

## Prefixing to phrases and alleged degrammaticalization: remarks on *ber-* in Indonesian

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### 1. Introduction

In this brief essay I consider a remarkable Malay/Indonesian construction presented in (1)-(3), which is seemingly ignored in typological studies:

- (1) *Mereka ber-celana pendek, tak pakai baju.*  
They POSS-trousers short NEG wear clothes  
'They wear (lit., have) short trousers and do not wear (other) clothes.'

(<https://properti.kompas.com/read/2009/05/20/10450010/ali.topan.wartawan.jalanan.95>,  
Accessed on 2019-04-22)

- (2) *Bayi itu ada.lah se-orang laki.laki, ber-badan manusia,  
ber-kepala gajah.*  
Baby that be one-CL male POSS-body human  
POSS-head elephant  
'That baby was a male person, with the body of a human, [and] the head of an elephant.'

(Made Taro. Dewa Berkepala Gajah (Bali).)

- (3) *Waah bagus Ran, kalau cari pacar yang ber-mobil  
seperti itu dong*  
PTCL fine Ran if look.for boyfriend REL POSS-car  
like that PTCL  
'Waah, that would be nice, Ran, if you could find a boyfriend who has a car like that.'

(<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9207435/1/Pacar-Baru-Ran>, Accessed on 2019-04-22)

In these examples, we find a possessive verb (derived with the prefix *ber-* 'to have'), which is followed by material that is semantically linked with its nominal base. In (1) *pendek* 'short' modifies *-celana* 'trousers', in (2) *manusia* 'human' and *gajah* 'elephant' modify *-badan* 'body' and *-kepala* 'head' respectively, and in (3) *seperti itu* 'like that' modifies *-mobil* 'car'.

The phenomenon is certainly well-known by scholars of Malay/Indonesian (see especially Ogloblin 1977, which is for the most part specifically devoted to the relevant pattern, but also its brief appearance in reference grammars Alieva et al. 1972: 316-317, and Sneddon 1996: 64 inter alia). Still, the construction presented in (1)-(3) is potentially surprising for adherents of syntactic theories respecting lexical integrity, i.e. the idea that “the syntactic constituents of phrases have words as the minimal, unanalyzable units; and syntactic ordering principles do not apply to morphemic structure” (Bresnan and Mchombo 1995). At least, if we consider *ber-* to be an affix (see Payne 1964: 45 for an attempt to portray it as a preposition).

Actually, there is ample evidence that *ber-* is not a syntactic word but a prefix which derives verbs (here I also consider the use of the morpheme in non-possessive functions). First, the morpheme cannot be used by itself, and neither can it be separated from its base. Second, *ber-* can participate in (arguably) word-internal morphonological processes. For example, if a base has an initial /r/, the two /r/'s coalesce (*berenang* ‘to swim’ < *ber-* + *renang* ‘swim’); see Alieva et al. 1972: 122 for details. Third, *ber-* appears as a part of a number of circumfixes (cf. its use in reciprocals such as *ber-R-an* described by Ogloblin and Nedjalkov 2007). Fourth, in some morphological models *ber-* appears to be a correlate of the prefix *per-* (arguably an allomorph of *ber-* in these contexts). For example, the causative derivation of verbs with *ber-* usually replaces *ber-* with *per-*, as in *mem-per.guna-kan* ‘to make use of’ (< *ber.guna* ‘to be useful’).

In what follows, I will add a few remarks concerning the status of the construction which may show that the picture is more complicated. Note that I do not insist that the constructions discussed below represent normalized speech – in fact, on the contrary, speakers evaluate some of these patterns as abnormal. Yet we will see that even such phenomena may tell us something about the development of *ber-*.

## 2. *Ber-* indeed can attach to phrases

Formally speaking, for (1)-(3), at least two analyses can be proposed:

- (4) a. The postverbal material modifies the base of the verb derived by *ber-*,
- b. The morpheme *ber-* is prefixed to a complex noun phrase.

The first analysis entails a violation of lexical integrity, since it assumes that a syntactic unit may serve as a syntactic companion of a part of a word. The second analysis, which is based on the possibility of phrases like *celana pendek* ‘short trousers’ for (1), *badan manusia* ‘a body of a human’ and *kepala gajah* ‘a head of an elephant’ for (2), and *mobil seperti itu* ‘a car like that’ for (3) may also look strange. Still, it does not entail that syntax may operate with morphological bases, but only claims that a morphological element can be added to a complex phrase – and this is known to be possible even in English; cf. the derivation of *generative grammarian* from *generative grammar* (see Lieber and Scalise 2007 for discussion).

