

Adalah* vs *merupakan

This treatise offers a different and fresh perspective on the functional differences between *adalah* and *merupakan*, which hitherto is still out with the jury. *Adalah* and *merupakan* may or may not be interchangeable. Native speakers instinctively know how to appropriately use these, but there lacks comprehensive explanations in current Indonesian language learning literature that categorises their usage differences. Many references and textbooks suggest that *merupakan* is a translation of the English verb ‘to be’ and that it is more literarily stylistic. But this, as we shall see, is somewhat true but also a simplified interpretation.

Important to our understanding of the *adalah* and *merupakan* differences, is keeping in mind that *adalah* is a copula. It is a grammatical word that has no inherent semantic meaning other than performing the grammatical function of joining (or equating ‘=’) two noun phrases (NP) in a nominative (subject focused) clause:

Jakarta adalah Ibu Kota Indonesia
NP1 = NP2

Whereas *merupakan* is a proper verb, a *me-x-kan* inflection of the base word *rupa* (from the Sanskrit ***rupa*** meaning ‘form’), which in Indonesian can mean ‘form’, ‘shape’ or ‘fact’. This gives hint of the descriptive and semantic function of *merupakan*.

In this treatise, we will first look at syntactical and of contextual examples of *adalah* and *merupakan*, and how they compare in usage. And secondly, we will look at examples of lexical and semantic derivatives of *merupakan*'s base word *rupa*, to gain a better grasp of its usage.

Let's compare when *adalah* and *merupakan* are interchangeable or not, and then we'll try to extrapolate some guiding premises.

Adalah and *merupakan* are interchangeable in a sentence such as,

Majapahit adalah sebuah kerajaan kuno yang mempersatukan Nusantara. ✓

Majapahit merupakan sebuah kerajaan kuno yang mempersatukan Nusantara. ✓

Majapahit was an ancient kingdom that united Nusantara.

On the other hand, if we take out the relative clause *yang mempersatukan Nusantara*, and only state the main nominative clause, then *merupakan* does not sit as well:

Majapahit adalah sebuah kerajaan kuno. ✓

Majapahit merupakan sebuah kerajaan kuno. ✗

Here we can see that *merupakan* sets the tone for more description to come in a relative clause (or otherwise). From this observation we can surmise two things:

Extrapolation #1: ***Merupakan*** works **better** when the **main clause** is **followed** by a **relative clause**.

Extrapolation #2: ***Merupakan*** does not function as a mere copula.

This is consistent with the semantic properties of *merupakan*'s base word *rupa* ('form', 'fact'), and that it is a proper verb (not a copula) possessing the semantic properties of its base word and works as an antecedent eliciting more descriptive information - from a relative clause - about the form, fact, state or condition of the subject in question.

To put it in a different way, *merupakan* performs a quasi function of a copula in a nominative sentence only when the main clause is followed by a relative clause offering more description.

This also explains why *merupakan* is stylistically associated with literature, where authors would utilise it in descriptive complex sentences.

Let's look at some other inflections of *rupa* and their usages.

*Gunung itu **rupanya** seperti bebek raksasa.*

That mountain is **shaped** like a giant duck.

Oh **rupanya** dia masih di Tokyo.

Oh so (as a matter of **fact**) he/she is still in Tokyo.

Oh **rupanya** begitu

Oh I see, so **that's** how it **is**.

Rupawan

good **looking**

*Pak Jokowi memberi kami bantuan yang **berupa** dana darurat.*

Pak Jokowi gave us assistance in the **form** of emergency funds.

In all of the sentences above, the different inflections of *rupa* relate to the form, state, situation or shape of something/someone. This is useful to keep in mind when we use *merupakan* in a sentence.

Conclusion

Adalah is a copula while *merupakan* is a proper verb and its use elicits a relative clause (*yang...*).

Let's just remember this simple formula,

My magic grammar rule:

merupakan is friends with ***yang***!

NP1 ***merupakan*** NP2 ***yang***...

Author's advice:

1. *Merupakan* does not sound natural in sentences with mundane/everyday context such as,

Ini merupakan sepatu baru yang saya beli kemarin. ✗

These are the new shoes that I bought yesterday.

Ini adalah sepatu baru yang saya beli kemarin. ✓

2. *Merupakan* works well in sentences of literature describing: events, history, geography, science, academia, etc, such as,

Big bang merupakan suatu ledakan dahsyat yang menciptakan alam semesta. ✓

The big bang was a mighty explosion that created the universe.

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