

Cultural Conceptualisations of Nativised English Lexemes in Malaysia English: A Study among Malaysian Third Culture Kids

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ABSTRACT

In the literature on New Englishes, research on Malaysian English (ME) lexis has often overlooked the use of nativised English lexemes among specific groups within the Malaysian speech community. This study addresses that gap by exploring the cultural conceptualisations encoded in nativised ME lexemes among Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs). Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are individuals who spent significant portions of their developmental years in foreign cultures and frequently face challenges in adapting due to their mobile upbringing. Given that ME functions as a unifying language in Malaysia, examining MTCKs' interpretations of culturally embedded lexemes offers insights into their meta-cultural competence and lexical knowledge. This, in turn, reflects their ability to communicate effectively and integrate within the broader Malaysian speech community. Employing a Word Association-Interpretation method, ten participants were asked to elaborate on their cultural conceptualisations of 30 nativised ME lexemes through a semi-structured interview. The data were then analysed using a deductive thematic coding approach. Findings revealed all 30 stimulus words elicited culturally grounded responses, with 101 references categorized under cultural schemas and 123 under cultural categories. These findings suggest that MTCKs possess a high level of conceptual variation awareness in ME which is an essential component of cultural cognition, behaviour, and communication in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: cultural conceptualisations; Malaysian English (ME); nativised English lexemes; Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs); Third Culture Kids (TCKs)

INTRODUCTION

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are individuals who were raised in a culture different from their country of nationality and spent a significant portion of their developmental years living in various cultural settings (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13). The term "significant" in this context refers to a period of one year or more occurring between birth and eighteen years of age (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 21). Research has shown that the transitional nature of TCKs' upbringing often leads to experiences of cultural homelessness, identity crises, and feelings of social disconnection, particularly in relation to their home communities (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Hoersting, 2010; Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Moore & Barker, 2012; Adams, 2014; Lily, 2014; Hisano, 2015; Long, 2016; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Ra et al., 2024).

While much of the existing literature has focused on American TCKs, there remains a noticeable lack of research on Asian TCKs, particularly in relation to their linguistic abilities. Studies on Asian TCKs reveal distinct challenges that differentiate them from their Western counterparts. However, specific attention to Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs) remains limited, with more research directed toward Japanese, Korean, Singaporean, and Chinese TCKs (Fry, 2009; Starr et al., 2017; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023). Notably, Hisano (2015) examined Asian TCKs' psychological states upon re-entry, while Long (2016) investigated Chinese TCKs' adaptation experiences upon returning to their native communities. In Long's study, participants reported linguistic struggles as a significant source of emotional distress. One participant expressed frustration at being reminded to act "more Chinese," while another lamented her unfamiliarity with local terminology and slang, which deepened her sense of cultural alienation (Long, 2016, pp. 68–69).

Holmes and O'Neill (2012) argue that difficulties in readjustment stem largely from TCKs' insufficient cultural knowledge and lack of fluency in local languages and varieties. Moore and Barker (2012) further note that TCKs from Asian backgrounds face more complex reintegration challenges, especially in language use, due to strong cultural expectations of conformity and linguistic fluency. This cultural pressure often leaves Asian TCKs feeling excluded from local social groups. As Long (2016) highlights, it is not just the mastery of local languages that matters, but also the understanding of nuanced meanings in colloquial speech. Fatima (2024) similarly found that MTCKs, like other Asian TCKs, seek social belonging and connectedness, identifying Malaysian English (ME) as a vital tool for integration. However, Fatima's study focused solely on the participants' lived experiences and did not explore their linguistic competence in ME.

This gap in the literature forms the basis for the present study's research question, which is to explore how nativised English lexemes in ME are embedded in MTCKs' cultural conceptualisations. Rather than focusing on Bahasa Malaysia which is the country's official language, this study foregrounds ME as the more relevant linguistic medium. ME functions as a colloquial lingua franca among Malaysians and symbolizes national identity (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Mavić & Abram, 2013). According to Sharifian (2015), exploring cultural conceptualisations in New English varieties like ME is essential, as linguistic competence in such varieties depends not only on language proficiency but also on the ability to navigate socio-cultural contexts (Hymes, 1971; Sharifian, 2015). By investigating MTCKs' cultural conceptualisations of ME, this study aims to uncover their lexical depth, cultural awareness, and communicative competence within the Malaysian speech community.

