



# A Look into the Word Order of Malay and Mandarin Compound Words/Phrases

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## ABSTRACT

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*There are many Malay students in Malaysia studying Chinese. In the process of learning, these Malay students are influenced by the negative transfer of their mother tongue when they write sentences, translate, and reorganize the words into Chinese sentences. As such, they will produce erroneous sentences. The authors opine that when Malay students learn the similarities and differences in the word order in Malay and Chinese phrases, the mistakes in making sentences, translating, and reorganizing words in Chinese sentences can be reduced. In this short article, firstly, an overview of the formation of compound words/phrases in the Malay and Chinese languages is presented. This is then followed by a brief description on the development in the teaching of translating Malay sentences into Chinese. The article ends with a summary on the comparison of the word order of nine categories of compound words/phrases in both languages. These nine categories of compound words/phrases are the common vocabulary found in the textbooks used in UiTM Mandarin courses. It is noted that when Malay compound words/phrases are translated into Chinese, compound words/phrases of these three combinations – noun-noun (of partial formal phrase structure), adjective-noun, and adverb-verb (“kata kerja – kata penerang” in Malay) – need to have their order of words changed. The compound words/phrases in six other groups, however, did not require any changes in the word order.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been noted that Malay students often translate Malay compound words/phrases into Chinese using the direct translation method. This happens probably because they firstly think of the word in Malay, and then use a dictionary to get the corresponding words in Chinese. Direct translation is mostly suitable for vocabulary learning. However, when used to translate

sentences, it will often result in sentences that are grammatically wrong or sentences with vague or ambiguous meanings. The direct translation of Malay phrases to Chinese and vice-versa may result in faulty or ambiguous expressions. This is due to the differences in the word order of both languages. As such, it is of paramount importance for students to know and learn of these differences so that they could minimise the errors in sentence construction.

## **2. AN OVERVIEW ON THE FORMATION OF COMPOUND WORDS/PHRASES IN MALAY AND CHINESE LANGUAGE**

Over the years, the formation of compound words and phrases in both Malay and Chinese languages has been looked into by many linguists including those cited below. Each of them may have used different methods of classification and different terms to refer to similar formation. The following section briefly presents some information on the formation/categories of Malay and Chinese compound words/phrases.

### ***2.1 The Classification of Compound Words/Phrases in the Malay Language***

In the Malay language, there are two main methods of classifying compound words. The first is compound words that are formed by combining two or more words irrespective of the parts of speech of the individual elements. These compound words can be categorized into three main types (Nik Safiah Karim et al., 2014). The first is compound words that are formed by combining two ‘unrelated’ words. Some examples of these compound words include “kapal terbang” (literally ‘ship + fly’ and carries the meaning of aeroplane) and “jam tangan” (literally ‘clock + hand’ and carries the meaning of watch). The second category is compound words that are formed and used in certain fields such as “segi tiga” (literally ‘side + three’ and carries the meaning of triangle, as used in mathematics) and “atur cara” (literally ‘arrange + method’ and carries the meaning of the programme, as used in computer science). The third category is compound words that are used as proverbs. An example of this is “kaki ayam” (literally ‘leg + chicken’ and carries the meaning of barefoot). The second method of classifying compound words in Malay is according to the parts of speech of the elements (Asmah Hj Omar, 1993):

- a. compound noun (e.g., warga negara, citizen, 公民)
- b. compound verb (ambil alih, take over, 取代)
- c. compound adjective (merah jambu, pink, 桃红)

Expanding further on Asmah’s proposal, Abdullah Hassan (2006) added another category namely compound task word (e.g., kadangkala, sometimes, 有时).

### ***2.2 The Classification of Compound Words/Phrases in the Chinese Language***

The formation of compound words/phrases in Chinese is much more varied and complicated. According to Luo (1992) in Modern Chinese Grammar, Chinese compound words and phrases can be classified into various categories. Among the categories for Chinese compound words are:

- a. 联合 Lianhe: Collocation (e.g., 朋友, friend, sahabat) – these words are often of noun-noun, verb-verb, adjective-adjective combination.

