

The Semantic Development of *Ter-*

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**The Semantic Development Of *Ter-***  
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## 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-awake*  
*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.



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.

With verbs:	<i>ter-</i> senyum 'smile' (20) kejut 'startle (lit. awake)' (15) dengar 'hear' (14)	<i>ter-lalu</i> ingat 'remember' (3) ber-tuah 'lucky' (1) ber-bahagia 'be-happy' (1) ber-hainya 'be-sorrowful' (1) me-nangis 'be-crying' (1) me-rompak 'be-looting' (1)
With adjs:	banyak 'many' (1) berat 'heavy' (1) utama 'excellant' (1)	sukacita 'joyful' (22) baik 'good' (17) banyak 'many' (14)

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 analysis 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-awake  
*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'.

- 21 \*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.

- 22 ... 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 Aceh  
And Raja Sulung ter-capture to Aceh  
*And Prince Sulung was taken captive to Aceh*

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.

- 24 ... 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.

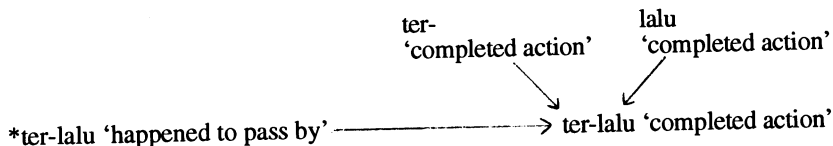


Figure 2

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    hujung sal-di  
       He book-ACC bag-DAT put into-PAST-3RD  
       *He put the book into the bag*

36    U kitapqa 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 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'.

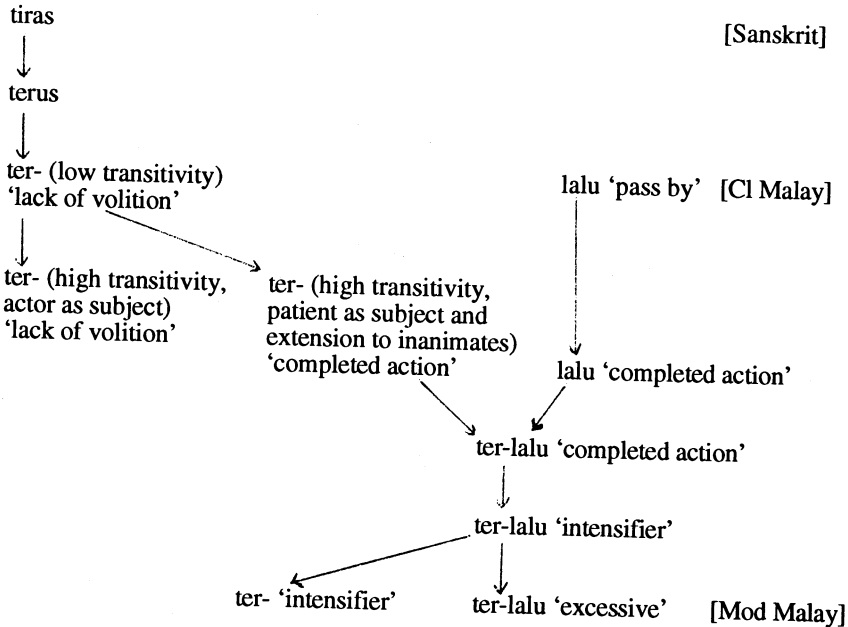


Figure 3

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