

Arabic Lexical Influence on The Malay Language: Civilizational and Humanistic Dimensions

Mohamed Rady Mohamed Elpaz Elsheakh*, Mohd Syauqi Bin
Arshad, Nurul Izzatie Binti Aziz

Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah International Islamic University (UniSHAMS), Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: mohamedrady@unishams.edu.my

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Abstract

This study examines Arabic lexical items in Malay, focusing on words retained in recognisably Arabic forms and those that have undergone phonological, morphological, or semantic adaptation. It further explores the civilizational and humanistic significance attached to selected Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay-speaking communities. The study is situated within the historical expansion of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, where Arabic served not only as the language of the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition but also as a key medium of religious learning, intellectual transmission, and cultural exchange. This descriptive-analytical approach identifies representative lexical items and classifies them by semantic domains, including social, religious, administrative, military, and scientific usage. The analysis shows that Arabic-derived vocabulary has become embedded in Malay at several levels of everyday and institutional life. Examples such as *tahniah*, *korban*, *ibadah*, *masjid*, *kuliah*, *makmal*, *ulama*, *hasil*, and *askar* illustrate how Arabic-derived forms have been integrated into Malay while acquiring usage patterns appropriate to the Malay linguistic environment. The study argues that the persistence of these lexical items constitutes an important linguistic record of sustained contact between Arabic-Islamic civilisation and Malay society. At the same time, lexical borrowing should be understood as a historical and sociolinguistic process rather than as evidence of simple linguistic replacement. The article therefore proposes studying Arabic loanwords in Malay as part of a broader history of Islamization, education, intellectual exchange, social organisation, and cultural identity in the Malay Archipelago.

Keywords: Arabic Language, Malay Language, Arabic Loanwords, Malay Archipelago, Lexical Borrowing, Islamic Civilisation, Humanistic Impact, Cultural Identity

Introduction

The relationship between Arabic and the Malay language represents one of the significant linguistic legacies of the historical encounter between Islam and the societies of the Malay Archipelago. Arabic entered the region not simply as a foreign language of communication, but principally through the religious, educational, intellectual, and cultural institutions that developed alongside the spread of Islam. As Malay-speaking communities adopted Islam,

they incorporated selected Arabic words into Malay, sometimes with little formal change and sometimes through phonological, morphological, or semantic adaptation.

The present study focuses on this lexical dimension of contact. It documents representative Arabic words in Malay and examines what their continued use reveals about Islam's civilizational and humanistic impact. The study proceeds from the observation that a language's vocabulary can preserve historical traces of contact even when the source language is no longer used as an everyday vernacular. In this respect, Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay provides a linguistic window into the history of religious practice, social relations, administration, education, scholarship, and cultural identity.

The study also responds to a broader claim that Arabic has had limited influence on languages spoken in Muslim-majority societies outside the Arab world. Rather than approaching the issue only in terms of the number of borrowed words, this article considers the semantic domains in which Arabic vocabulary has remained particularly durable. The continued presence of religious, social, administrative, and scholarly terminology suggests that lexical borrowing was connected to institutions and concepts that became meaningful within Malay Muslim society.

Three objectives guide the study: first, to identify representative Arabic lexical items preserved or adapted in Malay; second, to classify these items by their principal semantic fields; and third, to interpret their civilizational and humanistic significance within the historical experience of Islam in the Malay Archipelago.

The article is organised into four major analytical parts. It first discusses the historical setting of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. It then considers Arabic's position in relation to colonial linguistic change. The third part analyses selected Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay by semantic field. The final part synthesises the findings and proposes directions for further research.

Islam and the Linguistic Environment of the Malay Archipelago

The Malay Archipelago as a Zone of Cultural and Commercial Exchange

The Malay Archipelago comprises a vast maritime region encompassing present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and parts of the southern Philippines. Its location along major maritime routes connecting the East and West made it an important meeting point for merchants, travellers, scholars, and religious teachers. Shalabī (1983) emphasises the archipelago's geographical and commercial importance and its role in facilitating interaction among peoples from Arabia, India, China, and Southeast Asia.

Within this environment, trade networks created channels through which religious ideas and linguistic forms could circulate. Merchants and Muslim preachers were key agents in disseminating Islam. The source material emphasises the role of Yemeni merchants and the peaceful character of much of this process, particularly in contrast to models of religious expansion based primarily on military conquest (Shalabī, 1983).

The linguistic consequences of this interaction were gradual. Malay increasingly functioned as a common medium of communication among diverse communities, while Arabic acquired

a distinctive religious and scholarly status. The result was not the replacement of Malay by Arabic, but the incorporation of Arabic lexical resources into Malay in areas where Islamic concepts, institutions, and practices required new or more specialised terminology.

