

HOW LANGUAGE USE SHAPES MEANING: A CASE STUDY OF  
SINGAPORE SOUTHERN MIN LOANWORD *BALU*

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ABSTRACT

In contact linguistics, an overlooked area that has immense research potential is regular semantic change exhibited by loanwords. Due to the relatively shorter histories of contact languages as compared to ‘normal’ languages, semantic changes in contact languages are far better understood, thereby presenting us with case studies of polysemous words where contact-induced change and regular semantic change can be better demarcated. Studying such phenomena will thus shed light on the cognitive processes behind semantic change. This paper looks at how language use shapes the semantic pathway of Singapore Southern Min loanword *balu* and suggests that the findings in this paper can be applied cross-linguistically to other cases of regular semantic change.<sup>1</sup> Singapore Colloquial Malay adverb *baru* ‘recently’ was borrowed into Singapore Southern Min as *balu* ‘recently’. Although Southern Min *balu* and Malay *baru* both share a common function, they exhibit disparate semantic pathways. Data gathered shows that loanword *balu* ‘recently’ has no tendency to develop a conjunctive function similar to that of Singapore Colloquial Malay and *baru* ‘recently’ has no tendency to develop another adverbial function like that of *balu* ‘recently’ in Singapore Southern Min.

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Initial findings of this paper suggest that the contrasting semantic pathways for Southern Min *balu* ‘recently’ and Malay *baru* ‘recently’ are due to differences in semantic fields a particular word is most strongly associated. Nevertheless, the overarching mechanism behind both semantic changes is still pragmatic inferencing, or in other words, a reanalysis of contextually ambiguous sentences.

KEYWORDS

Language Contact Lexical Borrowing Language Use Semantic Change  
Semantic Field

语言使用对语义的影响：  
以新加坡闽南话借词 *BALU* 为个案研究

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提要

借词的语义演变在语言接触研究中是乏人问津的重要课题之一。相比之下，接触语言中的变化比一般“正常”语言的变化发生得晚，我们对变化的来源和动因也更加清楚。因此，我们可以更肯定地区分多义词新语义的产生是否由接触所致（外在因素）或者是因语言自身的使用所致（内在因素）。本文相信，对完全融入受语的借词而言，借词语义演变的规律与“正常”语言无异。通过对借词语义演变的研究，我们能进一步认识语义变化的认知基础。本文将介绍新加坡闽南话的语言使用如何影响马来借词 *balu* 的语义演变路径，并试图找出其中的规律。新加坡闽南话借入马来话副词 *balu* “刚刚”以后，两种语言的不同使用方式赋予词汇不同的生命。虽然两者同样表示“刚刚”，语义发展路径却迥然不同。经本文调查，借词 *balu* “刚刚”并没有发展出和马来话 *baru* “刚刚”相同的连词功能；马来话 *baru* “刚刚”也没有发展出和新加坡闽南话 *balu* “刚刚”一样的另一个副词义。本文的初步假设是：新加坡闽南话 *balu* “刚刚”和马来话 *baru* “刚刚”的不同语义路径是个别词汇最相关的语义场有所不同所致。虽然如此，两种语义演变的机制仍然是语用推理。换言之，在这两中语言中，新语义的产生都是重新分析的结果。

关键词

语言接触 借词 语言使用 语义演变 语义场