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**MALAY COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE**

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***Abstract***

In the Malay language, comparatives, such as 'lebih' (<> more) and 'kurang' (<> less), and superlatives, such as 'paling' (<> most) and 'sangat' (<> very), are said to exist with an adjective phrase, for example, 'lebih besar' (<> bigger), 'kurang manis' (<> less sweet), 'paling cantik' (<> most beautiful), and 'sangat besar' (<> biggest). Comparatives and superlatives in Malay are categorised as intensifiers. Comparatives and superlatives in Malay are also expressed with the use of the affixes 'ter-' and 'se-'. Grammarians claim that comparatives and superlatives forms collate with adjective structure. Based on this claim, this study aims at describing the comparatives and superlatives features. The features are examined using the corpus from Korpus DBP and Corpora Collection Leipzig University. Which are then generated using Antconc. The results from Antconc show comparatives and superlatives characters and statistics. The study shows that comparatives 'lebih' (<> more) and 'kurang' (<> less) and superlatives 'paling' (<> most) and 'sangat' (<> very) forms exist with count phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase. Besides, this study shows that the meanings expressed by comparatives and superlatives when combined with an adjective phrase are different from comparatives and superlatives that collocate with count phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase.

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## 1. Introduction

Usually, comparisons between two or more propositions can be expressed by comparatives and superlatives (Asmah, 2009). The comparisons of these propositions are dependent on certain features which are based on the amount or degree of the componential properties the propositions have in human cognition (Kennedy, 2006). Studies on comparatives and superlatives have been done from the perspective of morphology, syntax, and semantics with the focus on morpheme, structure, and logical meaning (Gawron, 1995; Grano & Kennedy, 2012; Pancheva, 2012; Paoli, 1999). Findings from previous studies on comparatives and superlatives show that comparatives and superlatives are two aspects in grammar that need to be analysed in every natural language. The reason is that comparatives and superlatives are expressed through morphemic or syntactic constructions.

In English, for instance, comparative construction can be realized (a) using the comparative degree marker morpheme ‘-er’ with the word ‘than’ or (b) by the use of the comparative circumfixed syntactic structure ‘more-than’ (Bacskai-Atkari, 2014). The superlative construction can be realized (a) by the use of the superlative degree marker morpheme ‘-est’ or (b) by the use of the comparative syntactic structure ‘most.’ These can be seen in (a) the pair (1) and (2) and (b) the pair (3) and (4). The difference between the two pairs is that (1) and (2) explicitly compares two entities within a syntactic structure, while (2) and (4) implicitly compares their subject with another entity which does not exist in the syntactic surface structure.

- (1) Timah is shorter than Pe’ah.
- (2) Bedah is more diligent than Siti.
- (3) Minah is the bravest girl.
- (4) Leha is the most intelligent girl.

Besides analysing the elements which help express comparatives and superlatives, studies on the grammatical structure of comparatives and superlatives in a language have also been done, such as the one by Bacskai-Atkari (2014) who looks at English and Mandarin; see (5) and (6):

(5) \*Mary is taller as John. (Bacskai-Atkari, 2014, p. 6)

(6) \*Zhangsan piaoliang Lisi yidian.

Zhangsan pretty Lisi one dot

Intended: ‘Zhangsan is a bit prettier than Lisi’ (Grano & Kennedy, 2012 p. 220)

The study on grammatical and ungrammatical elements of (5) and (6) has managed to help find a solution to comparative and superlative constructions. The study suggests that, syntactically, adjectival comparative does not allow the projection of the degree argument but does allow it if it exists with an implicit morpheme (Grano & Kennedy, 2006).

### 1.1. A critical review of studies on Malay comparative and superlative

Studies related to comparatives and superlatives by Malay language scholars are limited to the rules on the usage of both comparative and superlative words, rather than focussing on the descriptive analysis of those words. Some of the Malay language scholars such as Asmah (2009); Liaw and Abdullah (1994);

Nik Safiah et al. (2009); and Zainal Abidin (2000) do discuss and explain comparatives and superlatives (see Table 1). However, their explanations are different from the Malay language's comparatives and superlatives definition and structural formation aspects.

