TRANSLATING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONCEPTS: CHALLENGES IN BUILDING A BILINGUAL DICTIONARY FOR FILIPINO AND MALAY

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Abstract

Malaysia and the Philippines have relatively similar concepts on things and traditions. Their histories prior to the arrival of the colonial powers in Southeast Asia are quite similar: form of government, rituals, feasts, etc. The two countries, together with the other countries in Southeast Asia, have had a very close contact with each other through trade and migration. However, when the colonizers arrived in Southeast Asia, their similarities in cultural and religious concepts gradually changed. This paper looks into the religious and cultural concepts in the Philippine and Malaysian languages and the challenges it brings in building a bilingual dictionary. Some lexical items are easily translatable but the religious and cultural concepts pose some problems. For example, the word **binyag** *'baptism, ritual for coming of age'* in Filipino does not correspond to any word in Malay although the concept is shared. **Kitab** *'holy book pertaining to Islam'* in Malay does not correspond to any word in Filipino as well. These are just examples of the lexical items that generate difficulties in language teaching and learning. This paper will identify the 'challenging' areas in building a bilingual dictionary of Malay-Filipino. This paper will also analyze the religious and cultural concepts in terms of semantic theory, in this case Frame Semantics, and how these challenges can be addressed.

Keywords: Bilingual, translation, semantics, Filipino, and Malay

Introduction

Tagalog, the Philippine's basis for its national language Filipino, and Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, and its variant Bahasa Indonesia spoken in Indonesia, have been mostly influenced by the dominant religions in these countries. The Catholic religion, brought by the Spaniards in 1521, has largely been ingrained in all cultural aspects of the Filipinos. This is reflected mainly in the language, particularly relating to religion and celebration. Islam on the other hand, has been present in Southeast Asia earlier than Christianity. Islam was established in Malaysia by the conversion of the king of Melaka in 1400 but its spread was mostly in the coastal areas of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.[1] Although Islam also came to the Philippines, its influence is not as vast as that in Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. Islam is mainly practiced in southern Philippines.

Prior to the arrival of both religions, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as paganism and animism were practiced in Southeast Asia for hundreds of years. Some words in Tagalog and Malay have their origins from Sanskrit. Inspite of this, Tagalog and Malay share a lot of cognate words making their genetic relationship strong.

This paper will discuss the influence of Catholicism and Islam in Filipino and Malay languages. The aim of this paper is to identify the terminologies used in terms of religious and cultural practices and how these terms are translated in both languages. The paper will also find ways in explaining these terminologies using Frame Semantics in order to build a bilingual dictionary using Malay and Filipino as both source and target languages.

A Brief History of Dictionaries in the Philippines and Malaysia

The first Tagalog dictionaries published in the Philippines were written by Fray Francisco Blancas de San Jose in 1610 and Fray Pedro de San Buenaventura in 1613. Both were published by Tomas Pinpin in Pila, Laguna.[2] Most of the Tagalog dictionaries were authored by Spanish friars and were used as tool to learn the language of the natives. Only during the 1900s that dictionaries written by American scholars, as well as Filipino scholars were published. Most of these dictionaries were bilingual dictionaries: Spanish-Tagalog, Tagalog-Spanish, English-Tagalog, Tagalog-English, Tagalog-Cebuano, etc. Tagalog monolingual dictionaries were only published in 1958, when Tagalog was proclaimed as the national language. But only a handful of Filipino or Pilipino dictionaries are available.

Pigafetta may have probably produced the first Italian-Malay dictionary during Magellan's expedition in the Pacific in 1500s. But it was only in the 1800s when the first Malay dictionary was published. Nor Hamsiah noted that between the years 1631 to 1899, there were about 57 Malay glossaries and dictionaries published.[3] The oldest monolingual dictionary was *Kitab Pengetahuan Bahasa* published by Raja Ali Haji in 1858. From 1900s to the present, many monolingual, bilingual and even trilingual dictionaries in Malay were published.