- b. 偏正 Pianzheng: Partial formal (e.g., 新年, new year, tahun baru) – these words are often of adjective-noun combination with the focus on the noun. If the words are noun-noun combination, the meaning is usually determined by the second noun.
- c. 谓补 Weibu: Supplement (e.g., 看清, see clearly, nampak jelas) – these words are often of verb-adjective combination with the adjective explaining the verb.
- d. 动宾 Dongbin: Verb-object (e.g., 伤心, sad, sedih) – these words are often of verb-noun combination.
- e. 主谓 Zhuwei: Subject-predicate (e.g., 花开, flower blooming, bunga mengembang) – these words are often of noun-verb or noun-adjective combination.

According to Lu (2013), compound words in the Chinese language can also be categorised in the following manner:

- a. 联合/并列 Lianhe/Binglie: Side-by-side. For this category, the compound words are composed of two elements (words) with the same, similar, related, or opposite meaning, and the elements are of the same part of speech. The order of these two elements cannot be changed at will. An example is 劳动 (labour, kerah kerja). This is similar to Lou's (1992) collocation.
- b. 偏正 Pianzheng: Partial formal. For these compound words, the first element usually acts as a modifier and thus determines the meaning of the word (e.g., 足球, football, bola sepak).
- c. 支配/动宾 Zhipei/Dongbin: Verb-object. In these compound words/phrases, the first element which is usually a verb determines the meaning of the words/phrases (e.g., 扫地, sweep floor, sapu lantai).
- d. 主谓 Zhuwei: Subject-verb. The second element ‘explains’ the first element (e.g., 日蚀, eclipse, gerhana matahari).
- e. 补充/动补 Buchong/Dongbu: Supplementary. The first element usually refers to an action while the second element indicates the ‘result’ (e.g., 缩小, shrink, mengecut).
- f. 名量 Mingliang: Noun-quantifier. The first element is a noun while the second element is a quantifier (e.g., 花朵, flower, bunga).
- g. 附加 Fujia: Additional type. This consists of a root and another word (affix). The affix can be either before or after the root (e.g., 小说, novel, novel).
- h. 重叠 Chongdie: Repetition. This involves the repetition of the element (e.g., 娃娃, dolls, anak patung)

Comparing the two sets of classifications listed above, we can see that at times, different terms are used to refer to the same category. As for Chinese phrases, their formation may include the following categories:

- a. 动宾 Dongbin: Verb-object structure (e.g., 写文章writing, menuulis karangan)
- b. 偏正 Pianzheng: Partial formal (e.g., 可爱的猫cute cat, kucing comel)
- c. 谓补/补充 Weibu/Buchong: Supplementary structure (e.g., 看清楚see clearly, tengok dengan jelas)
- d. 主谓 Zhuwei: Subject-verb structure/subject-predicate (e.g., 学生学习students learning, pembelajaran pelajar)
- e. 联合 Lianhe: Joint structure/collocation (e.g., 我和父亲my father and I, saya dan ayah)

Song (1996) maintains that Chinese phrases can be formed according to the following:

- a. 主谓 Zhuwei: Subject-predicate phrases (e.g., 心情舒畅, feel comfortable, berasa selesa)
- b. 动宾 Dongbin: Verb-object phrases (e.g., 爱热闹, love liveliness, sukaan kemeriah)
- c. 偏正 Pianzheng: Partial formal (e.g., 我的妈, my mother, ibu saya)
- d. 补充 Buchong: Supplementary phrases (e.g., 看清楚, see clearly, tengok dengan jelas)
- e. 并列 Binglie: Joint phrases (e.g., 我和他, he and I, saya dan dia)
- f. 后补 Houbu: Predicate complement phrases (e.g., 跑得快, run fast, lari dengan laju)
- g. 同位 Tongwei: Compound joint phrases (e.g., 首都吉隆坡, Capital Kuala Lumpur, ibu kota Kuala Lumpur)
- h. 介宾 Jiebin: Jiebin phrase (e.g., 为人民, for the people, untuk rakyat)
- i. 数量 Shuliang: Quantity-quantifier phrase (e.g., 三天, three days, tiga hari)

Just like the classification of compound words, the terms used to describe the formation of Chinese phrases may be different even though they refer to similar categories.