Asmah (2009) states that comparatives and superlatives are comparison phrases, i.e. the phrase that compares between two or more propositions. As comparison phrase, comparatives 'kurang' (< lesser) and 'lebih' (< more) are categorised at 'tingkat kekurangan' (< less tier) and 'tingkat kelebihan' (< more tier), while superlatives 'paling' (< most), 'sangat' (< very) and 'maha' (< almighty) are placed in the 'tingkat kepalangan' (< most tier), 'tingkat kesangatan' (< very tier), and 'tingkat maha' (< almighty tier) respectively (Asmah, 2009). Although these words are superlatives, they are not placed in the same tier. This means that the Malay language superlative structures are different from one another. Liaw and Abdullah (1994) classify comparatives and superlatives as (a) adverb markers and (b) determinants for words whose word class cannot be determined. For instance, the word class for 'mengecewakan' (< disappointed) class can be only determined when it is preceded by the word (a) 'sangat' or 'paling' for the adjective class or (b) 'sudah' (< has/have/had) for the verb class. Comparatives are expressed using 'lebih' and 'kurang' which are categorised in comparison degree, while superlatives are expressed by (a) the phrase 'yang paling' (< the most), (b) the inflection morpheme 'ter-', (c) 'yang se- + adjektif' (< that se- + adjective), and 'sifat+nya' (< adjective+nya) (Liaw & Abdullah, 1994).

Nik Safiah et al. (2009) classifies comparatives and superlatives as intensifiers which intensify the meaning of the adjective word or phrase. In this case, Nik Safiah et al. (2009) use intensifiers as a tool to express comparatives and superlatives. However, Nik Safiah et al. (2009) do not explain the scale for 'lebih', 'kurang', 'paling', and 'sangat', but, only provides the term 'kata penguat hadapan' (< frontal intensifier) for the words 'kurang', 'lebih' and 'paling', while 'sangat' is known as 'kata penguat bebas' (< free intensifier). Zainal Abidin (2000) names the words 'lebih', 'kurang', 'paling' and 'as pangkat sifat' (< adjective rank). Like Asmah (2009) and Liaw and Abdullah (1994), the words 'lebih' and 'kurang' are categorised as 'tingkat perbandingan' (< comparative tier), while 'sangat' and 'paling' are categorised as 'tingkat menyangat' (< intensity tier). Based on the previous study, Asmah (2009), Liaw and Abdullah (1994), and Zainal Abidin (2000) agree that the Malay language has comparatives and superlatives, and they consistently exist with adjectives, except for Nik Safiah et al. (2009) who categorise comparatives and superlatives as one word class - intensifiers.

One critique of these studies is the scholars' agreement that comparatives and superlatives can only exist with adjectives. Their definition is based on the Malay language scholars' intuitions as native speakers of Malay, and it is not supported by empirical evidence. Corpus data shows that comparative and superlative structures exist with the verb class such as 'wan yang paling memberikan pengaruh pada mama' (< wan gives the most influence to mama) and noun such as 'semakin kurang orang menjenguk mereka' (< much less people visit them). The difference between the structures from the corpus data and the sentences from Malay grammar books raises a few questions: are comparatives and superlatives limited to expressing their meaning only through adjectives? If they do exist with adjectives, then what are the roles of comparatives and superlatives when they exist with nouns and verbs? If 'paling', 'sangat' and 'maha' are categorised in the same tier, i.e. superlatives, what are the differences between these three words?

The second critique is that the rules established by the language scholars do not consider the social context of the Malay society. This is because the examples in the Malay language grammar books are purely from their intuitions. As a scientific study, it is important that an empirical study is done using authentic, non-prejudicial big data, called corpus, to reflect the real usage of the language by the native speakers (Zaharani, 2013). According to McEnery and Xiao (2010), the use of corpora allows a linguistic study to be more objective.

Therefore, this study focuses on descriptively elaborating and explaining comparative and superlative phenomena in the Malay language. Based on this review, it is the view of this study that there is a need for a study on comparative and superlative usage in the Malay language sentences using corpora.

## 2. Problem Statement

By looking at the typology of comparatives and superlatives, this study tries to analyse the comparative and superlative structures of Malay. The study believes that the Malay comparatives and superlatives are significant to be investigated because the structures play an important role in strengthening the meaning of the adjectives (Nik Safiah et al., 2009).

