

## Research Article

# Comparative Ethnolinguistics on Metaphorical Interpretations in Japanese Kotowaza and Malay Proverbs

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## Abstract

This paper examines the comparison between Japanese *kotowaza* and Malay proverbs via the lens of ethnolinguistics. The rich cultural exchanges between the Japanese empire and Malay civilisation since the 15th century must be based on mutual values that both parties can agree upon. One such aspect is the sociocultural values apparent in proverbs and idioms. This aspect is integral in ethnolinguistics. Therefore, this paper has three objectives: 1) to compare the entities and the conventionalised metaphorical interpretations made in the proverbs of the two languages; 2) to conduct a comprehensive discourse analysis on the proverbs based on ethnolinguistic approaches; and 3) to trailblaze the opportunities for ethnolinguists to consider expanding the research in paremiology. This research is motivated due to the very scarce resource in Japanese-Malay comparative proverbs study. The methods used are library research and Cornell note-taking technique. There are 10 proverbs respectively in Japanese and Malay for similarity and 5 respective proverbs for the difference, totalling to 30 proverbs in both languages. The findings show that the proverbs in the two different languages can both reach the same interpretation despite different extensive backgrounds. However, opposing or dissimilar outcomes also occur despite the same allusion and/or source used in the metaphors. This paper concludes with the limitations and suggestions for linguists to consider in their research on proverbs.

**Keywords:** Ethnolinguistics; Metaphor; Kotowaza; Malay; Japanese

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## 1. Introduction

*Kotowaza* (諺) is the Japanese term for proverbs or idioms. In general, proverbs are short and ‘catchy’ idioms widely used in everyday speech, conveying broadly held views and opinions. Proverbs are an integral component of all spoken languages and are connected to other types of folk literature such as riddles and tales that began in oral transmission. Comparing proverbs from many regions of the world demonstrates that another essence of knowledge may be extracted under diverse cultural and linguistic contexts (Britannica, 2020). Proverbs usually are interpreted with

conventionalised metaphors and employ formulaic expressions. Ramin (2019) mentioned that proverbs and idiomatic phrases represent usually recognised cultural norms in society, and contain commonly used and accepted judgments of human conduct besides acts or deeds in many settings and conditions.

Japanese *kotowaza* may appear in three types of forms – *īnarawashi* 「言い習わし」 means ‘common saying’, *kanyōku* 「慣用句」 as ‘idiom’, and *yojijukugo* 「四字熟語」 as ‘four-character compound’. *īnarawashi* is basically a saying or

quotation (although most of the sources remain unknown due to absence of narrative chains records), such as 「天は自ら助くるものを助く」 (*ten wa mizukara tasukuru mono o tasuku*) which means “the Heaven helps those who help themselves”. *Kanyōku* is an idiomatic expression such as 「七転び八起き」 (*nanakorobi yaoki*) lexically means “fall seven times, rise the eighth one”. *Yojijukugo*, literally translated as ‘four-character compound’ refers to a Japanese lexeme incorporating four characters to form a phrase. Some proverbs in this form are based (or allegedly) from classical Chinese literature and Buddhist scriptures. It is merely a morphological formation, and therefore not all *yojijukugo* are proverbs. Non-idiomatic examples include *shunkashūtō* 「春夏秋冬」 representing the four seasons and *tōzainanboku* 「東西南北」 meaning the four wind directions. A popular proverb in this form is the abridged quote by the tea master, Sen no Rikyu - *ichi go ichi e* 「一期一会」 – literally meaning “one opportunity, one encounter.” Da Costa (2018) opined that the plausible English translation is “once in a lifetime.” Therefore, these formulaic expressions are deeply rooted from the cultural upbringing of a particular society, and ethnolinguistics covers this scope of linguistic study.

Ethnolinguistics (also known as cultural linguistics or anthropological linguistics) was defined by Takada (2015) as a research area that bridges linguistics and cultural anthropology. Benest (2015) coined it as the area of linguistics concerned with the connection between language and culture; the idea that the language we use influences our cultural habits and worldview. Nurova (2021, para. 1) further narrowed down and elucidated the scope of this interdisciplinary study:

“While linguistics studies the natural language, its structure and laws, ethnolinguistics reflects the linguistic expression of folk culture, that is, the

customs and traditions reflected in the language, the paremiological fund of the language, language standards, signs and symbols, learns language analogies and *metaphors*, anthroponyms, forms of speech etiquette”.

As we have discussed earlier, proverbs always have implicit meanings, and they act as a form of identity for their interlocutors. This opinion is rooted from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis propagated by Sapir (1929) in which we differentiate the role that language plays in forming our thought based on its capacity. If it determines our *worldview*, then it is linguistic determinism. If it is on a peripheral or contributory basis, then it is linguistic relativism. Gould & Rankin (2014) expounded this by mentioning that our ideas are indeed limited by our extent in comprehending the knowledge about the world. Thus, we are clear that the study of ethnolinguistics goes beyond a specific ethnicity or dialect group; it is about the sociocultural integration in the usage of language. From the above definitions and scope, the two keywords are important in defining proverbs: metaphors and worldview.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one word or phrase indicating one type of thing or activity is substituted for another to indicate a similarity or resemblance between them. The core structure of every metaphor consists of two domains called source domain and the target domain. The target/abstract domain would be mapped on a source/concrete domain. The mapping is important because it validates the usage of source domain language and inference patterns for target domain ideas. For example, the Japanese proverb *hana yori dango* (*dango* over flowers) have the ‘practicality’ and ‘aesthetics’ mapped onto *dango* and flower respectively. Metaphor is more than simply a matter of linguistic representation; it is also a matter of intellect and logic.