In New Englishes, nativisation at the lexical level typically occurs through creative processes such as borrowing, semantic shift, affixation, compounding, clipping, abbreviation, blending, and hybridisation (Yen, 1990; Menon, 2003; Baskaran, 2005; Traugott, 2006; Vanhove, 2008; Pillai, 2008; Azli, 2010; Hajar, 2011, 2014; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Grandy, 2012; Lee & Hall, 2019). In ME, these processes are reflected either through direct borrowings from local languages or through innovative reinterpretations of existing English words (Kachru, 2006). However, existing literature reveals a research gap regarding semantic shift in ME as most studies to date have focused on broader aspects of ME's growth, including its phonological and grammatical features (Yen, 1990; Menon, 2003; Baskaran, 2005; Azli, 2010; Hajar, 2011, 2014; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Fatima, 2021).

Thus, nativised English lexemes in ME refer to English words that have diverged from their original meanings and acquired contextually specific, non-native interpretations (Menon, 2003). Given TCKs' generally high English language proficiency, examining MTCKs' interpretations of these lexemes offer valuable insights into their semantic awareness and ability to distinguish between native and non-native meanings. While cultural linguistics has explored this intersection in a few other New English varieties including African, Aboriginal, Persian, and Chinese Englishes (Sharifian, 2015; Xu & Sharifian, 2017; Kianbakht, 2020; Oliveira, 2020; Wen & Chen, 2021), ME remains underexplored in this regard. This study therefore, contributes to the growing body of work in cultural linguistics by examining MTCKs' cultural conceptualisations of ME lexemes as a reflection of their linguistic integration and cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The language use of Third Culture Kids

Given the centrality of language in fostering unity and effective communication, this study examines the role of New English varieties among Third Culture Kids (TCKs), particularly in their efforts to reconnect with their home communities. One study that underscores the link between language and social connectedness among TCKs is by Holmes and O'Neill (2012). The researchers identified linguistic insufficiency, particularly a lack of knowledge and competence in local languages and varieties as one of the most significant challenges TCKs face when readapting to their home cultures. Using an ethnographic approach, they engaged 35 participants in intercultural interactions over six weeks, during which they developed the PEER model. Their findings revealed that developing intercultural competence involves navigating reluctance and fear, confronting stereotypes, managing emotional responses, and grappling with social complexity, all of which were found to be connected to participants' linguistic limitations.

Similarly, Long (2016) explored the experiences of Chinese TCK returnees who had attended international schools abroad. Through semi-structured interviews with four male and seven female participants, the study found that poor linguistic competence in the local Chinese variety was a key contributor to emotional distress and weakened social connectedness. For instance, one participant expressed frustration at being reminded of his local heritage and language in efforts to become "more Chinese" (Long, 2016, p. 68), while another described disappointment at not understanding local slang and terminology which is regarded as an experience that intensified her sense of detachment from her community (Long, 2016, p. 69).

Pollock and Van Reken (2009) attributed this linguistic gap to long-term enrolment in English-medium international schools, a choice often made by expatriate families seeking the global and cultural benefits of English immersion (Hylmö, 2002). These schools offer numerous advantages for future career prospects (Bonebright, 2010), and the frequent use of English as a lingua franca often results in TCKs developing high English proficiency at the expense of fluency in their native languages (Straffon, 2003). While many studies highlight the benefits of this global linguistic competence, others have noted its drawbacks, especially for Asian TCKs, who often face greater challenges in reintegration due to language-related issues (Aitken, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Long, 2016; Jungmin, 2019; Mizutani & Waalkes, 2023; Ra et al., 2024).

Moore and Barker (2012) emphasized that Asian TCKs encounter more complex reintegration processes, specifically concerning language use, due to the region's strong cultural emphasis on linguistic conformity and adherence to local norms. This cultural expectation often leads Asian TCKs to feel excluded or disconnected upon their return. Mizutani and Waalkes (2023) reaffirmed that this issue remains prevalent, noting that Asian TCKs continue to face linguistic challenges that hinder both academic success and social interaction upon repatriation.

Ra, Ko, Cha, and Kim (2024) further explored how TCKs' language abilities are influenced by the tension between their Asian cultural heritage and their globalized upbringing. The study found that many TCKs feel more at ease using English or other foreign languages that better reflect their upbringing and personal identity. As a result, their linguistic preferences may lead to a sense of cultural disconnection from their heritage and native language. Aitken (2008) observed that many TCKs find it easier to adapt to new foreign cultures than to reintegrate into their home countries. These struggles with local linguistic competence, as Long (2016) argued, often result in emotional distress and hinder social belonging.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that language is more than a tool for communication, but it serves as a mechanism for social integration and identity negotiation (Fatima, 2024). However, the literature reveals a significant research gap in the context of Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs), especially from the perspectives of cultural linguistics and applied linguistics. This under-researched area warrants further exploration to understand how language varieties like Malaysian English (ME) may function as vital tools for fostering social connectedness. According

to Tannenbaum and Tseng (2015), examining TCKs' language use and linguistic competence also provides deeper insights into their identity construction, as language choices often reflect their complex cultural affiliations and social realities.

