

Chapter 2

Batek Phrases for Biodiversity Researchers: A Preliminary Language Descriptive Analysis

Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif and Teo Kok Seong

Abstract The Kuala Keniam Research Centre is situated on the Tembeling riverbank within Pahang's Malaysian National Park. Researchers may request to use this center which operates as a transit point for accommodation and access to Batek Orang Asli guides. These Batek guides have precious knowledge of the Malaysian jungle flora and fauna which are valuable to biodiversity researchers. Unfortunately, their limited competence of the English language would hinder their willingness to share such information. Thus, it is pertinent for researchers to know some basic Batek phrases which can ease the cultural and language barrier. Data were collected through experiential observant-participation of approximately three months' field visits. Findings may provide essential Batek phrases for future researchers and may suggest that the /-lew/ stem is a possible indicator of Wh- questions equivalent. IPA transcription is provided for easy reference and some descriptive analysis is included for the future establishment of Batek grammar.

Keywords Batek Orang Asli · Aslian language · Batek phrases

2.1 Introduction

The Kuala Keniam Research Center is situated about 25 km north of Kuala Tahan, in the 434,300-ha Malaysian National Park. It serves as a transit station to ground the importance of the park as a biodiversity treasure fit for advanced researchers from environmental disciplines to social sciences [1]. The Batek Orang Asli dwell in this preserved area and some work as guides who indirectly may provide

UKM student research grants (sponsors).

T. I. S. T. Sharif (✉)
Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara Pahang,
Bandar Tun Abdul Razak Jengka, Pahang, Malaysia
e-mail: intansuzila@pahang.uitm.edu.my

T. K. Seong
The Institute of Malay Heritage and Civilization,
The National University of Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: teokok@ukm.my

R. Hashim, A. B. Abdul Majeed (eds.), *Proceedings of the Colloquium on Administrative Science and Technology*, DOI 10.1007/978-981-4585-45-3_2,
© Springer Science+Business Media Singapore 2015

precious knowledge and experience of the jungle. As such, knowing basic phrases for communication in Batek would extend chances of establishing rapport with the local Batek guides and unlocking the abundant secrets of their natural heritage. It may ease icebreaking efforts and create a symbiotic relationship between the guides and researchers. Some researches that have been conducted at Kuala Keniam include studies on birds [2], rattan [1], trees [3], tribal folklore and beliefs [4], and language [5].

The Aslian languages are a subdivision of the larger Mon–Khmer language family. Despite the substantial amount of research on Aslian languages among the indigenous communities (*orang asli*) in the Malaysian Peninsula (notably in the work of Temiar [6], Semelai [7], Mah Meri [8], Jahai [9], and several others), in some of which grammar and dictionaries have been published, research on the Batek language has been minimal. The latest known language-descriptive publication of Orang Asli languages is on the Semnam language [10]. There have been concerns amid researchers that the Aslian languages, Batek included, are facing the possibility of extinction due to several factors [11]. Among the factors affecting this is the influence of a more dominant language in the area where the indigenous tribes live. In the Malaysian Peninsula, [11] argued that the dominant Malay language has a long-term interaction with the Orang Asli tribes, mainly due to economic reasons and proximity. However, indigenous tribes which are in isolation or with limited contact with the Malays such as Cek Wong have managed to retain their languages [12]. Tribes with a higher degree of self-sufficiency, larger farming populations, and remote locations tend to have fewer borrowings from the dominant language [11].