Arabic, Islam, and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge

Arabic's enduring position within Islamic civilisation is closely connected to the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. The preservation and continued recitation of the Qur'an have helped sustain Arabic as a language of religious knowledge. The source material further links this continuity to the scholarly traditions developed to preserve and authenticate the Prophetic Sunnah, including the sciences of al-Jarḥ wa-l-Ta'dīl and 'Ilm al-Rijāl.

For Malay Muslim communities, Arabic consequently became associated with a wide range of concepts and practices that were transmitted through religious teaching. Terms relating to prayer, pilgrimage, sacrifice, mosques, religious scholarship, and other practices could therefore enter Malay not merely as isolated lexical borrowings but as components of a wider religious vocabulary.

An important implication is that the Arabic influence visible in Malay should be examined at the level of institutions and practices, not just individual words. A word such as masjid, for example, is linked to a physical institution; ṣalāh to a central act of worship; and ulama to a social category associated with religious learning. The persistence of such terms reflects the institutionalisation of Islamic concepts in Malay-speaking society.

Colonialism, Language, and the Changing Position of Arabic

Arabic as a Marker of Religious and Cultural Cohesion

The source material presents Arabic as more than a means of communication: it is described as one of the principal linguistic vehicles through which the Qur'an, Sunnah, jurisprudence, and Islamic intellectual heritage have been transmitted. Mahmūd Muḥammad Shākir similarly emphasises the unifying function of the Qur'anic language among Muslims of different ethnicities and linguistic backgrounds (Shākir, 2005).

This perspective helps explain why Arabic-derived vocabulary can remain in a language even when Arabic is not spoken as the principal vernacular. Religious terminology can be preserved through ritual, education, preaching, scripture, and communal institutions. The lexical history of Malay therefore reflects not only ordinary language contact but also sustained institutional contact.

British Colonialism and Linguistic Displacement

The source material argues that British colonial rule contributed to the marginalisation of Arabic in parts of the Muslim world, including the Malay Archipelago. It further argues that colonial educational and administrative structures strengthened English and promoted Latin-script literacy at the expense of older Islamic linguistic traditions. The source cites Jum'a (2000) as arguing that British colonial policy sought to displace Arabic from established domains in both Arab and non-Arab Muslim societies.

Such claims should be approached historically and comparatively, because the linguistic histories of Malaysia, Indonesia, Java, and other parts of the archipelago were not identical.

Nevertheless, the central linguistic observation remains significant: Arabic ceased to function as a broad public language in the region, yet a substantial lexical residue survived within Malay. This apparent paradox- a decline in direct language use alongside the persistence of vocabulary provides an important reason to study Arabic-derived Malay words.

The source material also points to the adoption of Latin script and the growing presence of English vocabulary as later developments in the region's linguistic history. These changes did not, however, erase the Arabic lexical layer. Instead, Malay developed as a language containing multiple historical strata, among which Arabic remains particularly visible in religious and scholarly domains.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology. The source material identifies Arabic lexical items that are either retained in recognisably Arabic forms or adapted within Malay and then examines their semantic and civilizational significance. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical.

The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, the study identifies representative Arabic-derived words from the provided lexical examples. Second, the words are grouped according to semantic field, including social, religious, administrative, military, and scientific domains. Third, the study interprets the semantic and institutional contexts of these words in relation to Islam's historical presence in the Malay Archipelago.

The study does not claim that the selected examples constitute an exhaustive inventory of Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay. Rather, they are treated as illustrative evidence of broader lexical contact. The source itself indicates that a larger corpus exists and that the examples presented are intended to clarify the scope and purpose of the study. A comprehensive quantitative corpus study would require a larger dataset and systematic comparison with historical Malay dictionaries, Arabic etymological sources, and corpora.

Accordingly, the civilizational and humanistic interpretations offered below should be understood as analytical readings of the semantic domains represented by the selected lexical items. They are not intended to suggest that every individual loanword possesses a single, fixed cultural meaning.

Arabic-Derived Vocabulary in Malay: Semantic and Civilizational Analysis

Social Semantic Field

One representative example is the Malay word *tahniah*, related to the Arabic *taḥni'ah* (تهنئة), meaning congratulations. The continued use of *tahniah* in Malay illustrates how an Arabic lexical item associated with a social practice has become fully integrated into everyday interpersonal communication.

The word is used in contexts such as academic achievement, professional success, marriage, the acquisition of a house or vehicle, and other happy occasions. Its significance therefore extends beyond etymology. It represents the incorporation of a communicative practice that expresses goodwill and shares another person's happiness into ordinary Malay social interaction.

From a humanistic perspective, this example demonstrates how lexical borrowing can accompany the transmission of social values. Adopting a word does not necessarily reproduce every aspect of its source-language usage; instead, the borrowed form can become localised while retaining a semantic association with congratulation, goodwill, and social solidarity.

