



Article

Copular Clauses in Malay with Distal Demonstrative *Itu*

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A B S T R A C T

The limited research in Malay nonverbal predication has predominantly revolved around the two attested copulas *ialah* and *adalah*. In fact, there is another grammatical element that appears to serve as a copula to the constituents flanking it, namely *itu*. Seeing that this distal demonstrative pronoun has never received any attention as a copula in the linguistics literature before, this study investigates the copular use of *itu* in Malay, focusing on its morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features within nonverbal clauses. Employing a qualitative approach through the descriptive method in linguistics, the analysis encompasses a range of nonverbal clauses taken from mainstream Malay news portals online to reveal that *itu* exhibits many copula-like characteristics. Constituent analysis was used to identify the linguistic features of the subject, the predicate, and most importantly *itu*. Only sentences with a generic subject and a predicate of the grammatical categories NP, AP, or PP were chosen so as to ensure that *itu* was not associated with the subject and the sentence was nonverbal. Morphologically, *itu* can combine with 3rd person *ia* to form a clarifying expression comparable to the embedded copular clause “which is...” in English. Syntactically, *itu* has the same distribution and behaviour as the other copulas in Malay. Semantically, *itu* is vacuous, making no contribution to the overall meaning of the clause. Information-structurally, *itu* does not carry any roles associated with the topic or focus. This research enriches our understanding of Malay linguistic structures, particularly in the underexplored area of nonverbal predication in Malay. Additionally, it provides historical linguists with insights into the evolution of pronominal elements into copulas as it happens. The findings have broader implications for the study of syntactic evolution and typological studies in Austronesian languages and beyond

I. INTRODUCTION

Nonverbal clauses typically comprise of a subject and a predicate that comes in the form of a nonverbal constituent, e.g. Noun Phrase, Prepositional Phrase, Adjectival Phrase, thus characterising nonverbal predication. Haspelmath (in press) presents an overview of the types of nonverbal clauses, which lack a typical verb but might include an element called the copula that seems to “mediate the relationship between a predicate and its subject” (Den Dikken, 2006, p. 1). Consider the following examples in English, which present nonverbal clauses with the subject *time*, the copula *be*, and a nonverbal constituent, also known as a copular clause:

- (1) a. *Time is* [_{NP} *gold*.]
- b. *Time is* [_{AP} *valuable*.]
- c. *Time is* [_{PP} *of the essence*.]

Copulas typically come in the form of a verb such as *be* in English; however, pronominal copulas, which are copulas that historically develop from pronouns, are not uncommon crosslinguistically. For example, it is claimed that Malay *ialah* evolved from the 3rd person singular pronoun *ia* and the focus marker *lah* (Omar, 2014; Tadmor, 2007; Yap, 2007), Arabic *huwa* (MASC) and *hiya* (FEM) evolved from 3rd person singular pronouns of the same form (Alharbi, 2017; Choueiri, 2016; Eid, 1983), Mandarin Chinese *shi* evolved from the proximal

demonstrative pronoun *shi* (Li & Thompson, 1977; Van Gelderen, 2011; Whitman, 2001), etc.

Alongside the widely accepted Malay copulas *ialah* and *adalah*, the demonstrative pronoun *itu* is used in nonverbal clauses suspiciously akin to a copula.

As illustrated below, *itu* syntactically occurs in the same clause-medial position as the copulas and it semantically does not contribute to the meaning of the nonverbal clause as it neither encodes deixis nor gets encoded as a referential element. Conversely, proximal demonstrative *ini* does not behave as such. It is argued by Monks & Davidson (2021) that distal demonstratives are less marked than proximal demonstratives, allowing their evolution into more grammatical elements as observed in many of the languages worldwide, e.g. the common use of Malay *itu* as a general marker of definiteness in Malay as well.

- (2) a. *Masa* { *adalah* / *ialah* } *emas*.
 time COP COP gold
 ‘Time is gold.’
- b. *Masa* { *itu* /* *ini* } *emas*.
 time DIST PROX gold
 ‘Time is gold.’

The study of nonverbal predication in Malay has predominantly focused on the two widely recognised copulas, *ialah* and *adalah*, leaving other potential copular elements unexplored. Among these, the distal demonstrative *itu* has been overlooked in the linguistics literature, despite its apparent role in linking constituents in nonverbal clauses. This lack of attention has resulted in a limited understanding of nonverbal predication in Malay and its morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural properties. Furthermore, the potential grammaticalisation of *itu* as a copula has not been examined, leaving a gap in the study of how demonstratives in Malay may evolve into functional grammatical markers. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing the documentation and analysis of Malay linguistic structures and for contributing to cross-linguistic studies on grammaticalisation and syntactic evolution. This research aims to bridge these gaps by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features of demonstrative *itu* in nonverbal clauses?

2. Based on the morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features of *itu*, can it be categorised as a copula?

