A LEXICAL ODYSSEY FROM THE MALAY WORLD

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Abstract

The Malay etymological legacy of the past five hundred years is an Austronesian elaboration of Lao Tzu's (1963: 77) dictum: 'Words have an ancestor'. Of equal interest is the issue of whether words will have 'descendants'. Dayton (2004: 13) indicates that, according to one linguistic study, by the year 2050 Malay will become one of the top ten spoken languages in the world. With this prognosis for the future, it seems that the lexical odyssey from the Malay World is an unfinished enterprise.

Introduction: Collecting Words

During the past five hundred years the English language has been enriched etymologically by words originating in the Malay World. Lexical absorption of Malay words commenced in the 15th century and intensified during the era of European exploration of the region, particularly by the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, French and the British. Subsequently, borrowings accumulated with the imposition of colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch and, lastly, the British, who remained in Southeast Asia until the mid-20th century. Beginning in the 19th century, tourism and travel writing also contributed to the growing repertoire of Malay loan-words.

Notably, by the early 17th century, familiarity with Malay words had progressed to the stage of publication. Augustine Spalding's *Dialogues in the English and Malaiane Languages* (London) appeared in 1614. The first dictionary was published in 1701: Thomas Bowrey's *A Dictionary of English and Malayo, Malayo and English* (London). Lexicographers collated and catalogued, but the real word work was conducted in the field by amateur word-collectors traversing the Malay World.

The Malay World of Words

The historical and contemporary boundaries of the 'Malay World' are sources of academic dispute (see Benjamin 2003; Scholte 1997). In its narrowest scope, the Malay World is restricted to a central core of the modern nation-states of Malaysia, southern Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei (Benjamin 2003: 54; McDaniel 1994: 1). Others employ a more elastic definition (e.g. Jabatan Muzium & Antikuiti 2001: 4). As such, the Malay World comprises the aforementioned core plus the Philippines, parts of Vietnam and Cambodia, but it radiates beyond Southeast Asia: north to Taiwan, south to New Zealand, east to the Polynesian Islands and west to Madagascar and South Africa.

This second, 'fully-stretched' definition is founded on a shared linguistic inheritance — Austronesian. The Austronesian languages probably originated in Formosa (Taiwan) approximately five to seven thousand years ago and reached the core of the Malay World around two to three thousand years ago (Bellwood 1991: 71-72; Benjamin 2003: 26). The Malay language is one of the primary descendants of the Austronesian language family. The vast voyages undertaken by Austronesian-speakers made theirs the

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most far-flung language of the pre-modern world, that is, pre-1500 CE (Bellwood 1991: 72).

Words continued to voyage as Malay developed into the principal language of trade and commerce in Southeast Asia. Significantly, an early Malay loan-word is the sailing ship known as **junk**, which derives from the Javanese *djong*. The word was adopted in most European languages in the 14th and 15th centuries. English was a latecomer: 'junk' was assimilated in the mid-16th century.

Experiencing the 'Exotic'

The borrowed words have been derived from a variety of experiential fields: the seafaring skills of the region's inhabitants (**junk** 1555, **prahu** 1582); material culture (represented in words such as **kris** c. 1577, **gong** 1600, **sarong** 1817); flora (e.g. **bamboo** 1563, **rattan** 1660, **gutta-percha** 1845); fauna (e.g. **cockatoo** 1616, **orang-utan** 1631, **dugong** 1751); and foodstuffs (e.g. **sago** 1555, **paddy** c.1598, **satay** 1900).

An early entry in the English language was the fruit **durian** (1588 in English, though it entered European languages c. 1440). 'Durian' derives from *duri* 'thorn' which describes the hard spiky rind of the edible fruit, with a heavenly taste and a hellish smell. A. Hamilton observed: 'The Durean is ... offensive to some People's Noses, for it smells very like human Excrements' (1727, *New Acc. E. Ind.* II). C. Whitney's description is no less vivid: 'If ... a banana were squashed and mixed with ... chocolate, and enough garlic to stamp strongly the whole, the result would be ... the nearest approach to the consistency and combination of tastes afforded by the durian' (1905, *Jungle Trails*).