The ‘worldview’ of an individual or the entire community can expand when exposed to cultural exchanges. The interaction between Malay civilisation and the Ryukyuan empire had been proven by Musa and Kamarudin (2015) as reported by Taha (2015) to be as early as 1480 with the findings of two documents that mentioned someone called ‘Hang Tuah’ who was revered to as the ‘legendary’ Malaccan warrior, and a traditional Nusantara asymmetric dagger or *keris* in Japan.

This recent discovery benefitted both parties because Hang Tuah is no longer a ‘mythical’ character in classical Malay literatures, and the diplomacy mission that had initiated since more than 5 centuries ago provides a strong historical basis of Malaysia-Japan relations. Fast-forwarding to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century during the Second World War, a short-reigned Japanese occupation of Malaya for 4 years from 1941-1945 happened. During this tumultuous and hostile period, Japan introduced a Japanese-oriented education system to the local community in order to inculcate Japanese values in the heart of a predominantly Malay society. The Japanese education system focused on obedience and loyalty to the Japanese emperor. Every morning, students were required to sing the Japanese national anthem *Kimigayo* and *Aikoku Koshin Kyoku* (Wahab, 2015). Japanese was the medium of instruction and textbooks in Japanese language were widely published. The *Shonan Shimbun* newspaper played an important role in publishing Japanese education. Finally, the Malaysia-Japan relations had invigorated in 1982 when the-then prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad announced the Look East Policy. The Malaysian government would observe the positive work ethics and practices in Japan to be adapted in a local context. Of course, this policy looks beyond this aspect and both countries took the opportunities to encourage language exchanges, trainings, foreign investments, and bilateral trades between them. Amzah

(2008) saw that this policy could be achieved via active encouragement for Japanese-Malay translation. I agree with this opinion since this facilitates knowledge transfer without language barrier. Thus, looking back at the ups and downs of the Japan-Malaysia relations and how the cultural conversations supersede one another even now, it is only safe to assume that the ethnolinguistic vitality and common moral values are present between Japanese speakers and Malay speakers.

It is an interesting insight to be able to compare the *kotowaza* between the two societies with different mother tongues to find common grounds on moral values. It is also worthwhile to discern any noticeable difference between them in their metaphorical interpretations of certain entities or subjects of the proverbs. Looking at several more recent research, there were studies in comparing Japanese and English proverbs by Neale (2015), in which the outcomes of their research indicated that matching proverbs from different languages may be a challenging task, both in dictionaries and in the second-language classroom. Another Japanese-English comparative study on proverbs was also done by Kengo (2009) in which the researcher’s study upon 21 proverbs concluded with much overlapping between English and Japanese proverbs, as both deal with universal truths and fundamental human emotions. The closest article to this research would be the one by Zin and Wan Idris (2017) as they did a comparison between 12 Malay proverbs (or *peribahasa* in Malay language) and 12 Japanese *kotowaza* to ascertain similarities in the intended messages. However, most of the interpretations made by the researchers were not supported with much evidence to support their claims. Moreover, their scope of study had been narrowed down towards synonymy and did not consider the possibility of antonymous interpretation using the same proverbial entity in the two languages. Besides this paper though, there

has been hardly any paper to discuss this comparative study scope for Japanese-Malay and make more elaborative research. Hence, objectives of this paper are: 1) to compare and contrast the entities and the conventionalised metaphorical interpretations made in the proverbs of the two languages; 2) to conduct a comprehensive discourse analysis on the proverbs based on ethnolinguistic approaches; and 3) to trailblaze the opportunities for ethnolinguists to consider expanding the research in paremiology.

## 2. Methods

The method used in this research is qualitative analysis. The techniques used in collecting data in this research were library research and The Cornell note-taking method. In most academic contexts, library research is an important part of research initiatives. Researchers are accountable for thoroughly examining pertinent material to ascertain its utility, trustworthiness, and authority in relation to the research initiatives in which they are participating. According to Allen (2017), this technique is a basic approach for university students as they ought to initiate this process at the beginning of a semester, or as soon as feasible throughout the semester. It is also applicable if there is an expectation for research projects to be completed, regardless of whether the project is for a college course, academic conference, or publication. The researcher should be continually monitoring a diverse range of information sources and recording when and where material was discovered.

### 2.1 Data Collection

The note-taking technique used in this study is to record the proverbs relevant to the data of this study. The Cornell Method is a notetaking, organisation, and review system. This technique was developed in the 1950s by Professor Walter Paul of Cornell University. The technique would have the layout of the paper to be

divided into two columns with a row running down the centre (Sridharan, 2019). Given such layout, it prioritises points over paragraphs, therefore saving time and energy.

The sources for the Japanese proverbs are extracted mostly from online sources such as *Kotowaza Jiten On* (<https://kotowaza.jitenon.jp/>) and other websites such as *Kotowaza All Guide*, *Proverb Encyclopedia* and *Kotobank*. The physical source would be *Kotowaza Jiten* by Naomi, Kevin, Meads, Ryan and Sharnoff (1990). Meanwhile, the Malay proverbs were retrieved from *Kamus Peribahasa Melayu* or The Malay Proverbs Dictionary by Said (2004) and online sources such as the one powered by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in Malaysia (<https://prpm.dbp.gov.my/>).