To contextualise this study, previous research concerning pronominal copulas is reviewed. The study of non-referential, non-deictic, and non-anaphoric pronominal elements as copulas crosslinguistically has illuminated our understanding of nonverbal predication in both synchronic and diachronic terms. Even in some lesser-known languages, pronominal copulas have been observed and documented, which makes for a compelling reason to examine copular clauses in Malay with the undocumented use of demonstrative *itu* as a copula. For instance, in the understudied Austronesian language Cham, the copula *nǎn* may co-occur with an actual demonstrative of the same form contiguously, thus illustrating that the second instance of the item does not play the role of a regular demonstrative, given its semantically vacuous nature. Blood (1977) claims that “two phrases or clauses (of a topic-comment sentence) may be juxtaposed or may be linked by *nǎn* ‘to be’”. In the latter case, *nǎn* functions as the main verb of the simpler or complex sentence” (p. 63).

Cham

- (3) *Ông nǎn nǎn urang tól.*
 mister DIST COP person guest
 ‘That gentleman is a guest.’
 (Blood, 1977, p. 63)

In Karo Batak, the “copulative particle” *émkap* is used in copular clauses (Woollams, 2005). It can be analysed as the distal demonstrative pronoun *é* affixed by 2 emphatic markers, i.e. *m* and *kap*. Remarkably, this combination of pronoun and emphatic markers to form a copula reveals a common trend in the evolution of copulas crosslinguistically, as also seen in the evolution of Malay *ialah* from *ia* and *lah*. Consider the following examples with the demonstrative *é*, the emphatic demonstrative *ém*, the emphatic marker *kap*, and the copula *émkap*.

Karo Batak

- (4) a. *É la ku=begi.*
 DIST NEG 1=hear
 ‘I didn’t hear that.’
- b. *É-m ni-pan.*
 DIST-EMPH PASS-eat
 ‘That was eaten.’

- c. *Kiniseran kap er-bahan-ca kami sirang.*
 poverty EMPH ACT-make-PRF I.EXCL part
 ‘Poverty caused us to split up.’
- d. *Kuta si meriah-na émkap Juhar.*
 village REL big-NMZ COP J.
 ‘The biggest village is Juhar.’
 (Woollams, 2005)

In Modern Malay, there already exists the pronominal copula *ialah*. According to Mustaffa (2022), *ialah* evolved from a resumptive pronoun into a copula in a topic-comment construction. To illustrate, the following examples show the use of *ialah* as a resumptive pronoun that has been suffixed by the comment marker *lah* and the corresponding copula in Modern Malay. The resumptive pronoun is obligatory as it is referential, and it takes the topic “raksasa itu” as its antecedent. Meanwhile, the copula in Modern Malay is optional and it neither refers nor contributes any semantics to the clause.

Classical Malay

- (5) a. *Ada-pun raksasa itu *(ia-lah)*
 AUX-TOP monster DIST 3.SG-COM
Dewa Batara Mahawisnu.
 D.
 ‘As for the monster, it was Dewa Batara Mahawisnu.’
 (Hikayat Sang Boma – 17th Century AD)
 (Proudfoot, 1991)

Modern Malay

- b. *Raksasa itu (ialah) Dewa Batara Mahawisnu.*
 monster DIST COP D.
 ‘The monster was Dewa Batara Mahawisnu.’

Examinations of the changes undergone by pronominal copulas over time have provided linguists with a vista into the processes involved in diachronic change, such as semantic bleaching, reanalysis, etc. In all of the preceding examples, bleaching is observed to have occurred to the pronominal copula with the loss of the semantic features commonly associated with the demonstrative pronoun. Other than that, cases of simplification are also common in that longer words are abbreviated, truncated, and even cliticised onto surrounding words. For example, According to Soriente (2018), the demonstrative *inah* derives the copula *nah* in Punan Tuvu. In fact, when contracted like the copula in Punan Tuvu, the Malay demonstrative *itu* can be used the same

way the demonstrative copula in Cham is used. Although it is only attested in spoken Malay, the contracted form *tu* may be used following the full form of referential *itu* as the subject:

- (6) *Itu tu burung nuri.*
 DIST COP bird parrot
 ‘That is a parrot.’

Pronominal copulas follow a common evolution path. Stassen (1997) argues “PRO-NOMINAL COPULAS OR PRO-COPULAS originated as resumptive subject pronouns in a topic-comment structure; they formed part of the sentence nucleus and were anaphorically related to the subject, which was placed outside the nucleus in the (commonly sentence-initial) topic position” (p. 77) and the same is opined by Hengeveld (1992). To illustrate, the dual use of Mandarin *shi* before and after its grammaticalisation in the examples below, cited in Van Gelderen (2015), is shown:

Old Chinese

- (7) a. *Shi shi lie gui.*
 PROX COP violent ghost
 ‘This is a violent ghost.’
 (Peyraube & Wiebusch, 1994)

Modern Mandarin

- b. *Zhe shi lie gui.*
 PROX COP violent ghost
 ‘This is a violent ghost.’