However, some Europeans found its attractions so alluring that it was suggested the durian, not the apple, caused the fall of Adam and Eve: 'There is one that is called in the Malacca tongue durion ... it seemeth to be that wherewith Adam did transgresse, being carried away by the singular savour' (1588, *Parke's Mendoza*). A.R. Wallace enthused: 'In fact, to eat Durians is a new sensation, worth a voyage to the East to experience' (1869, *Malay Archip.*). The durian has not lost any of its potency in contemporary times — an entire website is devoted to it (www.ecst.csuchico.edu/~durian).

Dugong (1751) is borrowed from *duyong*, a large aquatic mammal, which perpetuated the myth of the mermaid. W. Marsden noted: '... the *dugong* (from the Malayan word) ... has given occasion to the stories of mermaids in tropical seas' (1812, *Dict. Mal. Lang.*). The locals attributed magical properties to this sea creature. In Malay folklore the tears of the dugong were an infallible love charm and its canine teeth were made into amulets.

Sarong (1817) derives from *sarung*, a garment worn by both men and women, particularly in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and some Pacific islands. The British laboured to assimilate this alien apparel into their familiar world view. It was variously described as a bottomless 'wide sack', 'kilt', 'petticoat', 'round towel', 'skirt' and 'short gown'. It was simpler to adopt the word. The garment was popularised by the 'sarong girl', Dorothy Lamour, in the film *The Jungle Princess* (1936). In contemporary usage, the word is also applied to fashionable Western beachwear.

Creative Word Play

Some etymologies highlight the more inventive aspects of language borrowing. In this category is **amok** (also spelt amuk, amuck, amock) which is from the Malay *amuk*, meaning furious assault. The word entered English in the early 16th century via

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Portuguese renderings. The earliest citation is in 1515: 'The amocos are knights among men, men who resolve to die, and who go ahead with this resolution and die.' (Pires, *Suma Orient.*). In its original sense in the 16th century 'amok' referred to a combat mode. Early writers also mention that these fearless, suicidal fighters were fortified by opium.

The British had a special fondness for the word 'amok'**.** A. Hamilton revealed: 'I answered that I could no longer bear their Insults, and if I had not Permission in three Days, I would run a Muck ...' (1727, *New Acc. E. Ind.* II). The English poet, Alexander Pope, declared : 'Satire's my weapon, but I'm too discreet / To run amuck and tilt at all I meet (1735, *Hor. Sat.* II). The British statesman, Benjamin Disraeli, proffered: 'Ready to run a muck with any one who crossed him' (1870, *Lothair*).

As these previous citations divulge, 'amok' had gradually drifted from its original signification as a specialist fighting force of warriors. The term 'run amok' came to predominate, with the meaning of mindless killing by a frenzied individual. This meaning was a common theme in travel writing in the Malay World. Isabella Bird, the intrepid Victorian traveller, boasted: 'I have heard much of *amok* running lately, and have even seen the two-pronged fork ... used for pinning a desperate *amok* runner to the wall ...' (1883, *Golden Chersonese*).

Another word with a colourful history is **bamboo** (1563), probably derived from *bambu,* a trade corruption of *semambu*. W. Phillips described it as a 'thicke Reed, as big as a mans legge' (1598, *Linschoten's Trav. Ind.*). In the 18th century the word became a colour descriptor when Wedgwood invented a cane-coloured porcelain called 'bamboo'. In the 1940s 'bamboo' became British military slang meaning 'inside information' or a 'rumour'. This usage was derived from makeshift bamboo aerials. In 1998 a group of Australian performance artists, who erect bamboo structures, launched themselves as 'Bambuco' (*The Weekend Australian,* 30-31 Aug. 2003, p. 7).

The process of semantic adaptation is ongoing. The word **gong** (1600) is taken from the metallic, spherical musical instrument of Java. European and British households were summoned by gongs at meal-times: 'Let the breakfast-gong sound' (Wilson 1847, *Chr. North*). In the late 19th century, the British started to use 'gong' as slang for a military medal. M. Dickens provides a more recent instance: 'Other people came out of the war with Mentions and worthwhile gongs that tacked letters after their names' (1958, *Man Overboard*). In Australian usage, 'gong' is applied to any type of civil award, as in the headline: 'Gong for Aussie vigneron' (*The Australian,* 29 Oct. 2003, p. 5).

