THE SURVIVAL OF THE TEST: WHY DO CERTAIN EXPRESSION SURVIVE?

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Abstract

Indonesian People say "*Tak ada gading yang tak retak*" (There is no ivory without a crack) to describe that no man is perfect. In presenting the same idea hardly do Indonesian people say "*Tak ada tembok yang tak retak*" (There is no wall without a crack). Although the latter is understandable but it is not acceptable or at least we are reluctant to accept it is a part of our expressions. The phenomenon is interesting. Traditionalists assume that the acceptable fixed expressions are conventional—the result of the convention of the producers. However, the answer is not satisfying. This paper discusses the underlying concepts that enable us to accept or reject certain expressions.

Key words: fixed expression, dead metaphor, metaphor

1.   Introduction

In Indonesian, there are many types of fixed expressions. One of them, the main focus of this paper, is expressions containing metaphors.

Fixed expressions containing metaphors in Indonesian are very common and widely used among the speakers as frozen expressions. Metaphors themselves, simply, can be understood as saying one thing in terms of other things. Thus, referring the fact that 'no man is perfect,' Indonesian speakers may say (1) or (2) in certain cases. On the other hand, when we want to say that we have to work effectively and efficiently, we may say (3).

(1) Tak ada gading yang tak retak.
     (There is no ivory without a crack)
(2) *Sepandai-pandai tupai melompat, sekali pasti gawal juga*
     (Even a skillful squirrel, once, will fail to jump)
(3) *Sekali merengkuh dayung dua tiga pulau terlampaui.*
     (In a blow of a row, we pass two or three islands).

Interestingly, we never say (4) to refer to the meaning that 'no man is perfect'. The new expression actually is understandable, but it is not acceptable.
Similarly, we hardly say (5) and (6) either.

(4) Tak ada tembok yang tak retak
     (There is no wall without a crack)
(5) *Sepandai-pandai kaki berjalan, sekali pasti kesandung juga.*
     (Even skillful legs once will stumble on a stone)
(6) *Sekali suap, dua-tiga lauk masuk mulut.*
     (We can swallow two or three meals in one spoon-feeding).

Expression (2) expresses that human beings, even the best one, can make a mistake. In this expression, a person is represented by a squirrel. Similarly, expression (3) expresses human attitudes about the quality of work: doing one thing, but achieve more than one objective. In terms of metaphor, such expressions can be considered as dead metaphors since they have fixed meanings and restored in the speakers' language as one fixed expressions.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) investigate metaphors and give an explanatory account on the systematic of metaphors in human mind. They focus their investigation not on metaphors as an aesthetic instrument in human language, but as a cognitive phenomenon in which human mind has been shaped for ages both by the nature and the culture. Therefore, the subject of the investigation is not novel metaphors but dead metaphors. It is interesting that the systematic of metaphors is built around some basic conceptual metaphors such as ARGUMENT IS WAR and ANGER IS BOILING LIQUID IN A CONTAINER. Based on the basic conceptual metaphors we produce expressions such as "He *shot down* all my arguments" and "He *blew up* after knowing that his wife had an affair."

What is interesting in Lakoff and Johnson's study is the terms conceptual metaphors *that underlie the expressions we used everyday, especially those that are considered as dead metaphors. Using a similar assumption, this paper will investigate some popular fixed expressions, expression (1) up to (3), that are widely used by Indonesians. The main question is that whether the fixed expressions have the underlying conceptual metaphors that enable us to accept or reject new expressions, expressions (4) up to (6) that describe the similar idea with the original fixed expressions. However, before we come to the discussion of the underlying conceptual metaphors on the fixed expressions, we discuss other views that also give the explanatory account on metaphors and fixed expressions.*