Malaysian English

According to Platt, Weber, and Ho (1984), Malaysian English (ME) is best understood as a continuum ranging from the basilect (most colloquial form) to the acrolect (most standard form). While ME and Singapore English (SE) may appear similar due to shared colonial histories and linguistic features, they each exhibit unique characteristics and sociolinguistic identities (Kim, 2003; Lim, Pakir, & Wee, 2010). Nair (2017) explains that although ME remains closely linked to Bahasa Malaysia (BM) which is its parent language, the variety has developed distinctive features that set it apart from other New Englishes. These include influences from British English (BrE), American English (AmE), Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and other languages (Yamaguchi & Deterding, 2016). By 1957, ME had become widely used across various sociolinguistic domains in Malaysia, marking its nativisation and recognition as a legitimate variety (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012).

Scholarly work on ME has shown that it diverges from other New English varieties in several key areas, notably in grammar, pronunciation, and lexis (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Pillai, 2013; Nair, 2017; Fatima, 2021). One of the most prominent features of ME lexis is its incorporation of indigenous linguistic elements through lexical borrowing, as well as the creative development of new meanings through semantic shift (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Fatima, 2021). As Vanhove (2008) explains, semantic shift involves changes in word meanings over time, resulting in senses that differ from the original. Such changes may be driven by sociocultural developments, psychological factors, linguistic patterns, changes in referents, or shifts in worldview (Grzega & Schöner, 2007).

Semantic shift in Malaysian English

Traugott (2006) defines semantic shift as both a process and a product of meaning change, categorizing it into six types; Semantic Broadening which is the expansion of a word's meaning; Semantic Narrowing which is the restriction of a more specific sense; Amelioration which is the shift from negative to positive meaning; Pejoration which is the shift from positive to negative meaning; Metaphor which is the transfer of meaning based on similarity, and; Metonymy which is the association of a word with a related concept. In the context of ME, Azirah and Tan (2012) proposed six sub-categories of lexicalisation specific to nativised English lexemes. This includes, Polysemic Variation, Semantic Restriction, Informalisation, Formalisation, Directional Reversal, and College Colloquialism.

Among these, Fatima (2021) found that Informalisation is the most frequently occurring category in everyday ME usage. This observation aligns with Fairclough's (2003) assertion that Informalisation is a dominant linguistic trend in casual communication that is often characterised by interjections, expressive language, and rapid lexical innovation. In the Malaysian context, Baskaran (2005) notes that many ME lexemes are concentrated at the mesolectal level, where they function as informal alternatives to Standard English vocabulary. This tendency towards informality reflects a broader pattern of relaxed speech norms and localized expression in Malaysian society. Leech, Hundt, Mair, and Smith (2010) further highlight that Informalisation is particularly evident in media discourse, with journalistic language increasingly favouring a spontaneous and direct style over more traditional written forms.

Examples of such nativised ME lexemes include words and phrases like *potong stim*, *sound*, *tackle*, *member*, *on*, and *pattern*, which carry unique contextual meanings not typically found in Standard English (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Fatima, 2021). In alignment with Sharifian's (2015) approach, who compiled a list of 32 culturally salient English lexemes for conceptual analysis, the present study adopts a Word Association–Interpretation method. Thus, thirty (30) nativised English lexemes from the category of Informalisation were selected as stimulus

words to elicit participants' cultural schemas and cultural categories embedded within the ME variety.

Table 1. Nativised english lexemes in Malaysian English (ME) from the category of informalisation.

Words	Native Meanings	Informal Meanings/Substitution in ME
1. Action	The fact or process of doing something	To show-off or a person who is boastful, cocky and arrogant
2. Banana	A long, curved fruit with yellow skin when ripe	A Chinese who does not know Chinese language
3. Best	Of the most excellent or desirable type of quality	Lucky or great
4. Blur	Things that cannot be seen or heard clearly	Confused
5. Budget	An estimate of income and expenditure for a set period of time	To reckon or a person full of act and pretence
6. Burn	Damages or injuries by heat or fire	Something that is gone or cannot be used anymore
7. Cable	A thick rope of wire or hemp used for construction	Having connections with high and established organizations
8. Chop	To cut something into pieces	To stamp
9. Control	The power to influence or direct people's behaviour	Someone who tries to look good and appealing
10. Die	To stop living	Used in situations when one is in deep trouble
11. Finish	To end or to complete	Another dramatic way of expressing when one is in a troubled situation
12. Follow	To go or come after	To accompany
13. Line	A long, narrow mark or band	An occupation/field
14. Member	A person, animal, or plant belonging to a particular group	A close friend
15. On	Physically in contact supported by a surface	To agree on an activity
16. One	The first numerical digit	Confirmation to a statement
17. Over	Extending directly upwards	Doing things exceeding what is necessary
18. Pattern	Repeated decorative designs	A person who acts in various kinds of unusual behaviour
19. Power	The ability or capacity to do something	Exceptional or great
20. Round	To rotate with circular motion	To go out for a drive without any specific reason
21. Settle	To resolve or reach an agreement	To look after someone or something
22. Slang	Colloquial words	Accent
23. Slumber	A condition of sleep	To feel relaxed or too laid back
24. Solid	Firm and stable in shape	Impressive
25. Sound	Vibrations that can be heard through the air	To be reprimanded or scolded
26. Spend	To give money or to pay for goods and services	Giving a treat to someone
27. Steady	Something that is firm or stable	Someone who is laid back or relaxed
28. Tackle	An act of seizing while playing ball	To approach and flirt with an individual
29. Terror	Extreme fear	Terrific or super
30. Whack	To strike forcefully	To grab or dig in all the food