This study takes grammaticalisation, which is “the gradual historical process through which grammatical items are created” (Smith, 2017), as the theoretical framework. According to the theory of grammaticalisation, demonstratives and pronouns can gradually lose their referential functions and take on a more grammatical role as copulas, marking predication in nonverbal clauses. In the case of lexical items, they lose their lexical property and evolve into grammatical markers, whereas readily functional items progress into even more grammatical elements.

In the context of Malay, this theory is applied to investigate how the distal demonstrative *itu* may be undergoing such a transformation. While previous research has primarily focused on the copulas *ialah* and *adalah*, this study fills a gap by examining whether *itu* displays features of grammaticalisation typical of the pronominal copula cycle. By examining the morphosyntactic, semantic shifts of *itu*, the study contributes to our understanding

of how demonstratives in Malay may be evolving toward copular functions, thus offering insights into broader processes of grammaticalisation in Austronesian languages.

Clearly, the grammaticalisation of the distal demonstrative *itu* into a copula has been entirely overlooked in the literature as no prior research on the topic can be found. Despite *itu* exhibiting copula-like characteristics in nonverbal clauses, there is no substantive body of work that examines its potential role in this grammatical shift. The absence of scholarly attention on this subject leaves a significant gap in the understanding of how demonstratives in Malay may evolve into functional grammatical markers. Therefore, this study attempts to fill the knowledge gap with regard to the element *itu* in nonverbal predication in Malay as it examines its linguistic features in its synchronic use in Modern Malay to draw parallels with other copulas that have evolved from pronominal elements in their diachrony. It should be possible to see similar changes in the features of the element in terms of morphology, syntax, semantics, and information structure as it grammaticalises into a copula.

In addition to that, this gap in our understanding of this particular construction warrants a thorough examination, especially given the overall lack of research in nonverbal predication in Malay, compared to the wealth of existing literature on pronominal copulas in other languages, even in lesser-known languages. The significance of determining the (non-)copular status of *itu* lies in the unique opportunity to observe the evolutionary cline of pronominal elements into copulas by Van Gelderen (2011).

This study contributes to the examination and documentation of linguistic structures in the Malay language, especially in the direly understudied field of nonverbal predication in Malay. More generally, it provides a unique opportunity for historical linguists to look into the behaviour of pronominal elements as they evolve into copulas in real time.

II. METHODS

This study is a piece of qualitative research that employs a purely descriptive method to analyse the morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features of the distal demonstrative pronoun *itu* in nonverbal clauses in Malay.

Each sentence was analysed using constituent analysis to break down the sentence structure and identify morphological, syntactic, semantic and information-structural features. The analysis focused on understanding how *itu* interacts with surrounding elements, such as the NPs flanking it, to fulfil its role as a copula.

Following the deconstruction of the sentences into their constituents, the syntactic units within each sentence were identified and categorised to reveal their functions. For example, in the sentence “Mencuri *itu* jenayah” (stealing is a crime), *mencuri* (stealing) is identified as the subject, whilst *jenayah* (crime) is identified as the predicate.

The final step involved determining the function of *itu* within the sentence. This included analysing its role in the subject-predicate relationship and its interaction with other syntactic elements. By mapping out these structures, consistent patterns in the use of *itu* as a copula across different contexts could be identified.

Data Collection

The data for this research include sentences extracted from articles from mainstream Malay newspapers online, particularly those that include the use of *itu*. News articles – as opposed to other genres of writing – are examined to ensure that the language is standard Malay. As news articles go through a strict proof-editing process, the grammaticality of the language is guaranteed without jeopardising its authenticity.

Harian Metro and Berita Harian were the news portals chosen because, although a subscription might be required, the articles from these news portals that are searchable on Google are open access and available to the public. Conversely, when Google is used to search for articles from Utusan, another popular mainstream Malay news portal, the links redirect the user to articles that are behind a paywall.

By conducting a simple Google search using the keyword *itu* enclosed in quotation marks [“ ”], sentences that include the use of the relevant item can be identified. Additionally, the search operator [site:] should be used to restrict the search to specific news portal websites. For example, to search for the word *itu* on the Berita Harian website, one would use the following search string: site:https://www.bharian.com.my/ “itu”.

Most importantly, the following criteria must be met for the selection of the sentences to be analysed in this study:

1. The predicate must be nonverbal.

A nonverbal predicate is a constituent of a nonverbal category, such as NP, AP, or PP, that becomes a proposition once its variables are assigned fixed values. In the case of nonverbal clauses, the only variable involved is the subject, since nonverbal predicates are intransitive (Stassen, 1997). For example, the sentences below contain a nominal, adjectival, and prepositional predicate whose argument has been saturated by the subject “John”. The proposition can therefore be assigned a truth value: return *true* if John is a linguist; return *false* if John is not a linguist.