### 2.2 Data Analysis

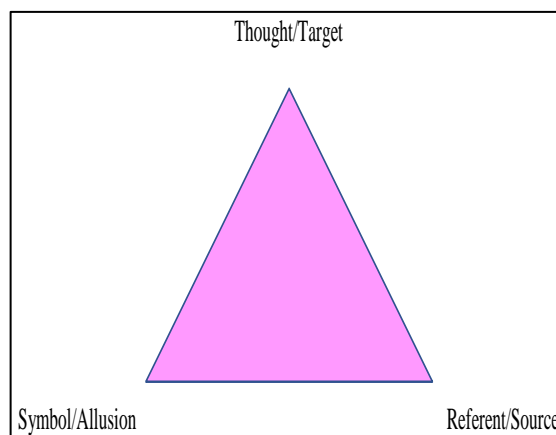


Figure 1 The Triangle of Metaphor

Referencing the ‘triangle of meaning’ by Ogden and Richards (1923), Fig.1 is the improvised version of the triangle that I model to integrate metaphorical components into the analysis. To elucidate this, assuming we use the same proverb 「花より団子」 :

Source: a real/actual *Dango* and a flower  
Allusion: *Dango*/food is necessary, flowers are beautiful yet generally inconsumable  
Target: Practicality over aesthetics



This concept is related to *imi kōzō* 「意味構造」 or the semantic structure that corresponds to other branches of linguistics such as cognitive linguistics. Azuma (2004, p.15) reiterated that recent Japanese linguists put considerable focus on “rhetoric, semantics, cognitive linguistics and studies of related areas, and there are also a considerable number of studies of ‘hiyu’ or metaphors”. This approach is also useful to study complicated texts to some extent such as religious scriptures when evaluating socio-semantics by Farsi (2017). The three terms in the metaphor triangle would be frequently used when we compare and contrast the different interpretations between the proverbs in the two languages throughout the analysis.

In this study, descriptive evaluation was used to compare and contrast the proverbs from a wider scope of ethnolinguistics. At this stage, the mapping process for each comparison was carried out, followed by exploring the background of the proverbs and the theme or focus of the proverbs. After that, the conclusion would be drawn out based on the cultural interpretations that put them in the same wavelength or to juxtapose one another. For this research, I highlighted three elements in this study as shown in Fig. 2.



**Figure 2 Three Elements in Analysing Proverbs for Ethnolinguistic Vitality**

The first element would be to discuss any syntactic structure of the proverb that might be influential in the conveyance of its meaning. Specific grammatical features can be useful to a particular language in teaching or learning a foreign language, especially Japanese. For example, Thomson and Armour (2013) opined that work on use of systemic functional theory to teaching Japanese as a second or foreign language is beneficial mostly from an educational perspective. We can then relate this aspect to the second element based on the opinion by Shibata (2013) that grammatical metaphors, or congruent and discrepant language functions, have been used between interlocutors in determining social position and mutuality. The second element would be to elicit the representation and interpretation from the entities in the metaphors. Gibbs (1992) argued that metaphor theories differ exactly because they place different emphasis on distinct temporal stages in the process of comprehending metaphorical terms. Proverbs are dependent on the time in which they appear, and thus the ‘worldview’ of a particular society will utilise common referents in their metaphors. The third element covers the widest range in this analysis as it would include any knowledge pertaining to the related proverb such as historical origins, cultural norms, and even religious thoughts. An on-point term for this view is cultural metaphor - a major phenomenon, organization, or event in a country with which most inhabitants relate cognitively or emotionally and through which the national culture and its conceptual framework can be described in depth (Gannon & Pillai, 2016). Any of the three elements would be utilised in the comparisons across the analysis to determine the ethnolinguistic vitality of these proverbs within their respective native speakers’ communities. The following section would present the samples of proverbs for the analysis.

### 3. Result and Discussion

In the following, Table 1 is presented with data containing 10 proverbs respectively in Japanese and Malay in which they have the same theme, connoting their common target metaphorical domain. Table 2, on the other hand, would have 5 respective proverbs in Japanese and Malay as well as contrasting interpretations and thus separated from the one as described in the previous section. The reason to compare

only 10 proverbs for synonymous interpretations is to emphasise a more comprehensive and systematic analysis by utilising any of the three elements. The target domains are diverse to represent rich perspectives from the communities about life based on their ‘worldviews’. In the meantime, only 5 proverbs were chosen to pioneer antithetical interpretations between the two languages and fill the literature gap.

**Table 1 Comparison for Same Metaphorical Interpretations**

Item/ Number	<i>Kotowaza</i>	<i>Peribahasa</i>	Target
1	無くてぞ人は恋しかりける nakutezo hito wa koi shikarikeru	<i>Jauh di mata, dekat di hati</i>	Absence
2	言いたい事は明日言え iitai koto wa asu ie	<i>Terlajak perahu boleh balik, terlajak kata tak boleh balik</i>	Speaking out
3	負んぶすれば抱っこ onbusureba dakko	<i>Diberi betis hendak paha</i>	Greedy
4	猫に小判 neko ni koban	<i>Bagai kera diberi kaca</i>	Impracticality
5	能ある鷹は爪を隠す nō aru taka wa tsume o kakusu	<i>Seperti harimau menyembunyikan kukunya</i>	Wisdom
6	井の中の蛙大海を知らず i no naka no kaeru taikai o shirazu	<i>Katak di bawah tempurung</i>	Oblivion
7	蛙の子は蛙 kaoru no ko wa kaeru	<i>Bapa borek, anak rintik</i>	Ancestry
8	明日の百より今日の五十 asu no hyaku yori kyō no go jyū	<i>Mendengar guruh di langit, air di tempayan dicurahkan</i>	Uncertainty
9	猿も木から落ちる saru mo ki kara ochiru	<i>Sepandai-pandai tupai melompat, akhirnya jatuh ke tanah jua</i>	Mistake
10	十人十色 jyūnin toiro	<i>Rambut sama hitam, hati lain-lain</i>	Diversity

#### 3.1 Common Thoughts/Targets

##### 3.1.1 無くてぞ人は恋しかりける / *Jauh di mata, dekat di hati*

The Japanese proverb for the first comparison is 「無くてぞ人は恋しかりけ

る」 (*nakutezo hito wa koishikarikeru*) which lexically means “without people, love can miss (them)”. The English equivalent of this idiom is ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’. 「恋しかりける」 (*koishikarikeru*) is in a potential form and

this indicate epistemic modality. This type has a negative modal shading, and this signalises uncertainty. On top of that, the subject of the modality is love itself, which is peculiar. This is where personification comes in when non-human things bear anthropomorphic behaviours. Delbaere, McQuarrie and Phillips (2011) mentioned that such personification, when embedded in attractive media such as advertisements, appear to lead to more positive emotions and attributions of brand personality, as well as greater brand liking. In this case, it is assumed that when the individual happens to be no longer in the proximity of the interlocutor, even the feeling would long for the person, rather than the actual human who expresses this idiom.