Cultural conceptualisations in New English Varieties

According to Bonvillain (2007), amongst the various languages around the world, it is the English language that has and still is, greatly being affected by language change. Today, changes in the English language have developed into new varieties due to history's expansion of colonization and the current influences of economic, political, and cultural influences of the United States, known as World Englishes and New Englishes (Kachru, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2012). World Englishes refers to the English language, used noticeably throughout the world such as British English, American English, Canadian English, and Australian English while New Englishes refer to Englishes that differs from the standard English and has gone through a more intricate process of change in terms of its properties. Examples of New Englishes include countries from the African regions such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia; countries from the Caribbean such as Barbados, Guyana, and Jamaica; the Arab regions such as Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan; Pacific regions such as Fiji, Guam, and Hawaii; as well as Asian regions such as India, Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia (Mesthrie, & Bhatt, 2008; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Sharifian, 2017).

Romaine (2000) argues that language plays a vital role in transmitting culture, serving as a repository of what societies deem important because the vocabulary of a language reflects the cultural concepts its speakers need to articulate. For instance, the German *Schadenfreude* (joy at another's misfortune), or the Russian *mir* (meaning both 'peace' and 'world'). English varieties around the world also reflect cultural distinctions. In Irish English, *old* can mean 'idiot'; in Nicaraguan English, *lion* refers to a cougar and *tiger* to a jaguar; and in South African English, *shame* is a positive exclamation akin to 'how sweet' (Hickey, 2014). In Asia, terms like *Aunty* and *Uncle* refer broadly to older individuals and not just family members (Baskaran, 2005).

Sharifian (2017, p. 5) explains that such variations demonstrate how language functions as a "collective memory bank" of cultural cognition. Although interest in the study between language and culture dates back to the 18th century, a unified subdiscipline had yet to emerge which led Sharifian (2015) to develop Cultural Linguistics, a framework grounded in cognitive science and anthropology. This theory explores how language encodes culturally constructed conceptualisations that shape human experience (Sharifian, 2017, p. 2). Central to Cultural Linguistics is the idea that language reflects group-level cognition that is distributed across and reinforced by members of a speech community.

Sharifian (2017) posits that individuals within speech communities both shape and are shaped by cultural cognition. On one hand, individuals may influence the development and spread of a variety and on the other, their linguistic behaviours are conditioned by shared cultural conceptualisations. These are formed through social interaction, enabling members of a cultural group to "think, as if in one mind" (Sharifian, 2011, p. 5). Thus, cultural conceptualisations provide a lens through which meta-cultural competence can be examined (Sharifian, 2017).

Within Cultural Linguistics, three key elements are analysed; Cultural Schemas, Cultural Categories, and Cultural Metaphors. Cultural Schemas are culturally constructed cognitive frameworks used to interpret meaning, encoding knowledge, values, and behavioural expectations (Sharifian, 2017, p. 7). They fall into five categories: event schemas, role schemas, image schemas, proposition schemas, and emotion schemas. For example, in Sharifian's (2011) study which explored the different cultural conceptualisations of the word '*shame*' among Aboriginal Australians and Anglo-Australians participants, both groups largely instantiated notions of cultural schema under the category of emotion, mentioning words such as *guilt*, *feeling left out*, and *discomfort*.

Cultural Categories, meanwhile, encompass culturally specific ways of classifying experiences such as food, kinship, and social roles which are often encoded in language (Sharifian, 2017, p. 15). For example, in the same study from Sharifian (2011), although the word '*kangaroo*' elicited responses related to categorisation from both groups, there was a clear conceptual discrepancy, as the majority of Aboriginal students categorised it as a *type of food*, or *hunting game*, while Anglo-Australians primarily categorised it as an *animal*.