To date, the only available glossary for Malay-Tagalog is Atilio Alicio's *Language Phrases in English, Bahasa Melayu, Tagalog, and Spanish.*[4] It cannot be considered as a dictionary but more of a phrasebook to guide learners of any of these languages in any of the target languages. Attempts are being made to compile and publish a probable first Filipino-Malay or Malay-Filipino dictionary.

Statement of the Problem

As already mentioned in the previous section, there is no available Filipino-Malay, Malay-Filipino dictionary. The lack of a useful dictionary is a problem in the study and teaching of Malay and the Filipino languages in the Philippines for the former and Malaysia for the latter. Bahasa Malaysia (or Bahasa Indonesia) is being taught as one of the language electives in some universities in the Philippines, while Filipino is being taught at the University of Malaya.[5] Without a proper dictionary to use, the learning and teaching of both languages have become a dilemma to both teacher and student. Certain concepts in the Filipino culture are difficult to explain most particularly in the area of religion and festivities. The same is also true for Malay. There are some ceremonies and rituals practiced in Malaysia that are difficult

to explain or to give the equivalent in Filipino (or even English). Although both languages are genetically similar, the question is: how high is the degree of possibility in finding similar cultural and religious concepts which will aid in the development, and subsequently, the publication of a Filipino-Malay or Malay-Filipino dictionary? Would Frame Semantics be able to help in building this dictionary?
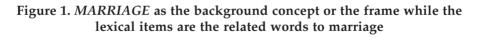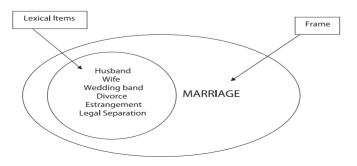
Malay and Filipino Data

This section is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the religious aspect while the second part the cultural aspect. Data were taken from the texts used in the Filipino language class for the Southeast Asian studies courses. The data were fed into a frequency counter, ConCapp, and only the most frequently used words were taken for analysis. Several words in Malay and Filipino were identified relating to religion and cultural concepts. These words were found to be difficult to 'translate' in each of the languages. The English explanations helped a little, however, when related to some cultural practices, were easily understood.

The framework used in the analysis of the data is Frame Semantics. Frame Semantics was first initiated by Charles Fillmore in 1968 through his article *Case for Case*.[6] He later on developed this theory to Case Grammar and now is the basis of FrameNet.[7]

What is Frame Semantics?

It is quite difficult to ascertain the true meaning of a word. Word meanings have two properties in accounting its systematicity.[8] These are the openness and the richness of word meanings. Charles Fillmore first introduced the concept of Frame Semantics through his works.[9] What he intended to do was to give a theory of text understanding. As Fillmore puts it, frame in Frame Semantics is "any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them is to understand the whole structure."[10] In Frame Semantics, there are two central ideas: the background concept and the lexical set.[11] The background concept pertains to the frame while the lexical set pertains to words related to the frame. For example, the concept *marriage* would provide the background concept for lexical items such as *husband, wife, wedding ring,* etc.

Figure 1. *MARRIAGE* as the background concept or the frame while the lexical items are the related words to marriage

The frame element is the regular participant, feature or attribute of a word being profiled. The frame provides the means to integrate words with other words or concepts. In this paper, we used the idea behind Frame Semantics but redefined it to be appropriate with the aims of the research. Thus, Frame Semantics in this paper is defined according to certain primes identified in the data. These primes served as the frame element that will relate the lexical items in both Malay and Tagalog to determine whether the Malay word for example can be found to have an equivalent in Tagalog and vice versa.