Among the pioneering works on the Batek are done by Endicott and Benjamin in the 1970s. Their work concentrated on the social aspects of the Batek as well as their interaction with the forest. Recent notable work on Batek knowledge acquisition and living has been done by Lye [13–15]. This research concentrated mostly on the relationship between the Batek and the surrounding forest, focusing more on the anthropological and environmental aspects of the lives of Batek. The Batek Hep’ are “lowland forest people and mobile hunter-gatherer” [13, p. 166] and consider the forest as “their dwelling place, source of food and refuge and the basis for cultural continuity” [15, p. 250]. The Batek are one of 19 or so of Malaysia’s Orang Asli Austroasiatic language speaking peoples [13]. They rely significantly on foraging activities and the trading forest produce with the local traders. Today, some of the Batek Hep’ are seminomadic and have frequent contact with the local Malays due to trading activities and serving as tourist guides. This has made their language become more vulnerable to the influence of the much more dominant Malay language. As such, more loanwords can be seen in their daily language use [5]. To date, some studies in Batek Aslian include work by Lye [14, 15], which although not a study on language includes a short list of Batek words; Sultan [16] on the syntactic structure of Batek; and Ahmad et al. [5] on Batek loan words.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 *Methods*

First, experiential observant-participation of approximately 3 months' duration, of several visits was undertaken. This was to understand the lifestyle and become familiar with the speech sounds. Then elicitation was conducted with several Batek men who regularly work as guides either for researchers or tourists and some females who dwell in the visited villages. Common daily phrases were observed and some phrases were given to them for translation. These translations were recorded (audio and video) and later transcribed. The assistance of a retired Department of Wildlife and National Parks officer who had worked with the Batek people and is proficient in Batek language was initially adopted for cross-referencing clarification of the translation.

2.2.2 *Objectives*

The findings presented here are a part of progressive research for the establishment of the Batek grammar. The immediate aim, however, is to assist future biodiversity researchers who wish to conduct researches at Kuala Keniam to gain basic communicative ability with the Batek guides. Secondly, the phonemic and some semantic analysis may indirectly unfold some elements toward the establishment of a grammar of Batek.

2.2.3 *Informants*

A few Batek villages, namely Aur, Teresek, and Dedari along the Tembeling river and Cangkung and Rincing along the Keniam river, were visited to document the Batek language. Male and female Batek in their 30s to 40s acted as informants. Ethical constraints [17] were imposed.

2.2.4 *Phrase Analyzed*

The number of phrases analyzed is shown below in Table 2.1. The existence of Malay loanwords is generally high among the Batek community [9], the contemporary Batek who work as guides and those who dwell at the show villages are showing threats of the loss of language. They show ignorance of synonymous lexicons and failure to recall Batek past lifestyle-related lexicons. The elderly Batek acknowledge this phenomenon and call the youth ignorant. Yet those who avoid the tourism monetary industry may have better grasp of the Batek language.

Table 2.1 Number of analyzed phrases

Category	Phrases		
	Phrases entry	Table 2.2	Table 2.3
1	Batek phrases	14	24
2	Batek phrases with loanwords	2	6
3	Batek phrases with language change	1	0

Table 2.2 Icebreaking phrases

Phrases			
Questions	Literal meaning	Reply	Literal meaning
/ʔaylew ¹ kabarʔ/	<i>What news?</i>	/nɛŋ kabar/	<i>No news</i>
/mɔh ʔuʔlewʔ/	<i>You who?</i>	/kenmɔh yek ² ../	<i>I (My) name is...</i>
/səh ³ nan ləh ^{1a} ʔ/	<i>Come from where?</i>	/yek ^{2a} səh nan../	<i>I come from...</i>
/mɔh səʔ ^{3a} masaʔ ʔɪʔloh ^{1b} ʔ/	<i>You arrive time when?</i>	/də-dəʔ ⁴ yek səh/	<i>Just now I come</i>
/mɔh ⁵ panek ʔaylewʔ/	<i>You want what?</i>	/yem ^{2b} pɪ ʔɔl mɔh pɪ-dɛŋ halbaw baʔ həp/	<i>I (to) request you to show path to jungle</i>
/halbaw baʔlewʔ/	<i>Path which?</i>	/halbaw Kənyam/	<i>Path Keniam</i>
/halbaw dəʔ ke baʔlewʔ/	<i>Path this to where?</i>	/halbaw baʔ tɔm pədəh/	<i>Path to river near</i>

