captured the three daughters of the Prince of Kelantan

21 is unacceptable because even though the three captive daughters are non-volitional participants, the people of Melaka are clearly not. As we saw, since the constraint of non-volitionality that ter- imposes extends only over its core arguments, the only way to code the event in 21 is with a passive construction, as shown in 22-23.

... dan anak Raja Kelantan yang perempuan itu ketiga-nya ter-tawan and child Raja Kelantan REL woman the all-three-POSS ter-capture oleh Orang Melaka by People Melaka

and the three daughters of the Prince of Kelantan were captured by the people of Melaka

23 Maka Raja Sulung ter-tawan ke Acheh And Raja Sulung ter-capture to Acheh And Prince Sulung was taken captive to Acheh

We now recall that the ‘completed action’ use of ter- also has the form of a passive, and differs from the passives in 22-23 by having inanimate subjects. Since the subject is now a patient in 22-23, it is natural to further extend the range of possible subjects to inanimates, giving us the uses of ter- shown in 10-11 above, and in 24 below.

... keris-nya sudah ter-hunus blade-POSS already ter-unsheath his blade was already unsheathed

Of course, having an inanimate subject still obeys, by default, the requirement that the core argument(s) of a ter- clause be non-volitional since inanimates lack volition anyway. But more importantly, precisely because of this, the issue of volition now becomes irrelevant. The fact that ter- marks ‘lack of volition’ becomes less salient, and speakers are now free to perceive this as a different use of ter-. This difference is interpreted as a ‘completed action’ use because of the close association that we noted between non-volitional action and perfectivity. It is also possible that this already close association is further strengthened by the passive nature of the construction.
Summarizing thus far, we began with uses of ter- which are relatively low in transitivity. This was then extended to verbs which are much more transitive, giving us uses of ter- in situations where there is a clear distinction between the actor and the patient. However, in situations where we have a non-volitional patient, but where the actor is not easily construed as acting non-volitionally, the ter- clause takes the form of a passive construction. The semantic extension of the subjects in the passive to inanimates makes the question of volition moot, and this opens the way for the perception of a new use of ter-, that of indicating 'completed action'.

We now turn our attention to the 'intensifier' use of ter-.

6 Relating the 'intensifier' use

Recall that in Classical Malay, the 'intensifier' use was mainly conveyed via a ter-lalu construction. 25 shows that the word lalu means 'to pass by'. (The prefix meN- is glossed as an active voice marker and the -i suffix is glossed as a transitivizer. These are undoubtedly oversimplifications since these affixes are also complex. However, a discussion of their semantics is beyond the scope of this paper.)

25 Dia me-lalu-i geraja itu sebelum membelok ke kiri
He ACT-lalu-TR church the before ACT-turn to left
He passed by the church before turning to the left

However, as 26 shows, lalu can also indicate 'completed action'.

26 Orang masuk lalu duduk
People enter lalu sit
People entered and then sat down

Recall from our discussion in Section 2.1 of the LINEAR SCALES ARE PATHS metaphor that it is possible for motion past a boundary to metaphorically indicate the completion of an action (example 2). In fact, the use of lalu as a marker of 'completed action' is extremely common in Classical Malay, as shown by the examples below.

27 Maka Bendahara pun me-nyembah lalu berjalan kembali
And official FOCUS ACT-pay-homage lalu walk return
And the official paid homage and then returned (to where he came from)

28 ... maka Laksamana pun turun dari balai gendang itu lalu
and Laksamana FOCUS descend from hall drum the lalu

berjalan masuk ke dalam pagar lalu berdiri di tengah halaman istana itu
walk enter to inside fence lalu alone in middle courtyard palace the

and Laksamana descended from the hall of drums and then entered the fence
and then stood alone in the middle of the palace courtyard

Since lalu can indicate 'completed action', and since ter- is perceived to also indicate 'completed action', this must have prompted speakers of Malay to reanalyse the ter-
lalu construction (which originally probably meant ‘happened to pass by’) as a marker of ‘completed action’, giving us the small number of uses of ter-lalu with verbs that we noted earlier in Figure 1. This use of ter-lalu with a verb is exemplified in 29.