The Malay proverb that is parallel with the Japanese counterpart is *jauh di mata, dekat di hati* that literally means “far from the eye, near to the heart”. The Malay proverb implements spatial deixis in this case since they use the opposite orientational adjectives *jauh* (far) and *dekat* (near) that describe distance in space. Therefore, the deictic centre between the interlocutor that expresses this idiom, and the intended receiver are different. As for the literary aspect, the exact syntactic structure between the two phrases (*jauh di mata*) (*dekat di hati*) with contrasting qualities points out this idiom as an isocolon – ‘far’ against ‘near’, ‘eyes’ that represent outer appearance against the ‘heart’ residing the inner feelings.

In real life, this situation refers to long-distance relationships (LDRs). A long-distance relationship is an intimate partnership between two people who live geographically apart. In LDRs, partners are geographically separated and have little to no face-to-face interaction. Across the ages we have seen that LDR is not a favourable situation since Yabora (2021) listed six possible problems that can jeopardise the relationship: miscommunication, jealousy, loneliness, drifting apart, time constraint, and trust issues. These concerns have

always disheartened both couples and friends. Both Japanese and Malay proverbs rely on the heart as the subject to convey the message of the speaker that their endearment would just increase with their partner’s absence. Thus, absence is the target domain in both proverbs whilst the heart becomes the common source domain.

### 3.1.2 言いたい事は明日言え / *Terlajak perahu boleh balik, terlajak kata tak boleh balik*

The Japanese proverb for the second comparison is 「言いたい事は明日言え」 (*iitai koto wa asu ie*) which lexically means “say what you want to say tomorrow”. 「言いたい」 (*iitai*) has the suffix たい-form and this has a desirative meaning ‘want to’ (Tsujimura, 2013) to the root verb 「言う」 (*iu*). This means the desirative verb has the potential to be carried out or otherwise, and that conclusion is suspended due to a temporal deixis anchored in the middle with the adverb of time ‘tomorrow’. Besides that, the same verb is used in the beginning and in the end of this idiom. Morphologically speaking, the two forms of the same verb are not the same but nonetheless the root verb is the case. Considering the temporal deixis ‘tomorrow’ between the future form and the present form of 「言え」 (*ie*), the emphasis about the consequence of stating something would be tremendous.

A similar Malay proverb is *terlajak perahu boleh balik, terlajak kata tak boleh balik* that literally means ‘an overshooting boat can return, an overshooting word cannot return’. The Malay proverb uses the deictic verb of motion *terlajak*. This means that both the objects – boat and word/speech – are movable in some sense. The allusion ‘boat’ is used due to the historical demography of most Malays living in the outskirts as farmers or fishermen. Since both phrases of this idiom use the same word (*terlajak perahu...*) (*terlajak kata...*) at the beginning, then this proverb is an anaphora. The same ending of both phrases

(...*boleh balik*) also makes this proverb as an epiphora. Malay civilization is deeply rooted into Islamic tradition since the Malaccan Sultanate, and so the style of some idiomatic expressions such as this proverb resonates with Quranic verses and the prophet's narrations or *As-Sunnah* (The Patriot, 2019) that evokes an enormous weight on the issue in question.

The two proverbs convey the same message: think before you speak. In this case, the two proverbs complement each other, in which the Japanese one ascertains the need for an individual to think over and over (a period of time) before truly voicing out what is in his/her mind. This is because the Malay proverb warns that the words we inadvertently or carelessly utter would be irrefragable and thus bear emotional scars in one's lifetime. An excerpt from the novel *Norwegian Wood* by Murakami (2000, p.29) would be a good advice about speaking out, "Not that we were incompatible: we just had nothing to talk about". In other words, it is better for us to not speak anything rather than talking randomly on a whim and regret it later.

### 3.1.3 負んぶすれば抱っこ / *Diberi sehasta hendak sedepa*

The Japanese proverb for the third comparison is 「負んぶすれば抱っこ」 (*onbusureba dakko*) which lexically means "if a piggyback, then hold (in the arm)". 「負んぶすれば」 (*onbusureba*) is conditional since it has a ば-form. Besides that, the 'request' is made from one action to another in a direct manner and this could be explained with 'theory of face' by Goffman (1969). The theory mentioned that self-dignity and respect explain our certain usage of words are formulaic in making requests or asking questions. So, since the idiom does not have phatic communication or hedge whatsoever to indicate politeness, this means the receiver of this proverb would be very oppressive by making harder requests from piggybacking to cross-cradle holding to the speech producer of this

proverb. The two actions in the idiom differ in the extent of difficulty or hardship needed to accomplish them.

The similar Malay proverb is *diberi sehasta hendak sedepa* that literally means "given a fathom, (now) demanding a cubit." The Malay proverb uses a passive voice with the word *diberi* (given). This implies the receiver of this idiom to be ungrateful for the quantity that had been spoonfed to him instead of earning them with own effort. According to *A Dictionary of The Malayan Language* written by Marsden (1812), *hasta* means a cubit or described as 'a length of a forearm', whereas *depa* means a fathom or 'the measure of a man's arms extended'. In other words, the two words are traditional measurement units, and they differ in terms of the size or quantity.