Cultural metaphors represent cross-domain mappings based on cultural traditions, such as folk medicine or spirituality (Sharifian, 2017, p. 7). A simple example of a cultural metaphor is the famous expression, '*Time is money*'. Some explorations by Sharifian (2015) include cultural traditions that give rise to conceptual metaphors involving internal body organs, such as the heart. Overall, the findings show that the associations between specific organs and emotions are not universal.

Sharifian's work shows that cultural conceptualisations vary in cohesion depending on a group's social connectedness, beliefs, values, and shared experiences. These variations can reveal deeper insights into group identity, unity, and communicative competence. For this reason, exploring how nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME) are embedded in Malaysian Third Culture Kids' (MTCKs') cultural conceptualisations offers a window into their vocabulary knowledge, linguistic integration, and social belonging which are areas where TCKs often face challenges.

Cultural Linguistics also provides a fresh approach to distinguishing English varieties, not through phonology or syntax, but via their underlying cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian, 2011). One key method in this field is the Association–Interpretation technique (Sharifian, 2015), which is a qualitative adaptation of traditional word association tasks. The method comprises two phases; the association phase which participants respond to stimulus words, evoking schemas and

categories; and the interpretation phase which researchers analyse the responses for cultural conceptual structures. This specific method reveals links between stimulus words and the cultural cognition of individuals or groups. In Sharifian's (2011) study, this particular method was applied to elicit English words like *family*, *home*, and *shame*. Results indicated that both groups spoke similar varieties of English, but their responses reflected divergent cultural schemas and cultural categories indicating differences not visible at the surface level of grammar or pronunciation.

Sharifian's findings therefore, underscore that miscommunication and feelings of disconnection are often rooted in mismatched cultural conceptualisations. While his work focused on Aboriginal English, the same challenges may arise in other English varieties. Therefore, examining ME through this lens can contribute significantly to understanding how MTCKs relate to Malaysian identity and navigate social integration through language.

METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study comprised a distinct group of Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs) currently in their youth, as this age group (18–35 years) is commonly associated with heightened challenges related to adaptation and social connectedness. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria in which they had to be Malaysian citizens aged between 18 and 35, who had spent at least one year living abroad between the ages of 4 and 18 as this is the key developmental window characteristics of a TCK (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). According to Levey and Polirstok (2011), by age four, individuals typically have fully developed speech and a functional understanding of their first language. Therefore, to ensure consistent linguistic data, participants' first language had to be English, acquired from the age of four.

To confirm participants' linguistic proficiency, multiple screening strategies were employed, guided by recommendations from Creswell and Creswell (2018). These strategies included: (1) a pilot-tested language assessment tool, (2) a self-report questionnaire on Bahasa Malaysia proficiency (rated on a scale from 1 to 5), and (3) a follow-up interview to validate responses and confirm language competence. The self-report data were collected via email prior to the main session, while the interview served as both a verification and a source of the qualitative data.

As the researcher is also a MTCK, initial participant recruitment was conducted through personal networks of individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Once participants were identified, interview sessions were scheduled at mutually convenient times. Each session began with a brief introduction, where participants shared their background and experiences as MTCKs. The main task involved a Word Association–Interpretation method, where participants were presented with 30 nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME). One word was presented at a time, starting with the most frequently used lexeme (*action*) and ending with the least frequent lexeme (*whack*) in the ME variety. For each word, participants were asked to provide associated words or phrases along with detailed explanations, enabling the researcher to identify embedded cultural schemas and cultural categories.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Participant responses of the stimulus words.

Stimulus Words		Participant Response
1.	Action	P1 - Umm, so what I think, from what I usually hear is, like being <i>poyo</i> (arrogant) or something. Like, if you use it in a sentence, it'll be like, OH, action <i>la kau ni</i> (you), you're not doing something that you're usually doing, I guess. Putting yourself out there, or attention seeker, maybe. So, that's what I think it is.
2.	Banana	P3 - I, I remember the term is used because it's for Chinese. Chinese kids if I'm not mistaken, Chinese kids who, who cannot speak Mandarin. I think the term is meant for banana yellow inside, white inside, yellow outside, white inside. So, it's something like, hey, hey you can't don't talk to this guy, he cannot speak Mandarin, he's banana one (chuckle). Something like that.