Mata Hari (1936) is one of the more recent loan-words. This synonym for an archetypal spy-seductress, is derived from the Malay, *mata* (eye) plus *hari* (day), meaning 'sun' or 'dawn'. Mata Hari was the exotic alias of Dutch dancer, Margaretha Gertruida Zelle (1876-1917). She was acclaimed throughout Europe for her erotic interpretations of Javanese dances. Mata Hari was charged with spying for Germany and she was executed in 1917. 'Mata Hari' maintains her figurative fascination, as exemplified in a headline of 2003: 'The new Mata Hari' (*Time*, 8 Sept. 2003, p. 55).

Borrowed Places

Over seventy Malay loan-words have been compiled to date. These also include a scattering of toponymic words. Bantam (now known as Banten) in Java was said to be the original home of the **bantam** (1749), a small but aggressive cockerel. In the late 19th century the word 'bantam' became a weight division in boxing. During World War I small-sized soldiers formed 'bantam battalions'. 'Bantam' is also used as a nickname to

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describe a small but spirited person. This sense first appeared in Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (1837).

Macassar oil (1809) and **antimacassar** (1852) are lexical relatives from the Victorian era. Both are now largely limited to historical usage. The first refers to a popular men's hair oil, so called because its ingredients were claimed to have come from Macassar (now called Ujung Pandang). Not wishing to offend the vanity of gentlemen callers, nor spend hours removing hair oil from their upholstered furniture, Victorian women made attractive coverlets — antimacassars — to protect their chairs. The word later became adjectival, as in D.H. Lawrence's phrase: 'A horse-hair antimacassar-ed sofa' (1920, *Lost Girl*).

The **Penang** lawyer (1828) and the **Malacca** cane (1844) refer to walking sticks: 'Penang lawyers, Malacca canes, and walking sticks of all kinds are incessantly pushed into your hands' (*Illustr. Lond. News,* 7 Dec. 1872) In the case of 'Penang lawyer', the term apparently has jocular reference to the use of this stick as a weapon to settle disputes in Penang. The literary character Sherlock Holmes was known to carry a Penang lawyer.

Formerly, Java was known for the commercial cultivation of coffee. **Java** became a synonym for coffee in America in the mid-19th century. In the late 20th century the word acquired an additional meaning as the JAVA trademark, a programming language for the World Wide Web. It was so named because its creators consumed large quantities of Java coffee. The JAVA™ develops this theme with titles such as *Java Beans* and *Instant Java.*

Absent Words

Etymological inquiries also reveal certain paradoxes. Some words which were absorbed into English from the Malay World are not used in the Malay language. For instance, the Malay term **mata-mata,** entered the English language in the 20th century during British colonial rule in Malaysia. The term literally means 'eyes' and it signified the police force. Subsequently, the poetic term 'mata-mata' was abandoned during post-independence modernisation and replaced with a prosaic loan-word from English — *polis*.

Perhaps the most intriguing word of the cluster of borrowed words that are absent in the original language is **orang-utan** (also spelt orang-utang, orang-outang.) It is a compound of *orang* (man) and *hutan* (forest). This 'man of the forest', the large anthropoid ape, inhabits Borneo and Sumatra but is now extinct in Java. The word comes from Bontius (1631, *Hist. Nat. et Med. Ind. Orient.*) who claimed that the Javanese had informed him that orang-utans could talk, 'but do not wish to, lest they should be compelled to labour'.

In the Malay World the orang-utan has always been known as *mawas*. However, 'orang-utan' persisted in the imagination of lexicographers. It was a usage reinforced by zoologists and natural historians, such as A.R. Wallace who entitled his book *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise* (1869). The orang-utan was the official tourism mascot for 'Visit Malaysia Year 1990' and this word — not *mawas*— is used prominently in tourism promotion campaigns in Borneo and Sumatra.

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