The two proverbs connote greed as the common target domain of the metaphor. Both proverbs imply the requests as unreasonable and inconsiderate. The manner of the request is also direct. This possibly ignites face-threatening acts (FTAs) which causes offense and annoyance for the receiving interlocutor of the proverbs, and FTAs indeed exist in Japanese society as well (Shigemasu & Ikeda, 2006). Being greedy is essentially wanting more than what is already acquired and never being satisfied with it. Hence, the moral value and message between the two proverbs is common.

### 3.1.4 猫に小判 / *Bagai kera diberu kaca*

The Japanese proverb for the fourth comparison is 「猫に小判」 (*neko ni koban*) which lexically means "koban to a cat". This proverb does not have a verb or action. However, since we have a dative case particle *ni* 「に」, this infers the verb ellipsis in which the verb 'give' would be implied in this case. Meanwhile, cats have significant presence in Japanese folklore and literature, dating back to as early as during the Nara period in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Cucinelli, 2013). This ascertains the influence of cats portrayed in literary works



throughout the ages. According to Tokyo National Museum, *koban* is a gold coin used since the pre-Edo period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The gold coin currency during the feudal eras basically have two types: *koban* and *oban* in which *koban* has a smaller monetary value than the latter (and thus uses the character *ko* 「小」). In a logical sense, it does not serve any purpose for someone to give money to a cat since it is a norm in the human society to use money for daily matters but not in the animal kingdom. The cat would not benefit from having *koban* whatsoever.

The Malay proverb that is synonymous with the Japanese one would be *bagai kera diberi kaca* that means ‘like a monkey given a glass.’ Contrary to the Japanese proverb, this Malay idiom explicitly mentions a verb, albeit denoting the same one as the implied action in the Japanese (give). This proverb applies simile with the word *bagai* (like) in which the receiver is compared to a monkey to emphasise or vividly describe the handling of the acquired glass.

Both proverbs utilise the give-and-take concept which typify that a giver is required to complete the transaction. Analysing the situations in both proverbs, a cat does not use money as a medium of exchange to gain something. A monkey cannot comprehend the usage of glass that may be used for drinking and so on. The Japanese and Malay proverbs have impracticality as their common target domains. The allusion of the idioms simply means giving something to unappreciative people since they cannot benefit or use the offered item.

### 3.1.5 能ある鷹は爪を隠す / *Seperti harimau menyembunyikan kuku*

The Japanese proverb for the fifth comparison is 「能ある鷹は爪を隠す」 (*nō aru taka wa tsume o kakusu*) which lexically means ‘The capable falcon hides its claws’. 「隠す鷹」 (*kakusu*) is in the basic form and this shows present or

habitual action. 「能ある鷹」 (*nō aru taka*) is a collocate of adjective + noun. Recognising collocations would be useful in corpus linguistics as we can comprehend the pattern usage for the association between the words. Since the ancient times, 「鷹」 (*taka*) has been a symbol of bravery and power in Japan, and has been valued by the royal family, aristocracy, and subsequently the samurai class. The falcon appears in a variety of artworks, including family crests and kimono motifs, indicating nobility and prestige. Suzuki (2013) shared a Japanese superstition, 「初夢」 (*hatsuyume*) about falcons or hawks: 「一富士、二鷹、三茄子」 (*ichi fuji, ni taka, san nasubi*). This is translated as “the first is mountain Fuji, the second is hawks, the third is eggplants”. *Hatsuyume* is the first dream that a person has in the new year in Japanese culture. Traditionally, the contents of such a dream foretold the dreamer's fortunes for the coming year and dreaming these three things would indicate good fortune for the rest of the year.

The Malay counterpart would be *seperti harimau menyembunyikan kuku* (like a tiger hiding its claws). Even the structure of this proverb is the same with the above except for the animal as the subject. The relationship between people in the Nusantara region and tigers are believed to be unique (Usman, Azmi, Ahmad & Wan Hasbullah, 2014). This was derived from the historical documentations by British colonial officers such as Winstedt (1982) that described that unique connection due to Malay mystical beliefs about tigers, including weretigers. Today, the tiger essentially becomes the symbolism of bravery for Malaysia (Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia, 2017), evident in the national coat of arms since 1895.

Both proverbs present their animals of identity to represent talent or prestige. If a falcon or a tiger ought to hide their claws, it is implied that they do not need to boast about their predatory skills and instead

focus on opportunities in successfully capturing their prey. We can conclude that both Japanese and Malay proverbs are mapped on a common target domain: wisdom.

### 3.1.6 井の中の蛙大海を知らず / *Katak di bawah tempurung*

The analysis for the sixth comparison is also identical with the previous one. The Japanese proverb is 「井の中の蛙大海を知らず」 (*i no naka no kaeru taikai o shirazu*) which lexically means “the frog inside the well knows nothing of the sea”. The Japanese proverb is thought to originate from a Chinese fable written by Zhuang Zhou around 350-250 BC:

北海若曰：「井蛙不可以語於海者...」  
Ruo of the Northern Sea said: A frog in the well cannot talk about the sea...

Its Malay counterpart is *katak di bawah tempurung* (A frog underneath a coconut husk). The coconut husk refers to the solid part of a coconut. Coconut milk is an integral ingredient in many Malays cuisine, making the fruit subject to idiomatic expressions.