### ***2.3 The Development in the Teaching of Translating Sentences from the Malay Language to the Chinese Language***

Not many articles that discuss methods of teaching or studying Malay – Chinese translation can be found. In their effort to help Malay students write correct sentences in the Chinese language, Hoe and Guo Ziwei began to study the word order of Malay and Chinese language and proposed the word sequence diagram (Hoe & Kuek, 2004). The improved word sequence diagram method (WSD) which addressed the arrangement of time words and the chart of the subject and predicate was published in Brunei in 2005 (Hoe, 2005). From then on, articles discussing the word sequence diagram with several relevant examples and explanations were written and debated (Hoe, Tan & Chan, 2011). In 2012, a theoretical framework of WSD was proposed (Hoe, Tan & Ho, 2012). Continuous improvement to the theoretical framework of the word sequence diagram was made over the next four years (Hoe, 2016).

To address the errors produced in the direct translation of Malay sentences into Chinese, the GATT translation method which incorporates the word sequence diagram as its foundation was proposed (Hoe & Liaw, 2006). GATT is the English abbreviation for the four steps of translation:

- a. G (grouping) refers to the grouping of words or phrases by time, subjects, places, and activities.
- b. A (arranging) refers to the arrangement of the groups of words or phrases according to the order of the word sequence diagram.
- c. T (translating) refers to the translation of the words or phrases.
- d. T (touching up) refers to the process of checking and rectifying the translation errors.

The GATT translation method was later refined, and a five-item checklist (for more information, please see Hoe, 2014) in the ‘touch up’ process were identified, and the theory of GATT was completed and proposed (Hoe, 2014). When translating, the word order must be given attention too. Sometimes the word order of a translated phrase stays the same as the original, but at times it is different. It should be emphasized that in some instances when the

word order is switched, the meaning changes. This is also true when translating from Malay to Chinese and vice versa.

### 3. COMPARING MALAY AND CHINESE WORD ORDER

Attempts are made to compare Malay compound words and phrases to Chinese compound words and phrases. In the comparison made, it is found that the categories of compound words and phrases in Chinese and Malay do not always correspond. An attempt was then made to compare the relationship within the word or phrase structure. It was discovered that this new comparison method, namely comparing the relationship within the word or phrase structure, was more appropriate for comparing Chinese and Malay words and phrases.

To determine the differences in terms of word order between Malay and Chinese compound words/phrases, the following steps were carried out. Firstly, the nine groups of compound words/phrases that are commonly found in the textbooks used in UiTM Mandarin courses were listed. The nine groups are:

- a. noun – noun (partial formal phrase)
- b. noun – noun (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)
- c. verb – verb (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)
- d. adjective – adjective (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)
- e. noun – verb (declarative word or subject-verb structure/subject-predicate phrase)
- f. verb-noun (dominant word or verb-object structure phrase)
- g. verb – adjective (supplementary word or supplementary structure phrase)
- h. adjective – noun (partial formal phrase)
- i. adverbs – verb (partial formal phrase)

Secondly, samples from each of the nine groups in Chinese and Malay were compared to identify which group needs word reordering and which does not. By knowing whether the elements (words) of each group need to be reordered or not, students will be able to translate Malay words/phrases into Chinese more accurately. It should be noted that there is another group of compound words/phrases that are made up of adjective – verb combination. This group, however, was not discussed as it was not used in the UiTM Mandarin course books.

### 4. WORDS RELATIONSHIP IN TRANSLATED PHRASE

In this section, a summary of the nine groups of compound words/phrases is presented.

- a. Noun-noun (partial formal phrase)

Chinese phrase	我 (的) 爸爸 wǒ (de) bàba	他 (的) 朋友 tā (de) péngyou	他 (的) 老师 tā (de) lǎoshī
Malay phrase	bapa saya	kawannya	cikgu dia
Word order	bapa 爸爸 (bàba) saya 我 (wǒ)	kawan 朋友 (péngyou) nya 他 (tā)	cikgu 老师 (lǎoshī) dia 他 (tā)
Conclusion	Words reordering is needed (left-right interchange)		

Compound words/phrases of this nature indicate possessiveness. All the examples are given in the table above – *bapa saya* (my father), *kawannya* (his friend), and *cikgunya* (his teacher) –

indicate possessive. This is different from the next category which is also of noun-noun combination but does not indicate possessiveness. When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, a left-right reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is needed.