2. Pragmatic Approach to Fixed Expressions

Pragmatic approach to human speeches is basically based on Austin's works on speech act theory (1962) which is developed in Gricean tradition with the famous four conversational maxims (1975 & 1978). This pragmatic tradition starts with a premise that all utterances are meaningful when they are uttered appropriately in the right time and in the right place. According to traditional semanticists, all utterances that fail to satisfy the truth in the real world (truth conditional semantics) must be false utterances. However, the truth conditional semantic cannot explain satisfactorily the facts that many people saying something with various intentions and in turns, the utterances have different meanings from the basic truth-meanings. The most common example is when people say, "It is hot here," which may be intended to ask somebody to open the window, or in other situation it is intended to ask someone to go away from that place. This kind of meaning is unreachable for the truth-conditional semantics.

Similarly, when a person says "Akhirnya belut yang licin itu tertangkap" ("Finally the eel is caught [by the police]") to refer to Tomy Suharto—who was once jailed for corruption and assassination— she does not intend to refer to the real eel. Instead, in her mind she has an idea that 'Tomi is belut'. How can such an utterance be understood? Stroik (1988) propose a pragmatic approach to understand it. Simply, when an utterance is not understandable in its literal meaning, a pragmaticist will start with a premise that the speaker must intend to

communicate about something else. In this case, the target listener, based on their knowledge, tries to find the most appropriate reference for 'the eel': Tomi.

Pragmaticists suggest that this approach is suitable to explain all utterances, especially those that are not fulfill the requirements of the truth conditional semantics. Unfortunately, this approach cannot explain why a certain expression such as "Tak ada tembok yang tak retak" is unacceptable, although it is understandable in terms of pragmatic interpretation.

Therefore, there must be other factors that enable a speaker to produce understandable utterances and at the same time acceptable ones.

3. Socio-Cultural and Natural Approaches to Fixed Expressions

Socio-cultural approach suggests that fixed expressions are the results of socio-cultural experience of the producers. Since Indonesians are familiar with gading, and the fact that gading always has cracks, they use the expressions to say that no man is perfect. However we can argue now, that Indonesians are also familiar with tembok (wall), but why do they resist accepting the expression? Or, why don't Indonesians say (5) instead of (2), or (6) instead of (3)?

To answer the questions, sociologists, culturalists and naturalists start with a premise that the history of fixed expressions are like the history of living organisms. They have undergone evolution. Borrowing Darwin's terms, they suggest that the existing fixed expressions are the surviving branches. At the beginning, there must be various expressions used to convey certain meanings among the society, but then one survives and other die. Not only fixed expressions, words and grammar have also undergone such a natural selection. In the living organisms' history, the environment has been the factor that determines the selection, but in the history of fixed expressions, the producers are the main factors of the selection. Thus, the terms used to describe the survival fixed expressions are "society convention."

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Socio-cultural and natural approaches deal mainly with fixed expressions as the results of natural and socio cultural selection. In part, this theory may answer the question 'Why do we now use certain fixed expressions?' However, we still don't understand why the society cannot or reluctantly accept other expressions with the same or similar meanings.

4. Cognitive Approach to Fixed Expressions

In parts, the questions on fixed expressions have been answered by pragmaticists, sociologists and naturalists. However, the main question, why we cannot accept, or are reluctant to accept new expressions has not been answered, yet. In dealing with the question cognitivist investigate how our mind works and how the knowledge we have learned are used to understand new and unexpectable phenomena. In the case of understanding fixed expressions and metaphors, the cognitivists such as Lakoff and Ortony (1979), Johnson (1980), MacCormac (1985), suggest that metaphors and fixed expressions are not only understood as comparisons, but also as complex processes that involve the schemata of our knowledge.

Let's start with the fixed expressions we are dealing with (1)—(3):

Tak ada gading yang tak retak.
Sepandai-pandai tupai melompat, sekali pasti gawal juga.
Sekali merengkuh dayung dua tiga pulau terlampaui.