Furthermore, this study also compares and contrasts the prescriptive and descriptive perspectives' rules for the Malay comparatives and superlatives. For instance, one of the prescriptive rules states that the Malay comparatives ('lebih' or 'kurang') and superlatives ('paling', 'sangat' and 'maha') must exist at a specific location, i.e. before or after an adjective (Nik Safiah et al., 2009) such as in (7) to (11).

- (7) Kuih ibu lebih sedap daripada kuih Siti.  
 Cake mother COMP-more delicious than cake Siti  
 'Her/His/My/Their mother's cake is more delicious than Siti's cake.'
- (8) Sambutan hari raya tahun ini kurang meriah.  
 Celebration day eid year DET COMP-less cheer  
 'The Eid day celebration this year is less festive.'
- (9) Sungai Rajang merupakan sungai paling panjang di Malaysia.  
 River Rajang BE river SUPER-most long in Malaysia  
 'The Rajang River is the longest river in Malaysia.'
- (10) Rumah itu besar sangat.  
 House DET big SUPER-most  
 'The house is the biggest.'
- (11) Dia Maha Kaya.  
 PRO-SING-1 SUPER-supreme rich  
 'He (God) is the Most Affluent.'

(7) to (11) show that comparatives and superlatives must co-exist with an adjective, and many scholars and grammarians of Malay accept this prescriptive rule which reflects these constructions. This acceptableness is also due to the somewhat limited descriptive linguistic study of Malay comparatives and superlatives. Because of these limited descriptive linguistic studies and the prescriptiveness of rigid rules

on Malay comparatives and superlatives, which create a number of issues, a more in-depth descriptive study needs to be done.

### 2.1. Comparative and superlative on the adjective structure

The main issue related to this structure is the presence of the comparatives and superlatives with only the adjective word or phrase. If the comparatives and superlatives can only co-exist with adjectives, there will be a question raised based on the observation from Korpus DBP ( $\langle \rangle$  DBP Corpus) (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2010-2013). Why are there comparative and superlative structures with verb phrases as in (10) and (11)?

- (10) Ukraine adalah kerajaan paling berkuasa Eropah.  
'Ukraine is the most powerful government in Europe.'
- (11) Harga yang sangat berpatutan berbanding jenama kristal yang lain.  
'The price is very reasonable when compared to other crystal brands.'

The 'paling berkuasa' ( $\langle \rangle$  most powerful) and 'sangat berpatutan' ( $\langle \rangle$  very reasonable) structures do not abide to the prescriptive rules of the Malay language. Observation towards comparative and superlative structural features require descriptive explanation. It is the view of this study that structures like (10) and (11) need to be accepted by Malay grammarians and scholars as another Malay language structures on comparatives and superlatives; the structures cannot be rejected just because the structures do not fulfill the rule given by the so-called prescriptive authority of the language.

### 2.2. Superlative scale

The second issue is superlative. This relates to the division of the degree level by Asmah (2009). In this case, superlative 'paling' and 'sangat' are categorised in the same degree, but at different levels - 'paling' to 'tingkat kepalangan' and 'sangat' to 'tingkat kesangatan' (Asmah, 2009). In terms of difference, 'paling' is said to be a continuity of 'tingkat kelebihan', whereas 'sangat' is at par with 'tingkat kelebihan' (Asmah, 2009). This statement raises the question: "How are 'paling' and 'sangat' different through syntactic and paradigmatic analyses such as in (12a) and (12b)?"

- (12) a. Pulau itu sangat cantik.  
'The island is very beautiful.'
- b. Pulau itu paling cantik.  
'This is the most beautiful island.'

(12a) and (12b) shows that the words 'sangat' and 'paling' have paradigmatic relation. There is no difference between the sentences structurally. However, the paradigmatic relation creates an ungrammatical sentence structure in (13a) and (13b).

- (13) a. \*Pulau itu sangat cantik di antara ketiga-tiganya.  
'\*The island is very beautiful among those three.'
- b. Pulau itu paling cantik di antara ketiga-tiganya.  
'This is the most beautiful island between those three.'

(13a) and (13b) show that ‘sangat’ and ‘paling’ are superlatives, but in certain syntactic context, the paradigmatic relation between them creates an ungrammatical sentence structure. Therefore, this study aims to analyse comparative and superlative structures in Malay as they are actually used and to analyse the different meaning between the words that reflect the comparative and superlative degrees using corpus data.