Table 2.3 Asking questions

Phrases			
Questions	Literal meaning	Reply	Literal meaning
/ʔaylew deʔ ^{4a} ʔ/	<i>What this?</i>	/bəlaw/	<i>Blowpipe</i>
/ʔaylew mə ^{5a} -dik ⁸ deʔʔ/	<i>What you do this?</i>	/yem jət/	<i>I (to) smoke</i>
/ʔaʔaylew mə-dikʔ/	<i>What you do?</i>	/cɔm ʔəs/	<i>Look (for) fire–start fire</i>
/ʔaylew dikʔ/ ^{7b}	<i>What do?</i>	/ʔuʔ yem dik ^{8a} /	<i>It I do...</i>
/ʔaylew mɔh kedapʔ/	<i>What you look for?</i>	/kedap batan ʔ.../	<i>Look for ... tree/plant</i>
/deʔ batan ʔaylewʔ/	<i>This tree/plant what?</i>	/taŋgoy/	<i>Rambutan</i>
/batan deʔ cambah ke ⁹ baʔlewʔ/	<i>Plant this grow at where?</i>	/təbŋ tɔm/	<i>Bank river</i>
/batan kayuʔ mabuʔ bah ^{6b} ʔ/	<i>Tree trunk poisonous?</i>	/ʔuʔ deʔ.../	<i>It (is) now ...</i>
/bəʔʔɛt ¹⁰ bah ^{6c} batan kayuʔʔ/	<i>(is this)Good tree trunk?</i>	/bəʔʔət/	<i>Good</i>
/deʔ batan buləh di-ʔubətʔ/	<i>This plant can cure?</i>	/weʔ dək, jəbɛc ¹¹ /	<i>Exist poison, bad</i>
/kləŋ ʔaylew deʔʔ/	<i>Sound what this?</i>	/kləŋ kawaw/	<i>Sound (of)bird</i>
/halət baʔunʔ ¹² /	<i>(is it)Dead there?</i>	/nɛŋ, gəs/	<i>No, (it's)alive</i>

2.3 Findings

The phrases provided here may serve to help researchers to start communicating with the Batek tribe in their own mother tongue. These phrases may serve as an icebreaker and indicate the willingness on the part of the researchers to learn and

communicate in Batek language. However, for language-descriptive purposes, vowel variants exist in many lexicons as Batek Aslian language does not have a written record.

2.3.1 *Icebreaking and Greetings*

The phrases in Table 2.2 can be used as an initial greeting upon meeting a Batek guide. Better reputation with the Batek guides shall then be achieved. For standard reference IPA transcription is adopted except for [j] is replaced by [y] (see [7]).

In this dialogue, bound morpheme /-lew/ (1) may suggest a question tag. Specifically, these lexicons: /ʔaylew/, /ʔɪʔlew/, /baʔlew/, /ʔuʔlew/, and /kə baʔlew/ can be translated as “what,” “when,” “which,” “who,” and “where,” respectively. /ʔaylew gən məhahʔ/, on the other hand, would be “why they angry?” While /ʔaylew nəŋ/ means “do not know,” /nəŋ ʔaylew/ means “no other.” In a sentence, however, each lexicon may sound differently as assimilation can occur. (1a) and (1b) are derivations from /kə baʔlew/ “where” and /ʔɪʔlew/ “when.” Pronunciation can vary from /ye:loh/ and /ʔayloh/ to /ʔeyloh/. These variations may occur due to laziness or play. However, not every /-lew/ signals a Wh-question. For example, /ʔalew/ is a white squirrel and /jəlew/ is a vervet monkey.

(2, 2a, 2b) and /ye/ are variants of the first person singular pronoun of “I.” Each lexicon positioning relies on sound assimilation though initial analysis may suggest (2b) is usually at sentence-initial whereas (2) and (2a) can occur at both sentence-initial and -final. (2b) is often followed by bilabial [p] and [m]. In (2a), voiceless velar [k] precede voiceless alveolar [s] and /ye/ is usually midsentence.