Comparing both proverbs, they apply spatial deixis with the adverbs of place: inside, underneath. A well and a coconut have small space and receive minimal to no light from the outside. If a creature were to be trapped inside either of the two, its sight would be limited, movement would be restricted, and it cannot mingle with other creatures. Therefore, the two proverbs have the same allusion: darkness. Kelly (2012) explained that the symbolism of darkness in literature is such a fragrant topic, embracing horror, comfort, oblivion, foolishness, being lost, being alienated, being sly, being smart; it is a depiction of the seething, absent energy of everything that is selfish and wicked and shrouded. The sea and the ‘outside’ are usually referred as an imagery for sagacity and eye-opening encounters. We can infer

that the Japanese and Malay proverbs point out the inability of an individual to grasp a wider understanding if that individual stays ignorant – oblivion would be the common theme. That is why knowledge and experience are among the core advice in both Malay and Japanese literature; the allegory in both proverbs is on point.

### 3.1.7 蛙の子は蛙 / *Bapa borek, anak rintik*

The Japanese proverb for the seventh one is 「蛙の子は蛙」 (*kaeru no ko wa kaeru*) which lexically means “A frog’s offspring is a frog”. Interestingly, this proverb implements the figure of speech ‘epanadiplosis’, as defined by Collins English Dictionary when a phrase contains the same word at the beginning and at the end. Then, if we use the technique of language categorisation or the prototype theory by Rosch (1975), we can discuss the actual comprehension of this animal called ‘frog’. Based on the prototype theory, let us assume a frog is generally an amphibian, jumping as its manner of motion, and uses its long tongue to catch its prey. Across the whole study into zoology, some outliers would persist with lesser-known frog species and so on, but this proverb covers the whole scope of the species, denying any wild possibility that a frog’s offspring would not be included in the frog species.

The Malay proverb in this comparison is *bapa borek, anak rintik* (The hen is speckled, the chick is spotted). The word *bapa* and *anak* might mean father and son respectively, two polysemous words. However, the definition of the word *borek* immediately narrows down its referent. According to *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, the word *borek* refers to the white speckles on a chicken’s skin. The word *rintik* is synonymously defined as spotted. Therefore, anchoring the definition of *borek* and the prototype theory, this denotes the lexical meaning of the proverb to refer to the same chicken breeds, and thus the

genetics of the hen is passed on to the chicks.

Japanese and Malay proverbs have the meeting point at the theme ‘ancestry’ or heritage. Despite the Japanese proverb focusing on the physique of a frog whilst the Malay proverb describing the colour or genetic traits, the animals practically have the same habits and routine as their animal parents. They have the same lesson: children’s attitude will likely follow the footsteps of their parents.

### 3.1.8 明日の百より今日の五十 / *Mendengar guruh di langit, air di tempayan dicurahkan*

The Japanese proverb for the eighth comparison is 「明日の百より今日の五十」 (*asu no hyaku yori kyō no go jyū*) which lexically means “Today’s fifty is better than tomorrow’s one hundred.” This is a suitable example of antithesis - a figure of speech that refers to a particular parallel sentence construction. Antithesis always contrasts two things that are quite powerful and evident antonyms (Lorenz, 2017). Therefore, two antonyms can be extracted: tomorrow against today, more (100) against less (50). Despite not mentioning any sort of reference to what the amount refers to, it can be generally understood as money because it is quantifiable into denominational units, and it is vital in daily life.

The Malay proverb is *mendengar guruh di langit, air di tempayan dicurahkan* (hearing the thunder in the sky, the water in the crock is poured out). Comparing this Malay proverb with the Japanese counterpart, both active and passive verbs exist in the former, but such features are completely absent in the latter. This means the Malay proverb explicitly opined the concept of choice in which the person in the Malay proverb decided to remove the leftover water in the crock with anticipation of having it filled up after depending on the auditory sense (thunder) rather than the tactile sense (water droplet).

Similarities prevail on several points: The initial condition is dissatisfaction, expectations for a better situation to exist, and the possibility that the person would incur a loss for clinging onto that anticipation. The anticipation is also related with uncertainty, and this becomes the common target domain for both proverbs. The central moral value is to be grateful with what we have rather than expecting something better that might not be realised.

### 3.1.9 猿も木から落ちる / *Sepandai-pandai tupai melompat, akhirnya jatuh ke tanah jua*

The Japanese proverb for the ninth comparison is 「猿も木から落ちる」 (*saru mo ki kara ochiru*) which literally means “a monkey also falls from a tree”. This proverb uses a material verb *ochiru* 「落ちる」 in its root form, and the inclusive particle *mo* 「も」 is important for the interpretation. The verb ‘fall’ describes something that has moved from a higher position to a lower one. With that, we acknowledge the fact that monkeys can hang onto trees for a long period of time.

The Malay proverb is more elaborative, *sepandai-pandai tupai melompat, akhirnya jatuh ke tanah juga* (as clever as a squirrel can be in jumping, eventually it would fall onto the ground). The same verb ‘fall’ is used in this Malay idiom, but it also adds two descriptive elements: a reduplicative adjective *sepandai-pandai* (as clever as) and another verb *melompat* (jumping). The adjective clever is not limited to intelligence; it is also defined by Oxford Dictionary as being talented. Besides that, the verb ‘jump’ is also related to latitude change just like ‘fall’.

Therefore, both proverbs refer to arboreal animals; they are skilful in jumping from tree to tree and capable of clinging onto them as their habitat. However, at times, even these animals might fall due to

slip of hands or undershooting during the jump. Both agree on ‘mistake’ as a common target domain. This basically means even experts can inadvertently commit faults despite their very best effort.

### 3.1.10 十人十色 / *Rambut sama hitam, hati lain-lain*

The Japanese proverb for the final comparison in this section is 「十人十色」 (*kyūnin toiro*) which lexically means “ten people, ten colours”. This Japanese proverb is a *yojijukugo* or the four-character compound. According to Yohani (2017), the original form of this proverb is actually 「十人寄れば十色」 (*kyūnin yadorikireba toiro*) and the character 「色」 in this *yojijukugo* is *iroiro* 「いろいろ」 meaning ‘various things’. With the omission of the verb *yadorikireba* 「寄れば」 in this proverb, the literary device used in this case is schesis onomatopoeia – a figure of repetition in which two or more distinct words with the same (or nearly identical) meaning occur inside the same sentence.