29 kerana ia ter-lalu ingat  
   because he ter-lalu remember  
   because he remembered completely

The process of reanalysis is schematically represented in Figure 2 below.

*ter-lalu ‘happened to pass by’  \rightarrow  ter-lalu ‘completed action’

Figure 2

The original meaning of ter-lalu ‘happened to pass by’ is shown with an asterisk because I have not been able to find any use of ter-lalu with this particular meaning. In other words, ter-lalu appears to have been totally reanalysed as a marker of ‘completed action’ in the Hikayat.

We can now account for the subsequent use of ter-lalu as an ‘intensifier’ by using the metonymy ENDPOINT OF SCALE FOR NEAR ENDPOINT, which was discussed earlier in Section 2.2 and exemplified with sentences 3-5. The use of this metonymy is motivated by the fact that some of the verbs that are modified by ter-lalu are stative, and thus tend to blur the distinction between an action and a quality. An example is shown in 30 below. This, of course, creates the possibility that ter-lalu is then metonymically associated with an ‘intensifier’ sense so that it is now able to indicate a point near the end of a scale.

30 Demi Tun Tuah melihat muka Tun Teja itu, ter-lalu berhainya  
   When Tun Tuah ACT-see face Tun Teja the, ter-lalu be-sorrowful  
   When Tun Tuah saw Tun Teja's face, he became extremely depressed

The conventionalization of this gives us an unambiguously ‘intensifier’ use, leading to sentences such as 31 below, and 16 above.

31 ... ia pun ter-lalu amarah  
   he FOCUS ter-lalu angry  
   he was extremely angry

I suggest that over a period of time, speakers came to treat the ter-lalu construction as being especially emphatic since the construction constitutes a form of notional reduplication due to the fact that each member of the construction is perceived to have the same meaning of ‘completed action’. Speakers then decided that a non-emphatic form was more appropriate. The ter- prefix was therefore able to take over the ‘intensifier’ use for itself.
Support for this suggestion comes from the fact that in Modern Malay, the ter-lalu construction still exists, but is distinguished from ter- by having an 'excessive' use rather than an 'intensifier' use. For example, compare 32 with 33.

32  Buku itu ter-besar  
    Book the ter-big
    *The book is extremely big*

33  Buku itu ter-lalu besar  
    Book the ter-lalu big
    *The book is too big*

In Classical Malay, the distinction between the 'intensifier' and 'excessive' uses was not conventionalized, and depended on the context instead; both were coded by the ter-lalu construction. Thus, compare 34 with 16.

34  Maka dalam berkata-kata itu maka berbunyi pula orang gempar  
    Then in to keep-talking the then to sound again people clamor
    di tengah pesara, ter-lalu huru-hara mengatakan orang mengamuk
    in middle supporter, ter-lalu tumult ACT-speak people ACT-run amuck
    dalam kampung Bendahara Paduka Raja  
    in village Chief Minister King
    *Then, while the talking was going on, then there was the sound again of a mob in the midst of the supporters, (it was) too noisy to speak (and) people ran amuck inside the village of the Chief Minister of the King*

7 On a possible etymology of ter-

7.1 Uighur: The case of salmaq 'put into/insert'

In order to look for a possible etymon for ter-, we first consider an interesting piece of comparative data from Uighur, an Altaic language. Here, we find that the word salmaq 'to put into/insert' (the -maq suffix is normally used in citation forms) can be used as an auxiliary to indicate 'lack of volition' (Taub 1994).

35  U kitabni hujunga sal-di  
    He book-ACC bag-DAT put into-PAST-3RD
    *He put the book into the bag*

36  U kitaqqa yezip sal-di  
    He book-DAT write-P put into-PAST-3RD
    *He accidentally wrote on that book*

(The -P form of a verb is assumed to indicate its non-finite status though this is not entirely clear.)
35 shows the use of salmaq as a main verb where it has the meaning of ‘to put into/insert’. In 36, however, salmaq is an auxiliary modifying yezip ‘to write’ and is used to indicate ‘lack of volition’.

