On the Notion of Isolating Language David Gil

What is an isolating language? Prima facie, the answer is obvious: an isolating language is one with little or no morphology, that is to say, one in which words typically consist of a single morpheme, without any further inflectional or derivational material. Upon closer examination, however, this definition turns out to be problematical. This is because the definition of isolating language is based on the notion of *word*, which is actually surprisingly difficult to define in a precise and objective manner.

What, then, is a word? We tend to think of a word as the stuff between two spaces, but this appeals to orthographic conventions that are arbitrary and subject to variation, as illustrated in the following example from a Facebook posting in Riau Indonesian:

(1) Makan siang nya [...] bobo siangnya eat midday ASSOC sleep midday:ASSOC 'midday meal [...] midday nap'

In the above example, the writer cannot decide whether to spell the associative marker *nya* as a separate word or as part of the word preceding it, and so fluctuates inconsistently between the two alternatives. Is Riau Indonesian isolating, then? Similar inconsistencies are also evident in the analyses of different linguists, as exemplified in the exact same phrase as represented in two different descriptions of Papuan Malay:

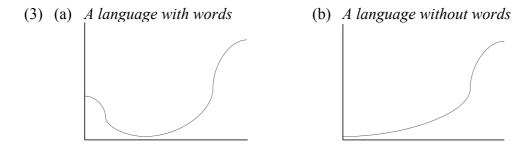
- (2) (a) sa pu bapa 1SG POSS father 'my father' (Kluge 2014:377)
- (b) sa=pu=bapa 1sG=POSS=father 'my father' (Donohue and Sawaki 2007:260)

While the former source treats the phrase as consisting of three different words, the latter considers the phrase to constitute a single word containing a stem preceded by two proclitics. Thus, while Kluge's description suggests that Papuan Malay may be isolating, Donohue and Sawaki's analysis implies that it is probably not.

In light of issues such as the above, Haspelmath (2011) argues that there is no valid cross-linguistic notion of word. Referring to the distinction between language-specific descriptive categories and cross-linguistic comparative concepts, Haspelmath acknowledges the possibility that individual languages may have language-specific categories of word, but denies that such language-specific categories can be meaningfully compared across languages in terms of a viable comparative concept of word. Haspelmath's position is consistent with several theories of grammar that make no reference to the notion of word, such as Chomsky's (1965) "Aspects" model, or Distributive Morphology as per Embick (2015), but is inconsistent with other approaches that posit a clear distinction between morphology and syntax, such as Anderson (1982), or, for that matter, traditional grammar. And of course, a corollary of Haspelmath's position is that there is no meaningful notion of isolating language.

This paper argues that, pace Haspelmath (2011), it is indeed possible to define a comparative concept of word. The first part of this paper proposes such a definition, and on its basis, provides a cross-linguistically viable characterization of the notion of isolating language. The second part of this paper applies the definition to a detailed analysis of wordhood in Riau Indonesian, showing how it exemplifies the isolating language type.

The definition of word is based on the distribution of morphemes associated with bonds of variable strengths. The two idealized graphs below plot the frequencies (on the vertical axis) of morphemes of varying bond strengths (on the horizontal axis).



Many languages exhibit a *bimodal* distribution of the kind shown in (3a), in which the two peaks represent the relatively greater frequencies of clearly bound and clearly unbound morphemes, with the trough between the two peaks constituting the cut-off point between morphology and syntax, and providing for a cross-linguistically viable comparative category of word. Some languages, however, exhibit a *unimodal* distribution of the kind shown in (3b): such languages have few bound morphemes, and therefore do not provide clear instantiations of the comparative category of word — instead, they may be said to be isolating.

A detailed investigation of Riau Indonesian shows the distribution to follow the pattern in (3b), with relatively few bound morphemes, and relatively few grammatical phenomena providing evidence for a distinction between variable bond strengths. A summary of the available evidence for word structure categories of various kinds in Riau Indonesian is presented in the following table:

	CORE FOOT	Inner Word	INNER WORD	OUTER WORD
		(terminal)	(non-terminal)	
focus intonation	X			
no reduction	X			
epenthesis	X			
loanword expansion	X			
obligatory si-	X			
<i>N</i> - realized as <i>nge</i> -	X			
Warasa ludling	X			X
final k realized as ?		X		
Sabaha ludling		X		
Bahasisa ludling		X		
Pantun rhythm		X		
reduplication			X	
spelling		X	X	X

As suggested above, there is relatively little hard-core grammatical evidence for word-internal structure; much of the evidence is paralinguistic, involving ludlings, poetic meter, and orthography. The strongest evidence is for a core disyllabic foot which is typically monomorphemic. Three additional larger levels of structure, which might plausibly be associated with the notion of wordhood, are relatively more weakly supported. Thus, Riau Indonesian is shown to be a language without a prominent instantiation of the comparative concept of word; it is thus a fine exemplar of the isolating language type.

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