Religious Terminologies

Below are some of the data used for this paper (based on most frequently used words):

Table 1: Malay Words Pertaining to Religion

Malay	Gloss
Azan	Call for prayers
Rumah Terbukah	Open house (during Hari Raya)
Fatwa	Religious decision in relation to any practices in the religion (Islam)
Firman	Warning or command
Haj	Pilgrimage to Mecca
Hari Raya	Feast after Ramadan, end of Ramadan
Jemaah	Pilgrims, congregation of believers in Islam
Kadi	Judge of Islamic Laws
Kafir	Infidel
Khalwat	Illicit (illicit contact related to religion)
Kiblat	Direction to Mecca for praying
Kitab	A holy book or scriptures
Maghrib	West (Arabic origin, pertaining to evening prayers)
Makam	Tomb for Muslims
Ramadan	Ramadan, the month for fasting
Songkok	A headgear worn by men during Friday prayers
Surau	Chapel (for Muslims)

Some of these are unfamiliar to a person who has little or no background of Islam. There are words however, that have been used quite extensively in the literature such as *Ramadan, Hari Raya* and *Haj*. But the rest of the words need further elaboration and explanation for a Malay language learner. In the case of Filipino, the following words are frequently used in the texts used for language teaching:

Table 2: Filipino Words Pertaining to Religion

Tagalog	Gloss
Antanda	Sign of the cross (for Catholics)
Ati-Atihan	Feast in celebration of the Sto. Niño (Holy Child)
Binyag	Baptism
Komunyon	Communion
Kumpil	Confirmation
Kumpisal	Confession
Nobena	Novena
Palaspas	Palm used during Palm Sunday
Panata	Vow, a solemn promise
Piyesta	Feast, fiesta
Rosaryo	Rosary
Salubong	Celebration of Easter Sunday
Semana Santa	Holy Week
Sinakulo	Re-enactment of Jesus Christ's suffering

For the Filipino language learners unfamiliar with the Catholic religion, the meanings of these words are not easily grasped. Further explanation and elaboration are needed in order for these words to be understood according to the conceptual system of Catholicism of the Filipinos.

The words presented in the previous tables were some of the words causing challenges in developing a bilingual Malay-Filipino, Filipino-Malay dictionary. Having said this, by looking further into the meaning of the said words, we can see that there are certain similarities between these words. By setting up a frame for each of these words, we can group or identify similar meanings from both Malay and Filipino. Given the word below, we can give a frame of related meanings according to:

Table 3: Semantic Frame for *'prayer beads'*

Primes	'prayer beads'	
	Filipino – rosaryo	*Malay – tasbih*
Length (no. of beads)	60 beads + 1 crucifix	99 beads (representing 99 names of Allah)
Use	To remember the prayers and number of recitations (in the case of rosaryo)	
Prayer	3 Mysteries (Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious), Hail Mary, Our Father, Glory Be and Apostle's Creed	SubhanAllah Alhamdulliah Allahu Akbar dhikr Allah

From this frame, we can see that *rosaryo* and *tasbih* share related meanings, although the prayers used may be different. Thus, we can propose an entry[12] such as:

Rosaryo – *k.n.*, alat untuk mengkabulkan doa dalam agama Katolik; seperti tasbih dalam agama Islam.[13]

Tasbih – *n.*, butil-butil na nakatuhog gamit sa pagdadasal sa Islam; tulad ng rosaryo[14].

Table 4: Semantic Frame for 'a month-long fasting and prayer'

Primes	'a month-long fasting and prayer'	
	Filipino – kuwaresma	*Malay – Ramadan*
Length	40 days 28 days	
Reason	Commemorates Jesus' retreat in the desert and his sufferings before crucifixion, and death.	Commemorates the revelation of the Holy Qur'an to Muhammad.
Activity	Prayer, fasting, abstinence from eating meat, alms-giving	Prayer, fasting, alms-giving
Final celebration	Easter Sunday	Hari Raya (Eid U-Fitri)

From this we can propose an entry:

Kuwaresma – *k.n.*, dalam agama Katolik, orang-orang berpuasa ataupun menahan diri makan daging, bersembahayang dan membagi sedekah; seperti Ramadan.[15]