Meanwhile, the Malay proverb to be compared is *rambut sama hitam, hati lain-lain* (same black hair, yet different hearts). Notice that rather than considering all people to be entirely unique in the Japanese

proverb, this Malay idiom lays a common ground amongst the people based on a physical trait: black hair. This narrative might be incorrect from a global perspective, but this view is plausible if it is implemented in a Malay community since Asian hair has dark pigmentation and large diameter (Leerunyakul & Suchonwanit, 2020). The hearts are then acknowledged as being diverse even within the community of having similar physical traits.

Both proverbs utilise the concept of colours. According to Biggam (2012), Basic Colour Terms (BCTs) in any language can form the worldview of the interlocutors with conceptual structures associated. From the perspective of the Malay proverb, the monolexic or non-predictable colour such as black is considered as a macro-category that clumps people into a single society. The Japanese proverb prefers to distinguish people with micro-categorical approaches as it attributes ten different people with ten different ‘colours’. Regardless of the difference in the perspective of colour, both proverbs recognise the diversity of the people and their preferences, and thus have the common target domain.

**Table 2 Comparison for Different Metaphorical Interpretations**

Item/Number	Kotowaza	Peribahasa
1	人の病は三年でも辛抱する hito no itai no wa sannen demo shinbō suru	Berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul
2	出る杭は打たれる deru kui wa utareru	Bagai pahat dengan penukul
3	犬は三日飼えば三年恩を忘れない inu wa mikka kaeba sannen on o wasurenai	Melepaskan anjing tersepit, sesudah lepas ia menggigit
4	知らぬが仏 shiranu ga hotoke	Anak anjing takkan menjadi anak musang jebat
5	類は友を呼ぶ rui wa tomo o yobu	Enggang sama enggang, pipit sama pipit, mana boleh terbang bersama-sama



### 3.2 Contrasting Views

In this part of the analysis, the structure would be different from section 3.1 since the focus would be on the difference in the metaphorical interpretations. They may have the same common source domain and/or allusion, but the interpretation is different or even opposite with each other.

#### 3.2.1 人の病は三年でも辛抱する / *Berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul*

The Japanese proverb for this first analysis is 「人の病は三年でも辛抱する」 (*hito no itai no wa sannenshō demo shinbō suru*) which lexically means “even if the people’s pain (has been) three years, be patient”. *Kotowaza Jiten* provided the explanation for this proverb that it is alright because the pain of others has nothing to do with you. In a subtler way, this means that even if you stumble upon a persistent problem, the society would expect you to be independent and overcome it somehow.

The Malay proverb to be the opposite of its Japanese counterpart is *berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul* (heavy for the eye that sees, heavier for the shoulder that bears). It means no matter how strong our sympathy towards those in trouble, the challenges that those who endure it would always be stronger.

Based on this initial assumption, we can observe polarising interpretations upon the allusion (hardship). In other words, Japanese and Malay proverbs are mapped on opposite sides of their target domains: independence against support. A study on individualism had been conducted by Ogihara (2017) upon Japanese society and he found that Japanese culture has become increasingly individualistic throughout time because of recent socioeconomic developments. Findings included parents giving their children and dogs more distinctive names, individualistic terms like ‘individual’ and ‘uniqueness’ appear more frequently in publications, yet household size decreased followed by

increasing divorce rates. Meanwhile, a news report by The Star (2015) mentioned that Charity Aid Foundation had ranked Malaysia as the 10<sup>th</sup> most generous nation in the world based on the World Giving Index. However, this resulted in the proliferation of charity scams across the nation to take advantage of the generosity. In conclusion, both sociocultural values – independence and altruism – are equally vital to form a prosperous society.

#### 3.2.2 出る杭は打たれる / *Bagai pahat dengan penukul*

The Japanese proverb for second analysis is 「出る杭は打たれる」 (*deru kui wa utareru*) which lexically means “the protruding stake is struck”. *Kotowaza Jiten* explained that the people who are talented and stand out would be hated by people anyway. Also, those who imitate too much would be criticized and sanctioned by others. If there is only one tall stake among the stakes lined up at the same height, it will be struck to it. It makes sense since the-then Prime Minister of Japan Yasuhiro Nakasone was just stating the obvious in his view: ethnic variety breeds confusion and strife, and societies work best when people look, think, and act similarly, as they do in Japan, according to the report by Burgess (1986). Homogeneity is a main stereotype about Japanese society, although it is now changing with the ongoing globalisation.

Meanwhile, the Malay proverb is a simile *bagai pahat dengan penukul* (like a chisel and a hammer). Collins Dictionary defines chisel as “a tool that has a long metal blade with a sharp edge at the end. It is used for cutting and shaping wood and stone” as it is struck with a hammer. This means that unless the hammer hits the chisel, it cannot function at all. In other words, this proverb means people who only work when instructed to do so.

The referent (hammer) is the same in the two proverbs and both reiterate force or submission to the surrounding pressure. However, the conclusion or the

interpretation in the Malay proverb had an extra twist: it has a two-pronged view. Despite the aforementioned meaning as being more popular, the lesser one would be ‘teamwork’. Without the hammer, the chisel cannot carve the wood and likewise if the chisel is absent. The identity of the Malay community is strongly related to wood carving art (MStar, 2020). Therefore, it is only natural to interpret that identity in a positive light.