- (8) a. *John is* [_{NP} *a linguist*].
- b. *John is* [_{AP} *stressed*].
- c. *John is* [_{PP} *in constant pain*].

2. The subject must be generic.

A generic NP makes “reference to a kind – a genus” (Krifka et al., 1995), not a specific object or entity. For example, the following sentences have a generic interpretation in that not a specific hummingbird is being referenced, but the species in general, despite the use of certain determiners, such as the definite or indefinite articles:

- (9) a. *Hummingbirds drink nectar.*
- b. *A hummingbird drinks nectar.*
- c. *The hummingbird drinks nectar.*

Lastly, the flowchart for identifying copulas by Mustaffa (2022) in **Figure 1** is taken as a guideline for this study in differentiating copular and non-copular elements.

According to the flowchart, in order for an element to be identified as a copula, it needs to pass the following criteria:

- 1. It accompanies a nonverbal predicate in a non-modifying manner.
- 2. It semantically differs when used with or as a verbal predicate, if possible.

The first criterion liberally allows various items associated with nonverbal predicates to be considered, whilst the second criterion acts as a filter to sift out all the unwanted material.

III. RESULTS

The description of the morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features of *itu* in nonverbal clauses in this section answer the first research question.

Morphology

Demonstrative *itu*, as a determiner or pronoun, is morphologically invariant; however, it can combine with 3rd person *ia* to form *iaitu*, which is used as an expression for clarification with respect to a preceding phrase or clause. Its use this way is comparable to Latin *id est* or English “that/which is”, which are essentially copular clauses. The examples below show the use of *iaitu* as such a clarifying nonverbal clause:

- (10) a. ... ‘Hilal’ *ia-itu* *anak bulan.*
 H. 3.SG-DIST child moon
 ‘... Hilal, which is the new moon.’
 (Bhari, 2022)
- b. *Ada benda asing ia-itu susuk.*
 EXIST object foreign 3.SG-DIST susuk
 There is a foreign object, which is *susuk*.
 (Abd Malik, 2023)

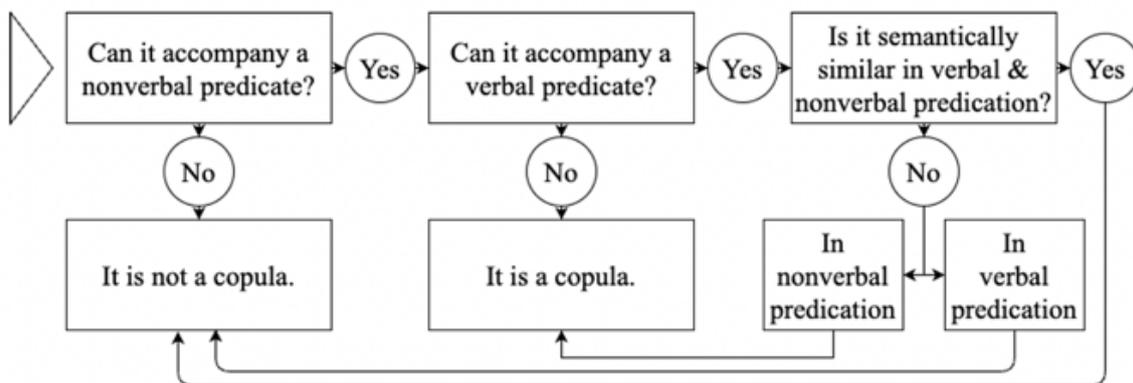


Figure 1. Flowchart for Identifying Copulas (Mustaffa, 2022)

Iaitu most likely developed by analogy with *yakni*, likewise an expression for clarification. *Yakni* deceptively appears to be a compound of *ia* (3.SG) and *ini* (PROX), but it is in fact a borrowing from Arabic. The spelling (one beginning with <i> and the other with <y>) is irrelevant as both expressions were written in the Arabic script with *ﻯ* /ja/ when *yakni* entered the language.

Syntax

With regard to its category selection, demonstrative *itu* naturally occurs with nouns as it serves to specify and spatially locate a physical object. However, in its copular use, *itu* is observed to be able to co-occur with adjectives, as pointed out by a reviewer.

- (11) *Cantik itu abstrak.*
pretty COP abstract
'Pretty is abstract.'
(Ithnin, 2020)

Of course this is common in copular clauses with *adalah*.

- (12) *Cantik adalah subjektif.*
pretty COP subjective
'Pretty is subjective.'
(Tengku Azhar, 2023)

However, notice that their co-occurrence is dispreferred as one creates redundancy in the presence of the other. Although this does not render the sentence ungrammatical, it does result in some awkwardness in parsing the sentence. One might even argue that *itu* is more suitable in the sentence below:

- (13) *Cantik itu ?(adalah) subjektif.*
pretty COP COP subjective
'Pretty is subjective.'