Religious Semantic Field

The religious field contains some of the most recognisable Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay. The source material identifies *korban*, derived from Arabic *qurbān* (قربان), as one example. In Malay, *korban* is strongly associated with the sacrificial rite performed during Eid al-Adhā. Related expressions include *ibadah korban* and *haiwan korban*.

Other widely used terms identified in the study include *ṣalāh*, *masjid*, *rak'ah*, and *ḥajj*. These terms are closely connected to central Islamic rituals and institutions and therefore possess a high degree of semantic stability in Malay Muslim usage. The persistence of this religious vocabulary is particularly significant because it demonstrates how language can preserve religious concepts across generations. Even when speakers do not use Arabic as a general language of communication, Arabic terms remain active in ritual instruction, sermons, religious education, family discourse, and communal life. In this sense, the vocabulary constitutes a linguistic record of religious continuity.

Administrative and Military Semantic Field

The study also identifies Arabic-derived vocabulary associated with administration and military organisation. One example is *hasil*, which the source treats as an adapted form associated with Arabic *taḥṣīl* (تحصيل), particularly in the sense of collection or revenue. Another example is *askar*, derived from Arabic *ʿaskar* (عسكر), referring to soldiers or military personnel.

These examples are important because they broaden the analysis beyond explicitly religious terminology. Arabic influence in Malay was not confined to ritual vocabulary. It also intersected with social organisation, administration, political institutions, and military terminology. Such lexical items can therefore be investigated as evidence of the institutional dimensions of Islamic history in the region.

At the same time, etymological relationships between Malay and Arabic words should ideally be verified through historical dictionaries and comparative lexical evidence. The examples in this article are presented according to the source study and are intended as representative cases rather than definitive etymological judgments.

Scientific and Educational Semantic Field

The scientific and educational field provides another important layer of Arabic-derived vocabulary. The study identifies *kuliah* as an adapted form of Arabic *kullīyyah* (كلية), which refers in Arabic to a faculty or college. In contrast, Malay *kuliah* commonly refers to a lecture or university class. This example illustrates semantic adaptation: a borrowed word can develop a usage that is narrower or different from the meaning most prominent in the source language.

The Malay word *makmal* is also identified as being derived from Arabic *ma'mal* (معمل), meaning a laboratory or workshop. The term is now part of ordinary Malay educational and scientific vocabulary. Likewise, *ulama*, from Arabic '*ulamā*' (علماء), remains widely used for religious scholars.

These examples reveal the importance of education and knowledge transmission in the history of Arabic-Malay contact. Arabic-derived vocabulary has not been confined to devotional practice; it also survives in the institutional language of higher education and scholarly activity.

Table 1

Representative Arabic-Derived Lexical Items in Malay

Malay form	Arabic source/form	Semantic field	Current Malay usage	Analytical significance
tahniah	taḥni'ah (تهنئة)	Social	Congratulations; expression of goodwill	Social solidarity and interpersonal ethics
korban	qurbān (قربان)	Religious	Sacrificial rite / sacrificial animal	Persistence of Islamic ritual vocabulary
ibadah	'ibādah (عبادة)	Religious	Worship / religious devotion	Religious conceptual continuity
masjid	masjid (مسجد)	Religious	Mosque	Institutional continuity
kuliah	kulliyyah (كلية)	Scientific/Educational	Lecture/university class	Semantic adaptation in education
makmal	ma'mal (معمل)	Scientific	Laboratory	Arabic influence in scientific terminology
ulama	'ulamā' (علماء)	Scientific/Religious	Religious scholars	Status of scholarship and knowledge
hasil	taḥṣīl (تحصيل), as treated in the source	Administrative	Revenue/proceeds	Administrative vocabulary
askar	'askar (عسكر)	Administrative/Military	Soldiers / military personnel	Organisational and military vocabulary

Discussion

Lexical Borrowing as a Record of Civilization Contact

The selected vocabulary demonstrates that the Arabic influence on Malay cannot be reduced to a list of isolated loanwords. The semantic distribution of the examples points to several interconnected domains of social life. Religious vocabulary reflects the institutionalisation of Islam; social vocabulary reflects interpersonal practices; educational vocabulary reflects the transmission of knowledge; and administrative and military vocabulary reflects forms of social organisation.

Lexical borrowing is therefore a useful historical source. When a borrowed word becomes established across generations, it can preserve evidence of sustained contact between communities. In the Malay context, Arabic-derived words trace contact that continued even after Arabic ceased to function as a broad vernacular language.

This perspective also explains why religious words tend to be especially durable. Ritual terms are repeated regularly in worship and religious instruction. Their frequency of use creates a mechanism of intergenerational transmission that can preserve vocabulary for centuries.