### 3.2.3 犬は三日飼えば三年恩を忘れない / *Melepaskan anjing tersepit, sesudah lepas ia menggigit*

The Japanese proverb for third analysis is 「犬は三日飼えば三年恩を忘れない」 (*inu wa mikka kaeba sannen on o wasurenai*) which lexically means “the dog - if you keep it for 3 days, for 3 years it will not forget the grace”. This explains that even animals like dogs will not forget the good deeds for a long time although it is taken care for a brief period. It is only natural that human beings must be better than that – be grateful, not forgetting the benefits they have received from others for the rest of their lives. The story of *Hachikō*, the loyal dog, is no stranger to anyone and there is even a statue in commemoration of it (Ukai, 2020). This resonates with the English saying, “dog is a man’s best friend”.

However, the Malay proverb, *melepaskan anjing tersepit, sesudah lepas ia menggigit* (releasing a stuck dog; it bites after release) immediately tells the other side of a coin. This idiom might come out due to bad experience with a dog; dogs are also usually a subject of idioms in Malay language to portray bad attitude such as *anjing menggonggong tulang* (a dog holding bones) which is interpreted as a person with greedy desires.

Both proverbs use ‘dog’ as their common source domain but the allusions opposingly differ between the cultures, thus interpreting contradictory values: gratitude against thanklessness. This juxtaposition

happens because of the difference in the cultural perception on dogs.

### 3.2.4 知らぬが仏 / *Anak anjing takkan menjadi anak musang jebat*

The Japanese proverb for the fourth analysis is 「知らぬが仏」 (*shiranu ga hotoke*) which lexically means “not knowing is Buddha”. The phrase consists of the mental verb in the negative/denial form *shiranu* 「知らぬ」 followed by the nominative particle *ga* 「が」 and *hotoke* 「仏」 means ‘Buddha’. The direct equivalence of this is the English proverb “ignorance is bliss”. This concept is a heavy topic since it is a form of meditation in Zen practice (Fronsdal, 2004). Briefly, it means that our inability to grasp full knowledge of this world would enable us to attain serenity and – to some extent hyperbolically – be holy and peaceful as Buddha.

It is the other way around for the Malay proverb *anak anjing takkan menjadi musang jebat* (a puppy will not be a civet). The word *takkan* is a contraction from the actual form *tidak akan* (will not) indicating parallelism of negation. Civets and foxes are considered by the Malay society as stealthy and swift animals because of their rare appearance in the eyes of the public. Saad, Kamaruzaman and Samah (2009) mentioned that animals are used as symbolism in Malay-Arab fables to represent certain qualities, such as bravery for a lion, slowness for a tortoise, and cunningness for a fox. Therefore, this proverb means that an ignorant person will never attain a good standing in life.

Hence, the combined interpretation between the two proverbs seems paradoxical: being ignorant will make a person at a higher level spiritually yet will never attain an adequate position throughout our lives. The correct conclusion is for us to be wise in order to achieve great things, yet being empty-headed in some matters might be more convenient for us as fickle human beings.

### 3.2.5 類は友を呼ぶ / *Enggang sama enggang, pipit sama pipit, mana boleh terbang bersama-sama*

The final Japanese proverb in this section is 「類は友を呼ぶ」 (*rui wa tomo o yobu*) that literally means “the similar gathers friends”. It means that like-minded people (individuals with similar interests) naturally gather to become acquaintances. Most people would say that this proverb is synonymous with the English version “birds of a feather flock together” and this is registered in *Al-Maany Dictionary*. This interpretation can be universal because if we say, ‘like-minded people’, this can imply a group of scholars, a band of musicians or a gang of thugs. The scope covered is huge and versatile for usage.

The Malay proverb to be compared is *enggang sama enggang, pipit sama pipit, mana boleh terbang bersama-sama* (hornbill with hornbill, sparrow with sparrow, both cannot fly together). Hornbills are categorised as a tropical and subtropical bird family found in Africa, Asia, and Melanesia. They have a long, downward-curving bill that is frequently brightly coloured, and occasionally has a casque on the upper mandible. A hornbill is huge and rare compared to a tiny, common sparrow. Since both birds have too big of a difference between them, they ought not to befriend each other and fly together. This difference in magnitude is adapted to the Malay pragmatics in the form of social status.

In this case, both proverbs provide a similar source (same kind of creature) and allusion (suitability). However, the target domain for the Japanese proverb and the Malay proverb diverges greatly: society for the Japanese proverb yet marriage for the Malay proverb. The conventionalised metaphor for the above Malay proverb is strictly applied in a marriage-related context.

## 4. Conclusion

Ethnolinguistic identification is a subjective sense of belonging or association with a social group characterised by shared ethnic heritage and language variation. According to ethnolinguistic identity theory, individuals employ communication accommodation techniques, such as verbal and nonverbal convergence to or divergence from their communication partner, to highlight affiliation or disaffiliation. These microlevel intergroup exchanges have ramifications for the preservation and shift of large-scale, macrolevel languages. (Noels, 2017). Similar theories place a premium on the function of ethnolinguistic identity in the acquisition of communicative skill in foreign languages and the process of ethnolinguistic group acculturation.

There are several limitations in this research, notably the unequal number of proverbs taken into consideration between the synonymous and different categories. This is because the primary focus of this research is to provide a more systematic approach in analysing bilingual proverbs, whilst suggesting the possibility to study the reason for different interpretations despite similar common source domains and/or allusion. This scope of research can be a new foreground for ethnolinguists to study to discover more common grounds than we realise.

Throughout the analysis, it is evident that both societies – Japanese and Malay – showcase their identities using their cultural elements. The similar sociocultural values reinforce each other’s ideals whilst the opposing views widen the ‘worldview’ of one another. With this, the three objectives would be achieved: discerning the black-and-white of the idiomatic interpretations by both societies, constructing a more comprehensive analysis on comparing Japanese and Malay proverbs side-by-side, and providing a

pathway for future researchers to delve into this scope of study even deeper.

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