This syntactic flexibility illustrates that *itu* has transitioned from its original function as a demonstrative to serve as a grammatical element connecting the subject and predicate. Its capacity to co-occur with non-nominal elements, such as adjectives, sets it apart from its conventional demonstrative usage.

Itu is not syntactically associated with the subject or the nonverbal predicate. A strong indicator for the independence of *itu* from the two constituents is its mobility. As shown in example (14), the subject of the interrogative clause is

“murka” and *itu* originates in a position following the subject but has moved past it in the preceding interrogative clause. Essentially, the demonstrative has inverted with the subject through subject-auxiliary inversion, providing important evidence that it does not form a constituent with the subject.

- (14) *Apa itu murka? Murka itu soalan anda.*
what COP anger anger COP question
2.SG
'What is anger?... Anger is your question.'
(Idris, 2018)

Itu is able to remain in its original position in an indirect question, which does not trigger subject-auxiliary inversion. As shown below, the interrogative-turned predicate has been fronted, but *itu* remains in its original position following the subject, providing support for the idea that *itu* is also separate from the predicate:

- (15) *Tahu-kah kita apa₁ makna tauhid itu t₁?*
know-Q 1.PL what meaning tauhid COP
'Do we know what the meaning of *tauhid* is?'
(Mohd Yusoff, 2016)

Also, *itu* lies outside the constituent marked by *kah* in a question. Given that demonstratives do not combine with *wh*-phrases in Malay, the position of *itu* following the interrogative in (16) signals that it is not associated with the *wh*-phrase.

- (16) *Apa-kah itu kronisme?*
what-Q COP cronyism
'What is cronyism?'
(Mohd Tahir, 2022)

To confirm that *itu* occurs outside the predicate, one can examine its distribution relative to other constituents such as adverbials and negators, as done in Mustaffa (2018). As predicted, *itu* lies outside the predicate, since adverbials mainly occur at the edge of the predicate and negators take scope over the predicate, as shown below:

- (17) *Cinta itu tidak selalu mudah.*
love COP NEG always easy
'Love is not always easy.'
(Reuters, 2018)

Example (17) presents crucial evidence for the syntactic position of *itu* being the same as the copula *adalah*. The negator *tidak* follows the copula, as in (18a), but precedes verbs, as in (18b).

- (18) a. *Kenyataan itu adalah tidak benar.*
 statement DIST COP NEG true
 ‘That statement is not true.’
 (Mohd Ali, 2023)
- b. *Kenyataan itu tidak boleh di-terima.*
 statement DIST NEG can PASS-accept
 ‘That statement cannot be accepted.’
 (AFP, 2023)

Suppose that the subject of a copular clause with *itu* is a left-dislocated topic and *itu* is its resumptive pronoun. If the subject were left-dislocated and a resumptive pronoun were left in its place, *adakah* should intervene between the topic and *itu* in a polar question. However, this prediction is not borne out as *adakah* precedes the subject of the nonverbal clause in (19), indicating that the subject has not been left-dislocated or topicalised. Both the subject and *itu* are therefore analysed to be contained within the root clause in the declarative, not the clause periphery.

- (19) *Ada-kah sembelit itu normal?*
 AUX-Q constipation COP normal
 ‘Is constipation normal?’
 (Fadzlyana, 2017)

It appears that, similar to the other copulas in Malay, *itu* is unable to undergo subject-auxiliary inversion in polar interrogatives as it cannot directly combine with interrogative marker *kah*. Polar interrogative copular clauses require *ada*-support, as evidenced by the employment of *adakah* even in copular clauses with *ialah*, since *ialah* is not morphologically decomposable (Mustaffa, 2022).

Based on the findings regarding the syntactic properties of *itu*, a nonverbal clause with *itu* can be concluded to have the structure shown in **Figure 2**.

Semantics

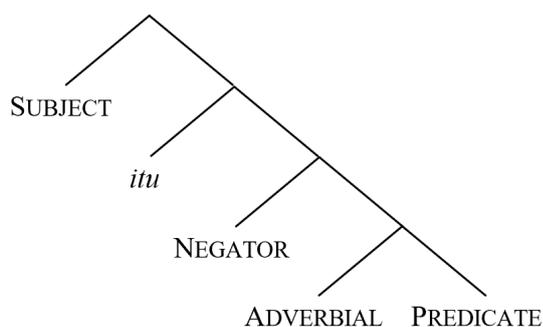


Figure 2. Structure of Nonverbal Clause with ‘Itu’

In terms of semantics, *itu* is vacuous, as are the other copulas in Malay. This is supported by the optionality of *itu*; its absence does not alter the interpretation of the nonverbal clause. The lack of semantic content is surprising, given that the word normally supplies a NP with definiteness, or is referential and deictic on its own as a demonstrative pronoun. Without the definiteness, referentiality, or deictic interpretation that is usually carried by the demonstrative pronoun or determiner form of *itu*, the nonverbal clause carries a generic interpretation.