In (3), [n] follows [h] yet in (3a), a glottal stop [ʔ] precedes [m] for ease of articulation. (5) is translated as singular second person “you.”

2.3.2 *Directions*

There are a few phrases that might be useful when asking or looking for directions. The following phrases can be used when talking about directions in the jungle. The phrase /cəp baʔ⁶ həp/, meaning “go to jungle” can signal your intention, and the phrase /halbow dəʔ ke baʔlew/? which means “path this to where?” where a reply could be, for example, /halbow baʔ həp/ “path to jungle.” The Batek used to travel by /pərahuʔ/ “canoe” but modern facilities have introduced them to /mutor/ “boat” and is the preferred choice of transport for the obvious reason. Thus /galah bəʔ^{6a} kəntək/ “pole upstream” or /galah bəʔ kiyum/ “pole downstream” may not be popular phrases anymore. /galah/ is a Malay loanword meaning “long pole” but it connotes rafting which, with the exception of children playing, they generally do not use anymore. (6, 6a) are speakers’ variants of “to” but rather “to+action,” and not “to+place.” Vowel [a] and consonant [ʔ] are followed by [h], yet [ə] and

[ʔ] followed by [k]. (6b, 6c) below are other variants which may take place as mid- or sentence-ending may have a connotation of a tag question “is it?” A Batek would tell you that as both variants are understood, no restriction is demanded. This, however, demands further analysis.

2.3.3 *Asking Questions*

It is pertinent that researchers are able to ask the right questions so as to get the desired answer. This limited yet basic list is sufficient for researchers to start their inquiry.

Between questions (7) and (7a), the latter is more common because it is already implied which action the speaker is referring to. (7b) or /ʔuʔ dɪkʔ/ are usually phrases said in fuss over a child’s mischief. When one wants to confirm the action and word meaning or to simply repeat the information, one may ask /ʔaylew məh kədəhʔ/ “*what you say?*” /batəŋ/ is a Malay loanword which means “*trunk*”. However, it does not translate literally to “*tree trunk*” but “*tree*” or “*plant*”.

(5a) on the other hand, is an example how [ɔ] and [h] sound in (5) assimilated to [d] sound. Comparing (4) in Table 2.2 with [4a], the lexicon has a different meaning in both sentences; that is, “*now*” in the former and “*this*” in the latter.

Antonym of (4a) is /tun/ though a variant of /boʔ/ and /baʔ/ may precede turning “that” to “there” by dropping initial [t] changing it to (12). Here (12) is preferable to /boʔ un/ as again it is just a sound play.

A near-minimal of (4) is (8,8a) which means “do.” (9) is a “to + place” directional marker similar to Malay. However, as seen in Table 2.1, this additional preposition (9) changes semantically “which” to “where.” (10) and (11) are antonyms.

2.3.4 *Some Minimal Pairs*

Some minimal pairs that can be suggested here are as follows:

- /dɪk/ “do” and /deʔ/ “this”
- /-lew/ “question tag”, /ləw/ “return/arrive or reach” and /lew/ “uninhibited”

There are more minimal pairs in Batek language that demand analysis, especially those involving nasalized vowels. The present study is an eye-opener in unfolding more features of Batek grammar.

2.4 Conclusion

The phrases provided in this paper are certainly not exhaustive but could be a catalyst in initiating better communication between researchers and the Batek tribe. It would display to the Batek that researchers are also inclined to understand their

language. This could help to break any communication barrier that may hinder the research process. It would prove to the Batek that researchers are making an effort in understanding and mastering their mother tongue. To summarize:

- a. /-lew/ may represent a Wh-question equivalent yet not exclusively.
- b. Contraction of words may occur as a possible umlaut.
- c. Speakers variants in pronunciation may occur as form of sound play or ease of pronunciation which may also be an effect of dental issues.