Ramadan – *n.*, pag-aayuno tuwing ika-9 na buwan ayon sa kalendaryo ng Islam; tulad ng kuwaresma.[16]

Cultural Terminologies

In this section, we will look into some terminologies relating to culture. There are certain words, despite sharing similar cultural background, still do not have an almost similar meaning. Malaysia and the Philippines share a lot of cultural practices prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity. For example, the concept of marriage, both countries practiced certain customs and traditions before and during the wedding ceremonies. However, due to the influence of religion, in the Philippines for example, the practice is reduced to the engagement (only when necessary) and the wedding ceremony itself. Also, because of the influence of Western culture, practices such as bridal showers and bachelor's parties are now adapted into the Filipino culture.
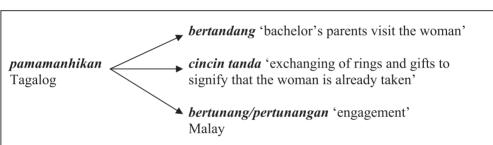
In the Philippines, typically before marriage, the concept of *panliligaw* 'courtship' is practiced among single men and women. Eligible, single women are courted first with *harana* 'serenade', and then when they accept, the lucky guy will have to do *paninilbihan* 'servitude' to prove his love and faithfulness to the woman and to her family. After he has shown his love and devotion to her and her family

approves, the *pamamanhikan* 'engagement or meeting of families' is set. Parents of both parties meet and set the date of the wedding day. The wedding day itself is called, *Pag-iisang dibdib, Araw ng Kasal* or *kasalan* which is taken from the Spanish word **casar** *'to wed'*.
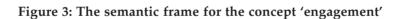
In Malaysia, the traditional wedding ceremonies are still being followed. After the *adat merisik* where the bachelor's family has found a suitable bride, will the process of marriage begin. The concept of engagement is called (*adat*) *bertunang* normally held at the bride's house. It is then followed by *akad nikah* 'signing of marriage contract, solemnization', and then followed by the wedding ceremony itself, *persandingan* or *bernikah*.[17]

A Malay wedding is more complicated compared to a Filipino wedding as there are more ceremonial practices done. Disregarding this, however, in setting up a semantic frame for the words related to marriage, there seems to be some overlap. In this case, we will only set up the frame for the concept *ENGAGEMENT*.

Figure 2: Semantic distribution of the concept 'engagement'

bertandang 'bachelor's parents visit the woman'

pamamanhikan
Tagalog

cincin tanda 'exchanging of rings and gifts to signify that the woman is already taken'

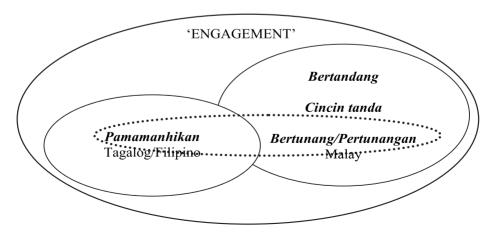*bertunang/pertunangan* 'engagement'
Malay

The concept 'engagement' in Tagalog pertains only to one word, *pamamanhikan* while in Malay, it comprises three levels: *bertandang* 'the meeting of parents', *cincin tanda* 'the exchanging of rings', and *bertunang or pertunangan* 'formal engagement'. For the Filipinos in general, all these ceremonial activities of engagement are done in one ceremony. In order to find the most suitable equivalent of engagement for both languages, we can show in this frame that:

Figure 3: The semantic frame for the concept 'engagement'

'ENGAGEMENT'

Bertandang

Cincin tanda

Pamamanhikan
Tagalog/Filipino

Bertunang/Pertunangan
Malay

pertunangan and *pamamanhikan* share a more related meaning than the other words in Malay. Both words mean formal engagement; thus we propose this entry:

Pamamanhikan – *k.n.,* pertunangan
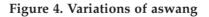**Pertunangan** – *n.,* pamamanhikan