To further illustrate the semantic vacuousness of *itu*, consider example (20). The use of *itu* in the following example with a gerundive subject does not promote a definite interpretation of the subject.

- (20) *Meny-tangis itu perkara biasa...*
 ACT-cry COP thing normal
 ‘Crying is something normal...’
 (Che Noh, 2018)

To begin with, a gerund in Malay does not warrant the use of a determiner the same way it does in English, as in the example “the crying of newly born babies”. The fact that copular *itu* may co-occur with a gerundive subject in Malay is uncharacteristic of genuine demonstratives in terms of meaning or distribution, making it obvious that *itu* does not function as a genuine demonstrative in the example above.

Besides, a gerund like *menangis* is a word that encodes an action, which is not referential or deictic. So, demonstratives do not pair with verbs semantically since actions cannot be pointed at. Using (21) to exemplify this semantic incompatibility, when a gerund functions as a direct object, a demonstrative modifying it becomes sharply ungrammatical, which makes an obvious case for *itu* not being associated with the subject in nonverbal clauses. Lying cannot be demonstrated, as in “this lying” or “that lying”.

- (21) *Saya benci meny-tipu (* itu /* ini).*
 1.SG hate ACT-lie DIST PROX
 ‘I hate (*that/*this) lying.’

Moreover, it can be omitted altogether or even replaced with a copula such as *adalah*, as shown below. This entails that *itu* does not semantically or deictically refer to anything at all.

- (22) *Meñ-tangis adalah biasa...*
 ACT-cry COP thing normal
 ‘Crying is something normal...’

The only way it is possible for *itu* to be used with *tangis* as a meaningful demonstrative is for the verb to be nominalised:

- (23) *Tangis-an itu perkara biasa.*
 cry-NMZ DIST thing normal
 ‘That cry is something normal.’

Also *itu* may occur in nonverbal clauses with unique human proper nouns as the subject, which is surprising if we analyse the subject as the antecedent of *itu*. Such a subject should be coindexed with a personal pronoun, rather than a demonstrative pronoun. Otherwise, the resulting sentence would be rendered ungrammatical due to a mismatch in human vs. non-human features. Nevertheless, the fact that such a construction is grammatical, as shown below, entails that the subject is not the antecedent of *itu*.

- (24) *Muhammad itu utusan Allah.*
 M. COP messenger A.
 ‘Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.’
 (Shuhari, 2023)

Another case of mismatching features is the use of *itu* with proximal subjects. Although nonverbal clauses of this kind are not attested in Bahasa Malaysia, they are very common in spoken Bahasa Indonesia. As shown below, copular *itu* may be used with proximal demonstrative *ini* as the subject, which makes apparent the non-referential property of *itu* as well as its semantic and syntactic independence from the subject.

- (25) *Alat ini itu tidak harus plastik...*
 device PROX COP NEG must plastic
 This device need not be plastic...
 (Bahfein, 2021)

It can therefore be said that copular *itu* does not have the features associated with its demonstrative pronoun form, such as referentiality, deixis, and definiteness. *Itu* does not alter or add to the semantics of a nonverbal clause or its constituents.

Information Structure

As is the case with copulas *ialah* and *adalah*, *itu* does not appear to carry any information-structural roles. The subject is identified as the topic, whereas

the nonverbal predicate is identified as the focus, as argued by Mustafa (2022). Meanwhile, the copulas *ialah*, *adalah* and *itu* are merely markers of the subject-predicate boundary and form part of the comment, as per relational givenness (Gundel, 1999). The information-structural partitioning of the copular clause is illustrated below:

- (26) a. [Topic *Masa*] [Comment *adalah*] [Focus *emas.*]
 time COP gold
 ‘Time is gold.’
 b. [Topic *Masa*] [Comment *ialah*] [Focus *emas.*]
 time COP gold
 ‘Time is gold.’
 c. [Topic *Masa*] [Comment *itu*] [Focus *emas.*]
 time COP gold
 ‘Time is gold.’

Although *itu* may be used as a copula, a change in the intonation of the sentence by allowing *itu* to carry stress changes the interpretation of the sentence. This reassignment of the stress onto *itu* essentially reassigns the information structural roles of the constituents of the clause and allows *itu* to be interpreted as a referential demonstrative pronoun that takes the preceding NP as its antecedent. In the usual case, *itu* is unstressed as are the copulas *ialah* and *adalah* in canonical copular clauses, but the ability for it to carry stress and thus be interpreted as a referential pronoun is unlike the other copulas, as *ialah* and *adalah* cannot be stressed, according to Mustafa (2022). Consider the following example with *itu* stressed:

- (27) [Topic *Masa*] *ITU* (*adalah*) [Focus *emas.*]
 time DIST COP gold
 ‘Time, that is gold.’