Table 2. (continued)

Stimulus Words		Participant Response
3.	Best	P2 - Ah...best, I myself use this word. So, I noticed that people use the word best in Malay conversation when it's good, or when it's like awesome, or like, things that you enjoy, so for example like, my friends would ask me, movie <i>tu best tak</i> (is it) like, they're asking if that's a good movie, and I would say, best, best! It was enjoyable, it was good.
4.	Blur	P5 - Blur is also another common word, like if you are puzzled or confused. You say, are you blur? Eh, blur <i>la you ni</i> , you don't know? Ah, something like that.
5.	Budget	P7 - For budget in Malaysia, it can be described as something like <i>acah-acah</i> (pretending). <i>Ayat macam</i> (for example the sentence) budget <i>pandai je dia</i> (he's being smart) means, <i>orang lain tak tau, dia je tau</i> (only he knows and others don't know).
6.	Burn	P4 - OH, non-refundable. So, if something's burnt, you're not talking about the burn <i>kat dapur tu kan</i> (at the kitchen). It's more about, you paid something and you won't get it back. I bought the ticket, but <i>dah burn dah</i> .
7.	Cable	P8 - Cable. OK, cable...this is like a connection with someone, like nepotism, isn't it...like, having connection to something.
8.	Chop	P7 - Chop is like, <i>jaga tempat</i> (calling dibs) or something.
9.	Control	P9 - To control something but for Malaysian content, where you use control, you're not controlling like, say, controlling a crowd or whatever, but it's more like control <i>cantik</i> (pretty).
10.	Die	P6 - This one is like I think this one is easiest because you know in everyone's culture hyperbole is used a lot, right? Young people want to be dramatic. They usually just straight up go from instead of just going, I'm in trouble, just straight up die.
11.	Finish	P1 - OH, like finish <i>la, habis lah kau</i> (you're doomed) you're done for.
12.	Follow	P5 - Follow is like you are accompanying someone. Like, I follow you to the shop <i>lah</i> , or I can follow you to the shop. You say that.
13.	Line	P9 - Line is my phone. Line, phone <i>tak ada</i> (don't have) line.
14.	Member	P3 - Ah, member is frequently used and I still use it today. We usually...It's basically a friend, but someone closer than a friend, means it's the friends in your group or...social group, yes. So, you usually call them members.
15.	On	P8 - On, like, it's on, like it's happening.
16.	One	P10 - So, again, one. I...maybe because among me and my Malaysian friends, we either speak English or Malay, or like...code mixing or code switching. So, I feel like 'one' is more...it has a more Chinese connotation to it. I would use it, I do use it but, more with my Chinese friends or Indian friends like, OK, to illustrate it...maybe I would say, OH, easy one <i>la!</i>
17.	Over	P1 - Over means like, acting more than you usually do. Like, over <i>la kau ni</i> (you are so). Like, over reacting, I guess. They simplified the over reacting to over, I guess.
18.	Pattern	P4 - OK, I would say something repetitive. Like in a sentence, <i>aku tak tau lah pattern dia macam mana</i> (I really don't understand him) <i>dia datang, dia tidur</i> (he comes, but then he sleeps). <i>Macam tu</i> (like that).
19.	Power	P6 - OK, power is also similar to best. It's basically a compliment. Trying to say that you're strong or you are good at something like that.
20.	Round	P9 - Round-round means you're going...you're going for, <i>apa...like jalan-jalan</i> (going for a stroll).
21.	Settle	P3 - Settle. I...I usually use the word settle a lot, usually to express when you finish something and no further questions asked. For example, I <i>dah submit kerja ni</i> (I've submitted the work), settle. Something like that.
22.	Slang	P5 - Slang is like another word for accent. People would say, eh, she talks English with good slang. So, accent.
23.	Slumber	P7 - Slumber...slumber is doing something without, <i>rasa malu</i> (feeling ashamed).
24.	Solid	P5 - OK, solid is like impressive. Like, something that impressed you, then people will say wow, you have a very solid lecturer. Like, impressive.
25.	Sound	P3 - Sound in Malay, I remember we usually use it for, for...uh...to, for example, to get angry at something. For example, teacher sound you, means the teacher scolded you <i>la</i> . Yeah, scolded.
26.	Spend	P4 - <i>Belanja</i> (treating someone). Umm. You choose <i>lah</i> whatever you wanna...I <i>nak</i> spend you.