In terms of supernatural beings, Malaysia and the Philippines share quite a number of them. Although there are variations, the ideas are somewhat the same.
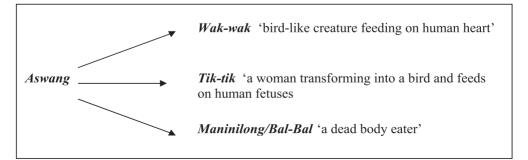
Table 5: Semantic Frame for 'banshee'

Primes	'a changeling; a demon-child'	'banshee or a ghoul'
	Filipino – tiyanak	*Malay – pontianak*
Appearance	Normal and cute baby	Beautiful woman
Sign of existence	Sound of crying baby	Sound of crying baby
Origin	A baby who died before being baptized; an aborted fetus; spirit of an unborn child whose mother died during labor.	A stillborn child; a woman who died while in labor.
Food	Feeds on blood	Feeds on blood by sucking through its long nails which function like a straw.

Although we see that there are some similarities, one striking and very important difference is the appearance or the shape of the banshee. A *tiyanak* is a child or an infant while a *pontianak* is a woman. This important prime prevents us from equating *pontianak* with *tiyanak*, despite sounding alike.

However, another mythical being in Filipino, the *aswang*, is more related to the Malay *pontianak*. The Filipino *aswang* is a woman who practices *kulam* 'black magic or sorcery' and transforms into a ghoul at night to feed on human flesh and blood. *Aswang* has other variations which are shown in Figure 4. *Aswang* is sometimes taken as a general term for any of these. The general feature is that all of these are blood-eating creatures.

Figure 4. Variations of aswang

Wak-wak 'bird-like creature feeding on human heart'

Aswang

Tik-tik 'a woman transforming into a bird and feeds on human fetuses

Maninilong/Bal-Bal 'a dead body eater'

A *pontianak*[18] has another variant which is a *langsuir*. It is said to be the most violent of the *pontianaks*. The same with *aswang*, it feeds on humans and human blood.

Table 6: Semantic Frame for 'banshee, a ghoul or a vampire-like creature'

Primes	'banshee or a ghoul'	
	Filipino – aswang	*Malay – pontianak*
Appearance	Beautiful woman	Beautiful woman
Sign of existence	The smell of boiling oil mixed with herbs which has been incanted with prayers	Sound of a crying baby
Origin	A normal person practicing black magic and transforms into a vampire-like creature	A woman who died while in labor.
Food	Feeds on blood, human heart and liver, human fetus.	Feeds on blood by sucking through its long nails which functions like a straw.

Having this set up, we can give an entry:

> **Asuwang/aswang** – *k.n.,* seperti hantu-raya yang memakan daging manusia dan menghisap darah. Ada berkaitan dengan pontianak.[19]
> **Pontianak** – *n.,* isang aswang na nagpapangggap na magandang babae. Sinisipsip ang dugo ng tao gamit ang kanyang mga kuko. Tulad ng aswang.[20]

Challenges in Building the Dictionary

Given the examples in the previous section, we can see that some words have overlapping meaning while some have no similarities at all. To find their similarities by putting them in a semantic frame, we can set some categories to find a probable prime in order to give an appropriate definition. Although at first, the idea behind Frame Semantics is to define words according to the categories it has[21], we used it as a guide to set up categories in defining the set of religious and cultural terms presented in this paper. By doing so, we were able to find certain similarities in order to formulate a 'friendlier' set of definitions.

But it should be noted, particularly for Filipino, the syntactic categories Filipino words belong to. Most Austronesianists analyzed Filipino words as belonging to open class categories. A noun can be categorized as a verb or an adjective and vice versa. This is not the case for Malay. Malay words are categorized more clearly than Filipino words. This may cause some challenges later on, not only for the religious and cultural terminologies but for the rest of the entries. For example, the word *bilis* in Filipino can be an adjective 'fast' or a noun 'speed' or a verb 'to be fast, to sped away'. Two of these meanings in Malay have two different words: *cepat* 'fast' and *laju* 'speed'.