As illustrated above, when it carries stress, *itu* serves as the grammatical subject of the nonverbal clause with the topic *masa* as its antecedent. An optional copula confirms this analysis. This seems to be the only difference in meaning between *itu* and the other copulas.

IV. DISCUSSION

As revealed in the findings, *itu* does not contribute any meaning to the semantics of the clause whatsoever. According to Bowdle and Ward (1995), demonstrative NPs can also denote kinds, making them generic. However, the genericity of the NP does not depend on the demonstrative in nonverbal clauses with *itu*, as evidenced by

its absence without affecting the interpretation at all. This phenomenon is also observed in verbal clauses with generic subjects and *itu*, as illustrated below. In both verbal and nonverbal clauses, *itu* can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence.

- (28) *Ke-tenang-an itu boleh di-peroleh...*
 NMZ-calm-NMZ DIST can PASS-get
 ‘Tranquillity can be obtained...’
 (Mat Hayin, 2024)

What makes nonverbal clauses with *itu* special is that *itu* can then be reanalysed as a semantically vacuous mediator of the subject-predicate relationship, seeing that there is no such element in the clause that does this. For example, the subject and predicate may occur side by side and need not be intervened by a copula, as is common in the world’s languages (Pustet, 2003):

- (29) *Murai se-jenis burung.*
 magpie one-type bird
 ‘A magpie is a type of bird.’

Otherwise, *itu* could be used as a meaningless filler, as observed of the evolution of the demonstrative *este* into a filler in Amazonian Spanish by Vallejos-Yopán (2023), to break up the subject-predicate boundary, with grammatically heavy subjects. Then it later grammaticalises into a copula due to its distribution.

This has allowed *itu* to reanalyse as a copula in clause-medial position since it does not function as an anaphoric, definite, or deictic demonstrative. This process commonly happens to resumptive pronouns following topicalisation, as argued by Hengeveld (1992) and Stassen (1997).

Conversely, the demonstrative in generic NPs in verbal clauses cannot undergo the same process because the subject is directly followed by the verb, which is the quintessential predicate that typically does not need the service of a separate grammatical element to connect it to the subject. Nonetheless, predicate markers for both verbal and nonverbal predicates do exist crosslinguistically, such as *i* in Tok Pisin:

- Tok Pisin
 (30) a. *Em i kam.*
 3.SG PRED come
 ‘S/he comes.’

- b. *Madang i bik.*
 M. PRED big
 ‘Madang is big.’
 (Smith, 2008)

Givón (2015) states that *i* grammaticalised from English *he*. It is no longer used in contexts other than agreement marking, suggesting for a pronoun to be reanalysed as an agreement marker, it needs to grammaticalise in all contexts, not just a specific grammatical construction. On the other hand, pronominal copulas, which are only used in nonverbal clauses, develop from pronouns, which are used in all contexts, entailing that pronominal copulas must specialise in nonverbal clauses, a specific grammatical construction.

With regard to Malay *itu*, it clearly has copular properties when used in nonverbal clauses, especially due to its distribution and lack of semantics. Its use facilitates the disambiguation of the construction as a copular clause, especially one with a grammatically heavy subject, rather than a noun phrase with an attributive modifier, much like demonstrative *este* in Amazonian Spanish, predicate marker *i* in Tok Pisin and topic marker *me* in Kalamang, an endangered Papuan language in Indonesia, according to Visser (2022): “The use of topic marker *me* makes an unambiguous copular clause” (p. 292). Indeed, copula *adalah* does the same job, e.g. noun phrase: *api panas* (hot fire) vs. copular clause: *api {itu/adalah} panas* (fire is hot).

Its use as a copula in nonverbal clauses and as its meaningful precursor in verbal clauses parallels *adalah* as a copula in nonverbal clauses and as a meaningful auxiliary verb in verbal clauses. If its use somehow declines in verbal clauses, it could reanalyse as an exclusive copula, as it has happened with *ialah*. Otherwise, if it loses its referential, anaphoric, and deictic features across the board but is still somehow used in verbal clauses, it could potentially evolve into a general agreement marker in principle, according to the cline by Givón (2015) in **Figure 3**.

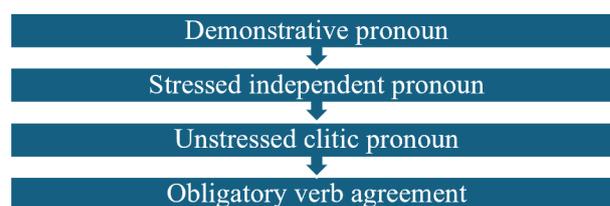


Figure 3. Morphogenesis of Pronominal Agreement

The multiplicity of its uses – as a copula in nonverbal clauses and as a regular anaphoric and deictic element elsewhere – in the current stage of the language presents a case of “layering” (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). In other words, the newly developing copular use of *itu* in a specific construction co-exists with the wide use of deictic *itu* in other parts of the grammar.