Humanistic Dimensions of Arabic-Malay Lexical Contact

The humanistic significance of Arabic-derived vocabulary becomes clearer when we interpret words in their social contexts. *Tahniah*, for example, belongs to the domain of interpersonal recognition and goodwill. Religious terms such as *ibadah* and *korban* relate to practices involving devotion, sacrifice, community, and moral responsibility. *Ulama* is associated with respect for learning and religious scholarship.

Such vocabulary illustrates a broader process in which linguistic borrowing and cultural adaptation occur simultaneously. A borrowed word becomes meaningful not merely because it has entered a dictionary, but because the concept represented by the word has acquired a place within the receiving society. Language consequently functions as both a record and an instrument of cultural change.

The use of Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay should therefore be understood as evidence of cultural interaction rather than linguistic dependency. Malay speakers have adapted Arabic forms to Malay phonology, morphology, orthography, and usage patterns. The resulting vocabulary belongs to Malay usage, even as its historical origins remain recognisable.

Arabic and the Preservation of Islamic Identity

The source study strongly associates Arabic with Islamic identity because Arabic remains the language of the Qur'an and a major language of the Prophetic and scholarly heritage. In the Malay context, religious education and ritual practice have reinforced this association. The survival of Arabic-derived vocabulary can consequently be viewed as one component of a broader process of identity preservation. However, this should not be interpreted as Malay identity being reducible to Arabic influence. Rather, Malay demonstrates how an indigenous linguistic system can absorb, transform, and naturalise vocabulary from another language while maintaining its own grammatical and communicative identity. This distinction is important for a balanced understanding of language contact. The historical relationship

between Arabic and Malay is better described as sustained interaction, adaptation, and integration than as one language replacing another.

Research Implications and Future Directions

The present study provides a foundation for more systematic research into Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay. First, future studies could construct a comprehensive corpus of Arabic loanwords by combining modern Malay dictionaries with historical Malay-Arabic dictionaries and early manuscripts. Such a corpus would make it possible to distinguish words directly borrowed from Arabic from those that may have entered Malay through intermediary languages.

Second, future research should examine chronological layers of borrowing. Arabic influence did not necessarily occur at one historical moment. Religious vocabulary, administrative terminology, educational terms, and later modern lexical items may reflect different periods and channels of contact. Third, phonological and morphological adaptation deserves systematic analysis. The transformation of Arabic sounds and word forms within Malay can reveal how Malay speakers accommodated foreign vocabulary to the phonological and morphological structure of their language.

Fourth, semantic change should be examined carefully. Words such as *kuliah* demonstrate that a borrowed lexical form may develop a specialised meaning in the receiving language. A comparative semantic study could therefore identify narrowing, broadening, metaphorical extension, and functional specialisation.

Finally, future research could compare Arabic-derived vocabulary in Malay with Arabic-derived vocabulary in Indonesian, Javanese, Acehnese, Bruneian Malay, and other regional languages. Such comparison would help determine which lexical items are widely shared across the archipelago and which are associated with particular historical communities.

Limitations of the Study

The study is primarily descriptive and interpretive and is based on a selected set of lexical examples. It does not provide a quantitative frequency analysis of Arabic-derived words in contemporary Malay, nor does it establish a complete historical chronology for each lexical item. In addition, the civilizational interpretations rely on semantic fields and historical context rather than large-scale sociolinguistic interviews. These limitations do not diminish the study's value as an exploratory contribution. Instead, they indicate the need for subsequent corpus-based and historical-comparative research. In particular, etymological claims should be tested against historical dictionaries, manuscript evidence, and intermediary-language data wherever relevant.

Conclusion

This study has examined the presence of Arabic-derived vocabulary in the Malay language and interpreted selected examples in relation to the civilizational and humanistic impact of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. The evidence shows that Arabic lexical influence appears across several semantic domains, including social interaction, religious practice, administration, military organisation, education, and scholarship.

The persistence of these words is historically significant. Although Arabic did not replace Malay as the region's principal vernacular, Arabic-derived vocabulary became integrated into Malay and was transmitted through religious institutions, education, social practice, and cultural memory. Words such as *tahniah*, *korban*, *ibadah*, *masjid*, *kuliah*, *makmal*, *ulama*, *hasil*, and *askar* illustrate different dimensions of this process.

The study therefore concludes that Arabic lexical influence should be understood as part of a wider history of cultural and intellectual contact. The continued presence of Arabic-derived vocabulary provides linguistic evidence of the long-term interaction between Islamic civilisation and Malay society. At the same time, the adaptation of these words demonstrates Malay's creative capacity to incorporate foreign lexical material into its own linguistic system.

Future research should move beyond illustrative examples toward a systematic historical corpus of Arabic-derived vocabulary in the Malay world. Such work would enable scholars to map the chronology, channels, phonological adaptation, semantic development, and geographical distribution of Arabic lexical influence more precisely. It would also provide a stronger empirical basis for understanding how language participates in the preservation, transformation, and transmission of civilizational memory.

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