Taub (1994:7) has suggested that the use of a verb meaning ‘to put into/insert’ to indicate ‘lack of volition’ is motivated by the assumption that if an object was not supposed to be in a particular location, then its presence would be accidental or unexpected. On this account, the act of inserting is construed as a way in which an intrusive object might come to be present.

7.2 Malay: The case of terus ‘through’

For the same situation to be motivated in the case of ter-, we need to look for a verb whose semantics is similar to that of the Uighur salmaq. A possible candidate appears to be the Malay word terus which means ‘through’.

37   ... lalu ditikam-nya oleh Laksamana dada Petala Bumi terus
     then was-speared-POSS by   Laksamana chest Petala Bumi terus
     ke belakang-nya
     to back-POSS

    then the Petala Bumi’s chest was speared by Laksamana through to his back

The grammaticalization of terus to a prefix would then lead to the loss of the second syllable, giving us ter-. In fact, even though speakers of Malay today perceive little or no relation at all between terus and ter-, there is actually still a very strong similarity between the two, as shown below.

38   ia terus sedar
     he terus be-conscious
     he immediately/suddenly became conscious

39   ia ter-sedar
     he ter-be-conscious
     he immediately/suddenly became conscious

In 38, terus is used to indicate that the process of becoming conscious happened suddenly rather than gradually. There is a strong inference here that the subject is acting non-volitionally even though this is not explicitly indicated. This is the main difference between 38 and 39. In the latter, the non-volitional nature of the subject is explicit. The use of terus in sentences like 38 make it plausible to suggest that it could have developed into a formal marker of ‘lack of volition’, as in 39.

Assuming we accept terus as a possible source of ter-, we can then trace terus itself further back to the Sanskrit form tiras ‘through, across, beyond’. This is not to say that there was a direct borrowing from Sanskrit itself since ‘third or fourth hand borrowing of Indian elements is in various parts of the Archipelago no rare occurrence’ (Gonda 1971:958). This is a rather controversial move since most scholars of Malay, while willing to acknowledge the Sanskrit origins of a large number of lexical items, are uneasy with the possibility that a prefix, too, could have started off as a borrowing. I lack the space to deal with this controversy here
but there is no doubting the suggestive parallels between the Uighur and Malay cases.

8 Summary

I show below a schematic representation of the semantic development of ter-outlined in this paper, including my speculations on its etymology.

On the polysemy of ter- itself, we begin with the affixation of ter- to verbs which are low in transitivity, followed by an increase in the transitivity of the verbs. With the more transitive verbs comes a distinction between actor and patient so that we have different ter-constructions where either the actor or the patient is the subject. The extension of the second type of construction to inanimates gives us the ‘completed action’ use.

As a separate development, we find that lalu can also indicate ‘completed action’. The result of the these two lines of development prompts the ter-lalu construction to be reanalysed as a notional reduplication which also indicates ‘completed action’. Via the metonymy ENDPOINT OF SCALE FOR NEAR ENDPOINT, ter-lalu comes to be used as an ‘intensifier’. This sequence of events brings us to the situation we find in Classical Malay.

By the time of Modern Malay, the reduplicative nature of the ter-lalu construction was felt to be too emphatic, leading to a split whereby ter-alone takes over the ‘intensifier’ use, and ter-lalu indicates a quality as being ‘excessive’.

[Sanskrit]

tiras
↓
terus
↓
ter- (low transitivity) ‘lack of volition’

[Cl Malay]

lalu ‘pass by’

[Mod Malay]

ter- (high transitivity, actor as subject) ‘lack of volition’

ter- (high transitivity, patient as subject and extension to inanimates) ‘completed action’

ter-lalu ‘completed action’

ter-lalu ‘intensifier’

ter- ‘intensifier’

ter-lalu ‘excessive’

Figure 3
Selected References