Table 2. (continued)

27.	Steady	P2 - Umm, I understand steady as something being stable, OK, doing alright, meaning like, ahh, <i>tadi</i> , Farah present (just now when you were presenting) you steady <i>je</i> . <i>Suara tak ketaq pun</i> (you didn't have a shaky voice). Steady <i>je</i> . Chill, yeah, not being panic. Yeah.
28.	Tackle	P5 - OK, tackle is, if you want to flirt with someone or if you want to approach someone, so we tend to use the word, eh go <i>lah</i> tackle that girl, she's <i>cun lah</i> (cute) she's very pretty, so go tackle. Ah, for a guy very common, I think everybody knows this. If you don't know this, you're non-Malaysian.
29.	Terror	P9 - Terror means you're really good <i>la</i> . Like, terror ah <i>dia tu!</i> (He's awesome!)
30.	Whack	P3 - Whack, usually we use the term whack to do something if I'm not mistaken, very fast and very how do you say in Malay, like <i>gelojoh</i> (greedy) I mean, I remember one of my friends said hey, you, slow down, <i>nanti</i> (you're going to) you whack everything.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes of cultural conceptualizations for each lexical item.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Nativised English Lexemes in ME
Cultural Schema	Norms and expectations of behaviour	Action, Budget, Chop, Control, Follow, Line, On, One, Over, Round, Slumber, Sound, Spend, Tackle, Whack
	Roles and expectations of behaviour	Banana, Control, One, Tackle
Cultural Category	Attributes	Best, Pattern, Power, Slang, Solid, Steady, Terror
	Emotions	Banana, Best, Steady
	Events	Burn, Die, Finish, On, Settle
	Mental State	Blur
	Objects	Line
	Relations	Cable, Member

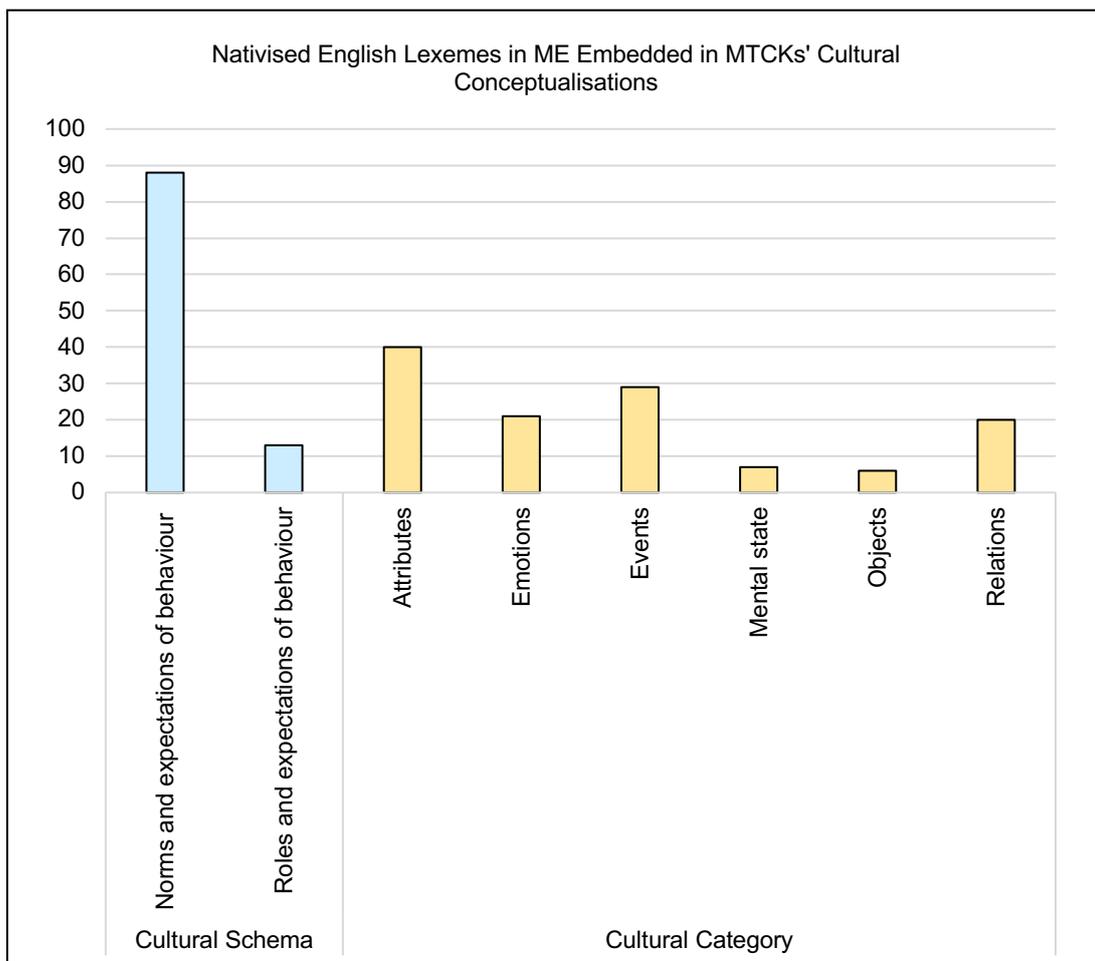


Figure 1. Number of references of nativised English lexemes in me embedded in MTCK's cultural conceptualisations.