The full-fledged pronominal copula *ialah* has evolved past layering as it can no longer function as a pronoun in Malay, due to its resistance to focus (Mustaffa, 2022). Although the 3rd person pronoun *ia* is still used, albeit in an increasingly narrowing scope (only with non-human antecedents in spoken Malay), *ialah* as a focused pronoun no longer exists. It exclusively occurs in copular clauses only, which demonstrates its specialisation in nonverbal clauses and the end of its layering. This specialisation in copular clauses allowed it to be reanalysed as a copula.

In almost all respects, *itu* parallels *ialah* and *adalah* in its use as a copula. However, as it is discovered with regard to its information-structural properties, *itu* may be interpreted as a referential pronoun when it carries stress, which is a similar property even when used in verbal clauses. What this suggests is that, although *itu* has developed use as a copula, it may still be used as a referential demonstrative pronoun in some contexts even within nonverbal clauses with generic subjects.

According to the flowchart for identifying copulas by Mustaffa (2022), an element in question that accompanies a nonverbal predicate but may also be used in verbal predication must have different semantic properties. *Itu* does have different semantics in verbal and nonverbal clauses, but the single property that makes it referential when stressed is similar in both types of clauses. Given the second criterion, *itu* does not fully pass as a full-fledged copula, although it is nearing this state. Therefore, to answer the second research question, it has not emerged categorically as a copula due to its predominant use as a referential demonstrative pronoun in both the verbal and nonverbal domains. However, one may imagine that if it ceases to be able to bear stress in nonverbal clauses, it may one day be considered a full-fledged copula like *adalah*.

The findings of this research have significant theoretical and practical implications. It provides empirical evidence supporting Van Gelderen’s

(2011) pronominal copula cycle, demonstrating how pronominal elements can transition into functional grammatical markers. Furthermore, it addresses the dire lack of studies on nonverbal predication in Malay, offering a valuable framework for future investigations into copular constructions in Austronesian and other typologically similar languages. Practically, the implications of this research include the documentation of Malay linguistic structures, aiding in the preservation and understanding of the language. It also has pedagogical implications, as the insights gained can inform the teaching of Malay grammar, particularly for second-language learners, by clarifying the role and function of *itu* in nonverbal predication.

This research has several limitations. First, the study relies on nonverbal clauses containing *itu* sourced exclusively from mainstream Malay news portals. This restricts the analysis to formal, written Malay and does not account for variations in colloquial speech, regional dialects, or informal registers, where it may exhibit different characteristics or usage patterns. Second, while the qualitative descriptive approach provides in-depth insights into the morphosyntactic and semantic behaviour of *itu*, the absence of quantitative methods, such as frequency analysis or corpus-based statistics, limits the generalisability of the findings to broader linguistic contexts. Additionally, although the study addresses grammaticalisation, it does not employ a diachronic corpus to trace the historical evolution of *itu*, leaving the precise timeline and mechanisms of its grammaticalisation as a potential copula unexplored. Lastly, while the study examines the syntactic and semantic properties of *itu*, it does not delve deeply into its pragmatic or discourse-level functions, such as its role in topic continuity, emphasis, or contextual relevance in conversation.

The limitations above can be addressed in future research by widening the scope of the study to include data sources from spoken Malay, both standard and vernacular. Also, the study should include a quantitative analysis involving a diachronic corpus to observe trends in the use of *itu* in the history of Malay as well as the cline in its grammaticalisation into a copula. Most interestingly, the rise of *itu* as a copula with regard to its function should be studied for us to make sense of the necessity of a third copula in the language, thus informing linguists of the communicative

needs of the people using it. The important research question to raise is the following: Why must *itu* be employed, considering that the Malay language already has 2 other more established copulas?

The combination of cognitive, functional, and construction grammar, to examine grammaticalisation, the trend of which has been rising as noticed by Enghels, Jansegers, and Bossuyt (2024), would yield interesting insights.

V. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the previously overlooked copular use of the distal demonstrative *itu* in Malay, revealing its morphological, syntactic, semantic, and information-structural features within nonverbal clauses. Through a qualitative analysis of data from mainstream Malay news portals, it is evident that *itu* exhibits many copula-like characteristics similar to established copulas.

Morphologically, it may combine with 3rd person *ia* to form *iaitu*, a clarifying expression akin to the embedded copular clause “which is...” in English or “id est” (i.e.) in Latin. Syntactically, it does not form a constituent with the subject and is separate from the predicate, especially because it is found to be able to undergo subject-auxiliary

inversion in *wh*-interrogatives. Semantically, it does not contribute any meaning to the clause anaphorically, referentially, deictically, or demonstratively. Lastly, *itu* is nearing complete grammaticalisation into a copula in the domain of nonverbal predication, despite its predominant use as a referential demonstrative pronoun in the verbal domain.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author has read and followed the ethical requirements for publication in Jurnal Arbitrer and the current work does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any data collected from social media platforms.

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The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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