#### b. Noun-noun (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)

Chinese phrase	我和爸爸 wǒ hé bàba	他和朋友 tā hé péngyou	他和老师 tā hé lǎoshī
Malay phrase	saya dan bapa	dia dan kawan	dia dan cikgu
Word order	saya 我 (wǒ) dan 和 (hé) bapa 爸爸 (bàba)	ta他 (tā) dan 和 (hé) kawan 朋友 (péngyou)	dia 他 (tā) dan 和 (hé) cikgu 老师 (lǎoshī)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

The compound words/phrases in this category are also of noun-noun category. These words, however, are usually joined by a conjunction and do not indicate possessiveness. When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

#### c. Verb-verb (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)

Chinese phrase	折扣 zhékòu	呕吐 ǒutù	旅游 lǚyóu
Malay phrase	kurang dan potong → diskaun	muntah muntah	lancang dan main → melancong
Word order	kurang 折 (zhé) potong 扣 (kòu)	muntah 呕 (ǒu) muntah 吐 (tù)	lancang 旅 (lǚ) main 游 (yóu)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

#### d. Adjective-adjective (side-by-side word or joint structure/collocation phrase)

Chinese phrase	聪明可爱 cōngmíng kě'ài	美丽 měilì	清新 qīngxīn
Malay phrase	cerdik comel	cantik molek	bersih segar
Word order	cerdik 聪明 (cōngmíng) comel 可爱 (kě'ài)	cantik 美 (měi) molek 丽 (lì)	bersih 清 (qīng) segar 新 (xīn)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

e. Noun-verb (declarative word or subject-verb structure/subject-predicate phrase)

Chinese phrase	妈妈做饭 māma zuò fàn	爸爸冲凉 bàba chōngliáng
Malay phrase	emak masak nasi	bapa mandi
Word order	emak 妈妈 (māma) masak nasi 做饭 (zuò fàn)	bapa 爸爸 (bàba) mandi 冲凉 (chōngliáng)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

f. Verb-noun (dominant word or verb-object structure phrase)

Chinese phrase	买菜 mǎi cài	看电视 kàn diànsì	吃饭 chī fàn
Malay phrase	membeli sayur	menonton TV	makan nasi
Word order	membeli 买 (mǎi) sayur 菜 (cài)	menonton 看 (kàn) TV 电视 (diànsì)	makan 吃 (chī) nasi 饭 (fàn)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

g. Verb-adjective (supplementary word or supplementary structure phrase)

Chinese phrase	说 (得) 好 shuō (de) hǎo	学 (得) 开心 xué (de) kāixīn
Malay phrase	cakap (dengan) baik	belajar (dengan) gembira
Word order	cakap 说 (shuō) (dengan 得 de) baik 好 (hǎo)	belajar 学 (xué) (dengan 得 de) gembira 开心 (kāixīn)

**Conclusion**      **No word reordering is needed.**

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is not needed.

#### h. Adjective-noun (partial formal phrase)

Chinese phrase	红衣 hóng yī	好电影 hǎo diànyǐng	新朋友 xīn péngyǒu
Malay phrase	baju merah	filem bagus	kawan baru
Word order	baju 衣 (yī) merah 红 (hong)	filem 电影 (diànyǐng) bagus 好 (hǎo)	kawan 朋友 (péngyǒu) baru 新 (xīn)

#### Conclusion      Words reordering is needed (left-right interchange)

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, a left-right reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is needed. Note that the word order for the Malay compound word/phrases is noun-adjective.

#### i. Adverb-verb (partial formal phrase)

Chinese phrase	再来 zài lái	再见 zài jiàn	也好 yě hǎo
Malay phrase	datang lagi	jumpa lagi	baik juga
Word order	datang 来 (lái) lagi 再 (zài)	jumpa 见 (jiàn) lagi 再 (zài)	baik 好 (hǎo) juga 也 (yě)

#### Conclusion      Words reordering is needed (left-right interchange)

When translating compound words/phrases of this structure, a left-right reordering of the elements in the words/phrases is needed. Note that the word order for the Malay compound word/phrases is verb-adverb.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The grammatical structure of Malay is different from that of Chinese. From the examples given above, when translating a Malay compound word/phrase into Chinese, three groups of words/phrases namely noun-noun (of partial formal structure), adjective-noun, and adverb-verb need word reordering. The other six groups of Malay phrases when translated into Chinese do not need any changes in the position of the words. These six groups of phrases are noun-noun (of side-by-side structure) verb-verb, adjective-adjective, noun-verb, verb-noun, and verb-adjective. With the knowledge of this, the possibility of getting the word order in the translated phrase right is greatly enhanced.

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