### **3. Research Questions**

These are the research questions:

- (1) Are comparative and superlative adjectives limited only to the adjectival structures given by *Tatabahasa Dewan* (Edisi Ketiga) (Nik Safiah et al., 2009)?
- (2) What are the forms for comparative and superlative adjectives in Malay?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This research aims at analysing descriptively the comparative and superlatives patterns in Malay sentences based on corpus data. This study also aims to compare and contrast the comparatives and superlatives in prescriptive and descriptive grammars.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Study approach**

This study uses case study design to explain comparatives and superlatives patterns and features

#### **5.2. Collections and observations of the study data**

This study uses two corpora: (a) Korpus DBP (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2010-2013) and (b) Corpora Collection Leipzig University (Deutscher Wortschatz, 1998-2020). DBP Corpus cannot count the frequency of a word; therefore, the sentences from the corpus are copied into a MSWord file. Then, the sentences are copied into a plain text format and stored in Antconc (Anthony, 2019). Antconc will produce the word list and concordance. Through the word list in concordance, statistical analysis and frequency can be done to the corpus data. This study uses keywords in context (KWIC) to examine the existence of words which reflect comparatives and superlatives in the middle line of the concordance.

#### **5.3. Data Analysis**

The content analysis method is used in this study to examine the features of the Malay comparatives and superlatives. From the content analysis, the data is then analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, a descriptive statistical analysis is done by examining the frequency of comparatives and superlatives. For qualitative analysis, an examination is done on the patterns and features of comparatives and superlatives found in the Malay language sentences.

## 6. Findings

Based on the data examination from (a) Korpus DBP (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2010-2013) and (b) Corpora Collection Leipzig University (Deutscher Wortschatz, 1998-2020), Malay comparatives and superlatives are not confined to sentence structures which only contain adjectives. There are comparatives and superlatives which co-occur with other word classes, besides adjectives.

### 6.1. The syntactic position of the ‘lebih’ (< more) and ‘kurang’ (< less) comparatives

For the discussion, the most frequent comparative structure will be used (refer to Table 01). Based on the data from Korpus DBP (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2010-2013), there are 133 ‘lebih’ comparative structural tokens and 113 ‘kurang’ comparative structural tokens. Observations on both comparatives show that ‘lebih’ and ‘kurang’ do not necessarily exist with the adjectives. This can be seen in Table 01.

**Table 01.** The most frequent phrase for the ‘lebih’ comparative

lebih + frasa bilangan (< lebih + count phrase)	F	lebih + frasa adjektif (< lebih + adjective phrase)	F	lebih + frasa kerja (< lebih + verb phrase)	F
lebih kurang (< much less)	15	lebih baik (< better)	8	lebih berfaedah (< more beneficial)	1
lebih banyak (< much more)	4	lebih besar (< bigger)	4	lebih berkesan (< more efficient)	1
lebih ramai (< more people)	4	lebih tinggi (< higher)	4	lebih berkualiti (< more quality)	1

From Table 01, one could see that the ‘lebih’ comparative is present before the count, adjective, and verb phrases. The presence of ‘lebih’ in the structure does not adhere to the ‘lebih + adjective’ rule given by Nik Safiah et al. (2009). According to Asmah (2009), ‘lebih’ is a comparative phrase that is usually used to make a comparison based on something such as that in (14).

- (14) Rumah Aswad lebih besar dari rumah dulu.  
 ‘Aswad’s house is bigger than the previous house.’

In (14), the word ‘lebih’ expresses a comparison between Aswad’s current house with Aswad’s previous house. This means that comparative ‘lebih’ must have two or more references when making a comparison, and this is in parallel with Asmah (2009) who states that ‘lebih’ cannot stand alone outside of its context. This poses a question – “does the ‘lebih’ feature in count and verb phrases express the same thing with ‘lebih + adjective’?” Below are sentences that contain ‘lebih + count phrase’ and ‘lebih + verb phrase’:

- (15) Pada setiap musim Awang bin Taman membeli benih ikan lebih kurang 10 000 ekor pelbagai jenis dengan kos hampir RM5000.00.  
 ‘Every season Awang bin Taman bought about 10 000 various fish seeds at the cost of almost RM5000.00’
- (16) Pengiraan kadar insiden lebih bermakna pada makmal yang mempunyai jumlah bilangan jam bekerja yang tinggi atau bilangan pekerja yang ramai.