Figure 1, Table 2, and Table 3 present a summary of the overall themes and subthemes derived from the data analysis. Using the Word Association–Interpretation method, ten participants were interviewed and asked to define, explain, and relate a set of 30 nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME) as stimulus words. Responses were analysed using a deductive thematic analysis approach with the aid of NVivo 14. While some participants were unable to provide detailed definitions for certain lexemes, the data collected were sufficiently rich for analysis. Their varied interpretations, classifications, and associations revealed that all responses were connected to cultural schemas and cultural categories, indicating that these ME lexemes encode cultural conceptualisations. This supports the broader claim in Cultural Linguistics that human language is deeply embedded in cultural conceptual structures, and that lexical items function as linguistic labels for shared schemas and categories.

The analysis identified 101 references under the cultural schema theme, which included two primary subthemes; Norms and Expectations of Behaviour (88 references), linked to lexemes such as *action, budget, chop, control, follow, line, on, one, over, round, slumber, sound, spend, tackle,* and *whack* as well as; Roles and Social Expectations (13 references), associated with lexemes such as *banana, control, one,* and *tackle*. These findings suggest that MTCKs possess a strong awareness of culturally specific social norms and behavioural expectations embedded in ME, despite growing up in multicultural or foreign environments. Their ability to interpret and apply such schemas indicates access to shared socio-cultural knowledge and social role understanding within the Malaysian context.

Simultaneously, 123 references were classified under the cultural category theme, with subthemes including; Attributes (40 references) such as *best, pattern, power, slang, solid, steady, terror*; Emotions (21 references) such as *banana, best, steady*; Events (29 references) such as *burn, die, finish, on, settle*; Mental States (7 references) such as *blur*; Objects (6 references) such as *line*; and Relations (20 references) such as *cable* and *member*. Cultural categorisation, regarded as one of the most fundamental cognitive processes, reflects the structure of an individual's conceptual system (Sharifian, 2017). For MTCKs who may not have internalised these cultural categories during early childhood, the ability to categorise ME lexemes in ways consistent with local usage demonstrates a notable level of conceptual variation awareness which is an essential component of meta-cultural competence.

CONCLUSION

This study has affirmed that nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME) possess what Thirusanku and Melor (2012) describe as the "magical property" of ME due to its capacity to act as a powerful social phenomenon, rooted in identity construction and symbolic unity. By exploring how these lexemes are embedded in the cultural conceptualisations of Malaysian Third Culture Kids (MTCKs), the findings offer deeper insights into their linguistic adaptation and cognitive alignment with the Malaysian speech community.

Participants' responses reveal that integration into the Malaysian community is a priority for MTCKs, and acquiring the lexical knowledge to navigate context-specific behaviours and cultural norms is essential. Despite their upbringing in diverse cultural environments, MTCKs demonstrated a clear inclination toward understanding and using ME, suggesting that the variety serves as a linguistic bridge which enables them to access culturally constructed concepts integral to Malaysian ways of thinking, feeling, and communicating.

The study also contributes meaningfully to the broader discourse on TCKs, offering a more nuanced perspective on MTCKs' experiences, emotions, challenges, and strategies for cultural adaptation. Through the lens of cultural conceptualisation, this research has highlighted MTCKs' levels of participation, membership, and social connectedness within the local speech community. These findings strongly align with Sharifian's (2017) theory of Cultural Linguistics, which views language as deeply embedded in distributed cultural cognition, reflective of social practices and shared meaning-making within a community.

Importantly, the study found that for MTCKs in their youth, nativised ME lexemes are actively used in daily communication to foster interpersonal clarity and avoid confusion, misinterpretation,

or social alienation. Their conscious effort to understand culturally specific vocabulary reflects a high degree of conceptual variation awareness, a key indicator of meta-cultural competence in Cultural Linguistics. This not only reinforces the significance of ME in MTCKs' cultural integration, but also contributes to the identification of ME as a distinct English variety, differentiated by its underlying cultural conceptual system.

Furthermore, the study offers a valuable perspective on semantic and pragmatic meaning-making, as participants provided rich, inclusive interpretations of each stimulus word. The use of the Association–Interpretation approach not only met the research objectives but also surfaced extended meanings and novel insights into the lexicon of ME. These include connections to broader themes such as the vitality of ME, code-switching and code-mixing practices, figurative and hyperbolic expressions, collocations, and linguistic simplification, all of which underscore ME's richness as a living, evolving variety. In sum, the findings illustrate how MTCKs, through their engagement with ME lexemes, navigate cultural belonging and identity, offering important contributions to the understanding of language, culture, and cognition in New English varieties.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Nur Fatima Wahida Mohd Nasir carried out the research, wrote and revised the article.

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