Setting up frames for each word found in the corpus is quite a difficult task. However, by using Frame Semantics, and hopefully later on FrameNet, we can develop our own sets of semantic domains that are typical in any Austronesian languages. By having our own semantic domains, we can find words that can belong to frames and identify the most possible equivalent in both languages.

Conclusion

There have been no published Malay-Tagalog or Tagalog-Malay bilingual dictionaries to date. This may be attributed to the audience this type of dictionary may cater to. Since the two languages are now being taught in universities and private language centers in the Philippines and Malaysia, the need is slowly developing. In the attempt to build a corpus for this dictionary, the above-mentioned difficulties were faced. Some words in both languages are not easily translatable despite their similarities. But, by developing a set of frames with categories, it might in developing the corpus of the dictionary.

This paper is just an initial analysis to the corpus being developed and collected for the said dictionary. Further analysis of the data at hand is being taken in order to come up with a good set of dictionary entries.

Endnotes

[1] N. Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* vol. 1. (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2] Dominador Buhain, *A History of Publishing in the Philippines,* (Philippines: Rex Book Store, 1998), p. 9.

[3] Nor Hamsiah Binti Ahmad Hosaini, "The Bibliographic Control of Dictionaries Published in Malaysia between 19990-2005," (Master's thesis, University of Malaya, 2007).

[4] Atilio Alicio, *Language Phrases in English, Bahasa Melayu, Tagalog and Spanish,* (Kuala Lumpur: Univesity of Malaya Press, 2001).

[5] Sometimes it is also taught as a service language in some government institutions.

[6] Charles Fillmore, "The Case for Case", in Emmon Bach and Robert Harms (eds.), *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), pp. 1-88.

[7] A website devoted to the use of Frame Semantics found at http://framenet.icsi. berkeley.edu/. Frame semantics refers to a different variety of approaches to systemically describe the meanings of words (Fritz, Hamm, *Frame Semantics,* available at www.uni-stuttgart.de/linguistik/sfb732/files/hamm_**framesemantics**.pdf*, 2007 (accessed June 20, 2009).*

[8] Jean Mark Gawron, *Frame Semantics,* January 31, 2008, available at http://www.hf.uib.no/ forskerskole/new_frames_intro.pdf (accessed June 20, 2009).

[9] Fillmore, *Case for Case*; Charles Fillmore, "Frame Semantics", in *Linguistics in the Morning Calm* (Seoul: Hanshin Publishing Co., 1982).

[10] Fillmore, *Frame Semantics,* p. 373.

[11] Jean Mark Gawron, *Frame Semantics,* p. 8.

[12] For Filipino entry words, we use the Malay version of the syntactic categories. For Malay entry words, we will use the English version of the syntactic categories for convenience.

[13] Prayer beads (Catholic religion); similar to *tasbih* in Islam.

[14] Prayers beads (Islam); similar to *rosaryo*.

[15] In the Catholic religion, people fast or abstain from eating meat, pray and give alms; similar to Ramadan.

[16] Fasting every 9th month of the Islamic calendar; similar to *kuwaresma*.

[17] Pahang Delights, "Delightful Traditional Malay Wedding in Pahang," available at http://www.pahang-delights.com/delightful-traditional-Malay-wedding.html (accessed June 20, 2009).

[18] "What is "Pontianak"?" World Horror Stories, November 9, 2005, available at http://horrorstories.anthonet.com/archives/what-is-pontianak (accessed June 20, 2009).

[19] Like a monster eating human flesh and sucks blood. Similar to a *pontianak.*

[20] A ghoul or a banshee pretending to be a beautiful maiden. Sucks human blood using its nails. Similar to *aswang.*

[21] Mirriam R. L. Petruck, "Frame Semantics," in J. Verschueren, J. Östman, J. Blommaert, and C. Bulcaen (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics,* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996).