‘Calculating incident rate is more meaningful for labs which have high number of working hours or more number of workers.’

(15) and (16) show that comparative ‘lebih’ does not uphold the meaning in adjective phrase structures. Other than that, this study finds that the comparative ‘kurang’ also exists in structures other than in the adjective phrase, for example (17) and (18):

(17) Strategi ini dirangka bertepatan dengan keadaan ekonomi negara yang berada di tahap kurang memberangsangkan ini.

‘This strategy is planned in accordance with the country’s economy that is less stimulating.

(18) ... ramai pereka muda yang kehadiran mereka kurang dirasai meskipun pernah meraih pelbagai anugerah antarabangsa.

‘... many young inventors whom their presences are less felt although they won various international awards.’

(17) and (18) show that comparative ‘kurang’ does not necessarily exist with an adjective phrase. From the distribution aspect of these two comparatives, the comparative + adjective structure does not conform to the prescriptive rules of *Tatabahasa Dewan* (Nik Safiah et al., 2009). If it is examined semantically, ‘kurang’ has a denying feature which allows the structure ‘kurang + adjective’ to express denial. However, if it is with other structures, the denial feature is not directly reflected at the surface level as it is only reflected implicitly. This shows that Malay comparatives have various distributions and are not limited to adjective phrase, and, from the semantic perspective, ‘kurang’ and ‘lebih’ do not show the same meaning with the ones expressed in comparative + adjective distribution.

## 6.2. Descriptive superlatives ‘paling’ and ‘sangat’ facts

According to Asmah (2009), the superlatives ‘sangat’ and ‘paling’ have different degrees. In this case, from the semantic aspect, ‘paling’ is an addition or continuity from something neutral (Asmah, 2009), for example:

- (19) a. Tudung kakak cantik. (Tingkat neutral)  
‘My sister’s hijab is beautiful. (Neutral tier)’  
b. Tudung kakak paling cantik di antara ketiga-tiga tudung ini. (Tingkat kepalingan)  
‘My sister’s hijab is the most beautiful among those three hijabs. (Most tier)’

For the ‘sangat’ superlative, its meaning would refer to ‘tingkat kelebihan’ which does not require any context like the ones with ‘paling’ superlatives. In other words, ‘sangat’ is context-free. The question is whether or not superlatives ‘sangat’ and ‘paling’ interchangeable? Look at (20).

- (20) a. Aku akan panjat tiangnya yang paling tinggi.  
‘I will climb the highest pole.’  
b. Aku akan panjat tiangnya yang \*sangat tinggi.  
‘I will climb the \* very high pole.’



(20a) shows that, among the poles, there is only one pole which shows ‘kepalingan’. However, when ‘paling’ is substituted with ‘sangat’, the sentence is ungrammatical. This proves that ‘paling’ and ‘sangat’ are not synonymous. From the distribution aspect, superlatives ‘paling’ and ‘sangat’ do not only exist in the superlative + adjective structure, but in other phrases as well, for example (21a-b) which clearly show that superlatives are not limited to the superlative + adjective structure.

- (21) a. Peringkat seterusnya merupakan peringkat yang paling ditakuti oleh seseorang pesakit HIV.  
‘The next level is the scariest level for the HIV patient.’
- b. Riverside masih baru dan tradisi ilmiah antara Belanda dan Amerika Syarikat sangat berlainan tetapi saya tetap menaruh harapan.  
‘Riverside is still new and the learned tradition between the Netherlands and the United States are very different but I am still hopeful.’

## 7. Conclusion

Based on this discussion, Malay comparatives and superlatives are clearly different from the prescriptive rules given by Nik Safiah et al. (2009). Syntactically, comparatives and superlatives are not limited to adjective phrases construction only. Semantically, the four comparatives do not have the same features. Superlatives ‘sangat’ and ‘paling’ do not uphold the same meaning. Besides, this study finds out that comparative and superlative structures, other than adjective phrases, do not have the same meaning as comparatives and superlatives in the adjective phrase.

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