These findings would serve as a doorway for future research into the grammar of Batek Aslian language.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank UKM student-research fund, 600-RMI/SSP/FRGS/5/3/Fsp (33/2010) grant, Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor and Badli Esham Ahmad for basic initial data collection.

References

1. Hamid, N. H. A., & Suratman, M. N. (2011). Distribution of rattan at Kuala Keniam Taman Pahang Malaysia. Rehabilitation of Tropical rainforest Ecosystems, Kuala Lumpur. www.forr2.upm.edu.my/frp/images/abstract42.pdf. Accessed 22 Nov. 2012
2. Saad, M.-N., Mohd-Salleh, D., Ismail, M., & Singh, H. R. (2011). The distribution of avifauna community at the Uitm-Perhilitan Research Station, Kuala Keniam, Taman Negara Pahang. www.forr2.upm.edu.my/frp/images/abstract10.pdf. Accessed 18 Sept. 2012
3. Aisah, M., & Nazip, S. M. (2011). Rehabilitation of tropical rainforest ecosystem. Retrieved from www.forr2.upm.edu.my/frp/images/abstract51.pdf. Accessed 18 Sept. 2012
4. Zahari, N. F. K., Omar, M., & Daim, S. (2011). Lawad, Ye' Yo' And Tum Yap: The manifestation of the forest in the lives of the Bateks in Taman Negara National Park. fspu.uitm.edu.my/cebs/images/stories/j3.pdf. Accessed 18 Sept. 2012
5. Ahmad, B. E., Noor, M. Y. M., & Sharif, T. I. S. T. (2011). Endangered language: Batek lexicon and loanwords. *The European Journal of Social Sciences*, 26(2), 241–249.
6. Benjamin, G. (1976). An outline of Temiar grammar. P. N. Jenner, L. C. Thompson, & S. Starosta (Eds.), *Austroasiatic studies. Part 1. Oceanic linguistics special publication no. 13* (pp. 129–187). Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii.
7. Kruspe, N. (2005). *A Grammar of Semelai*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Kruspe, N. (2010). *Dictionary of Mah Meri as spoken at Bukit Bangkong*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
9. Burenhult, N. (2005). *A Grammar of Jahai*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
10. Burenhult, N., & Wegener, C. (2009). Preliminary notes on the phonology, orthography and vocabulary of Semnam (Austroasiatic, Malay Peninsular). *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society*, 1, 283–312.
11. Benjamin, G. (2011). The current situation of the Aslian language. www.class.cohass.ntu.edu.sg/Publication/Documents/Benjamin.pdf. Accessed 22 Nov. 2012
12. Kruspe, N. (2009). Loanwords in Ceq Wong, an Austroasiatic language of Peninsular Malaysia. In: M. Haspelmath & U. Tadmor (Eds.), *Loanwords in the world's languages: A comparative handbook of lexical borrowing* (pp. 659–685). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
13. Lye, T. P. (2000). Forest, Batek and degradation: Environmental representations in a changing world. *South East Asian Studies*, 38(2), 165–184.
14. Lye, T. P. (2002). The significance of forest to the emergence of Batek knowledge in Pahang, Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 40(1), 3–22.

15. Lye, T. P. (2005). *Changing Pathways*. Petaling Jaya: SIRD.
16. Sultan, F. M. M. (2009). Struktur sintaksis frasa nama bahasa Bateq. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 9(1), 47–61.
17. Sharif, T. I. S. T., Noor, M. Y. M., & Ahmad, B. E. (2012). Ethical concerns in language documentation. a case study of Batek Aslian Tembeling River. *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, 31, 154–158. www.lpedr.com/vol31/029-IC-SSH%202012-S10031. Accessed 22 Nov. 2012

Proceedings of the Colloquium on Administrative
Science and Technology

CoAST 2013

Hashim, R.; Abdul Majeed, A.B. (Eds.)

2015, XXIII, 544 p. 70 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-981-4585-44-6