Indonesian examples cited in literature do not provide us with a definite argument for the choice between the two analyses. Usually the modifier appears immediately after a verb derived by *ber-*, so one cannot say that it forms a constituent with its base and does not just modify the verb (for example, as secondary predication). The real evidence that *ber-* may indeed be added to complex noun phrases comes from coordinating constructions preceded by the prefix:

- (5) *Kupu-kupu aneh ber-ekor dan tanduk*  
 Butterfly strange POSS-tail and horn  
 ‘Strange butterflies have tails and horns.’

(<https://60detiknews.com/serangga-bersayap-dan-berekor-empat/>, Accessed on 2019-04-22)

- (6) *Apa mama yakin dia (...) bukan pria hidung.belang*  
 What mama be.sure s/he NEG man playboy  
*ber-istri dan anak?*  
 POSS-wife and child  
 ‘Is mama sure that he is not a playboy with a wife and children?’

(Pia Devina. Roma.)

Here it is impossible to claim that the material following the word with the prefix *ber-* somehow modifies it, so we are left with the second interpretation (4b). It is worth noting, though, that examples like (5)-(6), although fully accepted, are still felt to be less usual than a simple coordination of *ber-*phrases (like *berekor dan bertanduk* for (5) and *beristri dan beranak* for (6)).

Note also that *ber-* can also take proper names (even complex) as a base, as in (7), where the prefix precedes the name of the street *Soekarno-Hatta*:

- (7) ... *pilih-lah kontrakan yang ber-soekarno hatta tidak jauh*  
 choose-EMP rented.house REL POSS-Soekarno Hatta NEG far  
*dari kantor atau-pun tempat kerja Anda*  
 from office or-EMP place work you  
 ‘Further, choose a house for rent which is on Soekarno-Hatta (street) and not far from your office or your working place’

(<https://www.lamudi.co.id/west-java/bandung/soekarno-hatta/house/rent/>, Accessed on 2019-04-22)

It is generally assumed that proper names constitute full nominal phrases, which have their own reference. Given this, examples like (7) also suggest that *ber-* can be added to nominal phrases in general. Such examples are still evaluated by speakers as not entirely normal.

### 3. Orthographical autonomy

Interestingly, we also find variation in how the prefix *ber-* is written.

First, this concerns the reflection of morphonological processes associated with *ber-*. When the prefix is added to complex phrases or even to compounds which are written as a sequence of orthographical words, *ber-* does not always show the expected morphonological effects. For example, even though there is a well-established word *berumah* ‘to have a house’ (< *rumah* ‘house’), where the final /r/ of the prefix and the first /r/ of the root coalesce, when the prefix is added to the compound *rumah tangga* ‘household’ (lit., ‘house stairs’), it is quite common to write *berrumah tangga* rather than *berumah tangga* (although the latter variant is also quite widespread):

- (8) *ter.nyata berrumah tangga [ber-rumah tangga] tak se-sederhana*  
Clearly POSS-house stairs NEG one-simple  
*Yang se.belum-nya ter-pikir-kan.*  
REL before-3 APASS-think-TR  
‘Clearly, having a household is not as simple as it was thought before.’

Second, *ber-* is regularly separated from its base by a hyphen, especially if it is a proper name (*ber-Muhammad* ‘have Muhammad (in his/her heart)’), an acronym (*ber-SMS* ‘have an SMS’), or a borrowed word (*ber-internet* ‘have internet’).

Finally, we even find the prefix written occasionally as a separate word, as in the following photo (see (9)).



Photo 1.

- (9) *di-larang becak ber-operasi di wilayah DKI Jakarta*  
PASS-prohibit pedicab POSS-operation in region DKI Jakarta  
'Operating pedicabs in DKI (Special capital region of) Jakarta is prohibited.'

Thus, in some contexts *ber-* may be perceived as something quite autonomous and not just a derivational prefix.

#### 4. Conclusion

We find, then, that besides the standard patterns with *ber-*, there are also patterns where the prefix and/or its base display(s) more autonomy than is usually described. The phenomena discussed above represent a kind of periphery, probably associated with lower frequency and/or higher variation. The examples given above may reflect further development of *ber-* accompanied by its extension to new contexts. If this hypothesis is on the right track, such development is all the more remarkable because it represents a rare phenomenon of degrammaticalization: while bound elements usually become more bound, the prefix *ber-* is evidently getting more autonomous and taking a wider syntactic distribution, which is reflected by certain formal processes.

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