ASSOCIATION: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENT

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In a series of publications, I have argued that Riau Indonesian exhibits a number of syntactic and semantic features that characterize it as typologically exceptional. The question arises whether Riau Indonesian is truly exceptional, or whether its apparently exceptional properties are a mere artefact of a particular descriptive approach. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to compare Riau Indonesian to other languages through the same eyes, using the same objective and rigorous yardsticks. This paper proposes one such yardstick, in the form of a psycholinguistic experiment designed to elicit truth-value judgments in different languages.

At the heart of the semantic analysis of Riau Indonesian is the claim that when two expressions X and Y with meanings P and Q respectively are combined, the meaning of the collocation X Y is derived from that of its constituent parts by means of the association operator, A (P, Q), which says that the meaning of X Y is associated in an unspecified way with the meanings of X and Y respectively. For example, if *ayam* means 'chicken' and *makan* means 'eat', *ayam makan* means A (CHICKEN, EAT), or anything that has to do in some way with 'chicken' and with 'eat'. In particular, the semantic representation A (CHICKEN, EAT) lacks any specification of thematic roles: the chicken could assume the role of agent, patient, or whatever might make sense in the context of the utterance.

This paper presents the results of an experiment designed to measure, objectively across a variety of languages, the availability of *apparently associational interpretations*: interpretations that appear to be obtainable from the association operator without reference to thematic roles or other semantic categories. Two kinds of apparently associational interpretations are sought: (a) those in which what looks like a bare noun preceding a bare verb is interpreted as the patient (rather than the agent); and (b) those in which what looks like a bare noun in construction with a bare verb is interpreted as an oblique argument or even a non-argument (in the absence of prepositions or other such markings). The experiment presents subjects with a sentence in the target language and two pictures; subjects are asked which of the two pictures is

best described by the sentence. The experiment is ongoing; as of August 2005, over 1000 subjects in a dozen languages had been tested.

While non-isolating languages have near-zero availability of apparently associational interpretations, isolating SVO languages generally allow apparently associational interpretations to some extent, thereby setting such languages apart from most others. However, amongst themselves, isolating SVO languages exhibit substantial cross-linguistic variation with respect to the availability of apparently associational interpretations. In this regard, the position of Riau Indonesian amongst isolating SVO languages is not exceptional: it falls in the mid range of Malayic languages, and in the mid-range of other isolating languages, in fact with substantially lower availability of apparently associational intepretations than other West Malayo-Polynesian languages such as Minangkabau and Sundanese.