From the first sentence (1), we find that HUMAN is compared to IVORY, and IMPERFECTNESS is compared to a CRACK. In applying the comparison, we are involving a property mapping of each entity. One prominent property of human beings, animateness, has no match with one of ivory's properties—which is inanimate entity. The shared property of the two entities is clearly found in their value. Ivory is valuable and highly valued by human beings and so is a human being. That is why when we compare HUMAN to WALL such as in (4), the expression is hardly acceptable because there is no shared properties found in the two entities. In Lakoff and Johnson's terms, we have the conceptual metaphors: HUMAN BEINGS ARE VALUABLE THINGS and HUMAN BEINGS ARE ROCK. Therefore, besides that expression, we also find expressions such as:

(7) Dia permata hati saya.
   (She is my diamond.)

(8) Dia sebuah berlian yang belum digosok.
   (He is an unpolished diamond.)

In another case, human beings with their characters and intelligence can be compared with something else such as:

(9) Pak Gurito adalah kamus berjalan.
   (Mr. Gurito is a walking dictionary)

(10) Pak Trisno adalah batu karang.
   (Mr. Trisno is a rock.)

Similarly, sentence (2) compares a HUMAN to a SQUIRREL, an animal. How can we understand such comparison? What properties are they shared? If we closely think about the comparison, we realize that point of view is not the entities, but the expertise of the two entities being compared. In our realm of mind, the best jumper in the world is a squirrel that can jump from one tree to another, even in a windy day. But, again, not all experts perform perfectly at all time they show their expertise. In this case, one property of a squirrel is appropriately mapped with one of a human being. The conceptual metaphor underlying the expression, therefore, is HUMAN BEINGS ARE ANIMALS. In this comparison, we set up a large area of property mapping. That is why we can find the following expressions.

(11) Tomi Suharto benar-benar seekor belut.
   (Tomi Suharto is an eel.)

(12) Aku tak mau dekat-dekat dengan ular berkepala dua itu.
   (I don't want to be close to the two-headed snake.)

Expression (3), on the other hand, does not compare a human being, but it compares a quality of humans' work. In short, the expression is based on the conceptual metaphors: A HUMAN'S LIVES ARE SAILING/ROWING A BOAT IN THE SEA. Thus, doing something (working) can be compared to rowing a boat and the effectiveness of the work is shown by passing two or more islands in one blow of a row.

From the explanation above, it is clear why certain expressions are hardly accepted by the speakers of the language. However, we do

not know how far the degree of acceptability of expressions. At least up to here, cognitivists' idea, especially Lakoff and Johnson's idea about basic conceptual metaphors, can be used to analyze the existing fixed expressions. From the three fixed expressions we are dealing with in this paper, we can find that it is the underlying concept of the expression that enables them to be accepted or rejected.

5. Implications of this Study

From the facts that conceptual metaphors, which are bound in the culture of the producers, can be used to analyze fixed expressions found in the language, we can also analyze daily expressions used by people. In turns, we can find a way to reveal how the group of people in the culture thinks about certain aspects of their lives such: political views, environmental views, and feminisms. Other aspects may be revealed using the same instruments, which in certain degree, will enlighten to understand our own fate as human beings.

Although in some cases we cannot accept novel expressions, but we need to clarify further the degree of acceptability of the expressions. In sentence (4) we may very reluctant to accept it as part of our expressions, but in sentence (5) or six, the degree of rejection may not as high as expression (4). Thus, the agenda for further research on fixed expressions is investigating further the acceptability novel expressions among the speakers of certain culture.

6. Conclusion

Why are we reluctant to accept novel expressions? The answer of the questions lies on the mental concepts we developed to generate metaphors and fixed expressions. When the novel expression does not represent the underlying concepts, the expressions will be difficult to be accepted by the speakers. Expressions that do not represented the conceptual metaphors, the mental concepts we have acquired since we encountered with the cultures and the language, will become ill form in terms of their meanings. Probably the meanings are understandable, but the speakers will feel that the utterances do not belong to them.

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