

THE COMPLEXITY OF JAVANESE LANGUAGE: AN OVERVIEW FOR WESTERN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract

Pemahaman lintas budaya pengajaran bahasa asing memiliki peran yang sangat penting. Budaya patriarkri yang melekat pada Bahasa Jawa telah menjadikannya sebagai salah satu unsur budaya Indonesia yang memiliki kompleksitas tinggi. Unsur budaya yang tidak dipahami secara komprehensif seringkali mengakibatkan kesalah pahaman dalam proses pembelajaran lintas bahasa dan budaya. Artikel ini akan membahas kompleksitas bahasa jawa ditinjau dari sisi sosiolinguistik dan nilai-nilai budaya yang melekat padanya dengan harapan memiliki sumbangsih pemikiran terutama bagi pengajar asing yang akan bersinergi dengan para pemelajar yang berlatar belakang Bahasa Jawa.

Kata Kunci: complexity, javanese language, language teachers

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross cultural communication between speakers from dissimilar communities involve not only the language, but also the culture. Language learners and teachers should recognize that communication between two languages involves in two the cultures from those languages performing: their own and the target languages (Kramsch 1993 cited in Crozet & Liddicoat 1999:113). However, most people, including language teachers in Java today, still have a lack understanding of the true situation of the true situation of language in the real world. As a result, language teachers often fail to stimulate their students due to some miscommunication during the class sessions. This article will examine the complexity of the Javanese language in order to get a basic understanding and to identify the uniqueness of this language and how those factors affect the student's performance to learn. Based on my observation, it seems that the complexity of the Javanese language and its culture has the potential to create constrains and misunderstanding in western culture study environment.

A. The History of The Javanese Language

To begin with, statistics has shown that the Javanese language has 60 million speakers and it is the most widely used language in Indonesia after Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian Language). The users of this language are not only found on the island of Java, such as Kalimantan and Sumatra. The Javanese can be found also in Suriname on the North Coast of South America which has 43,000 of speakers (Uhlenbleck, 1964:42). According to Crawford, the percentage of Sanskrit in modern written Javanese is about eleven percent. For example, the world *estri*

(wife), *desa* (village), *sadasa* (ten), *keris* (knife), *serat* (writing), are adopted from Sanskrit.

From a speech community aspect, Koentjoroningrat categorized Javanese into the groups. Those are *Central Javanese Solo-Yogya*, which is famous as standard Javanese; *Pesisir Javanese of the town of the north coast* which is similar but has been influenced by Sundanes, and *Javanese of the coastal area of East Java* which has been influenced by Madurese. Eventhough there are some different vocabulary and accents, people in Java have a good understanding of their dialects and can easily recognize from which part of Java others have come (Errington, 1982:90).

People who use Javanese in Indonesia usually are bi-linguals or multi-linguals. This is due to their using of *Bahasa Indonesia* in their daily lives as well as the Javanese. Interestingly, in Indonesia, and mainly in Java, people still use Javanese in most domains; for example, people sue Javanese in their family, friendship, religion, even in education and administration. This phenomenon can be seen in rural Java areas. However, in urban areas, *Bahasa Indonesia* has become the domain language in education, government and civil administration.

B. Javanese Speech Levels and Politeness

Regarding the Javanese language, Smith Hafiner (1989:258) argues that the size and distribution of the Javanese community is the basic reason for this language continuing to exist. Errington (1982:93) believes that many anthropologist and linguist have been interested in studying Javanese owing to the elaborate system of the Javanese speech levels. Koentjoroningrat (1985:18) classified the Javanese speech levels into three categories: they are *Ngoko* (familiar), *madyo* (semi-formal), and *Kromo* (formal). These categories

show a politeness phenomenon in the Javanese language. The politeness in Javanese can be principally seen by the selection of vocabulary. This vocabulary indicates the degree of formality and social status between the speaker and addressee.

The first level that Koentjaraningrat mentions is *Ngoko*. *Ngoko* is the basic language of the Javanese and it is commonly used for children and low class people. It is spoken by superiors to inferiors. Except for fables, riddles and folklore, it is not the written language. *Ngoko* also refers to impolite speech forms and does not express any respect. The second Javanese speech level is *Kromo*. *Kromo* is a polite speech form of Javanese and it is used

As the highest speech level to unfamiliar people, or to people of higher social status. *Kromo* used in addressing someone towards whom the speaker must be distant and formal. The last level that Koentjaraningrat has mentioned is *Madyo*. *Madyo* indicates the intermediate polite level (the middle or middle-point) of the Javanese language. *Madyo* is a mixture of *Kromo* and *Ngoko*. It serves as an introductory dialect which used by certain classes of people, such as merchants and low officials (Leob, 1994: 115).

Another problem is for the subject. The Javanese language does not have a gender word as in English. For example, he or she, *Ngoko* Javanese only use *kowe*. *Kowe* here can be 'he' or 'she'. This also similar to *Madyo* and *Kromo* which use *sampean* and *panjenengan*.

However, vocabulary and speech pattern are not the only matters of politeness. In relation to the politeness in Javanese language, Poedjosoedarmo (1968: 57) says that politeness within the Javanese culture involves using gestures and intonation as well as through speech. In gestures, Javanese speakers have to show some complicated etiquette in term of walk, dress, laughing, pointing, sitting, and standing. This etiquette has a significant correlation with the Javanese language. This is the reason for a polite person not only being seen from their language (Javanese speech level), but also from their attitude and behavioral patterns, which is shown by their gestures.

In term of intonation, Poedjosoedarmo also states that Javanese has two more markedly different speaking tones occur: *alus* (polite), and *kasar* (crude). The *alus* speaking tone is slower, softer, and tender; and it involves a more monotonous intonation. The *kasar* speaking tone is quite the opposite: it is loud, rough, and rapid, and it involves greater extremes of intonation. The *alus* also has an implicit meaning and avoids the explicit. For example, to say one does not agree, Javanese often use words like *sakarepmu* (it's up to you). This sometimes makes people from outside Java find difficult to catch the meaning (Poedjosoedarmo 1968: 59).

C. Determining Aspects in Using Javanese

In determining the speech level, as already stated, the choice of speech level is determined by the degree of formality in the relationship between the speaker and the addressee and the social status of the addressee. In terms of the degree of formality in the relationship, if one speaks to someone whom one considers distant, the very formal speech level, *Kromo*, will be used; when one speaks to someone whom one considers close, the informal speech level, *Ngoko*, will be used; and if the addressee is of intermediate distance *Madyo* will be used.

Similarly, regarding the social status of the addressee, one addresses a *priyayi* (member of Javanese elite classes) with *Kromo*, regardless of the main speech level being used. One does not use *Kromo* in addressing *wong cilik* (poor people). A master speaks in *Ngoko* to his servant, and a servant speaks in *Kromo* to his master in most circumstances. If, however, the servant is very much older than the master, the master may possibly use *Madyo* in addressing him. Such a practice implies that the master is not an arrogant person, and further that he is very conscientious about being polite (Poedjosoedarmo 1968: 75) An employee is expected to speak in *Kromo* to his employer. The employer normally addresses high-ranking employees in *Kromo*, low-ranking employees in *Madyo*, and sometimes unskilled labourers, especially if they are very young, in *Ngoko* (Poedjosoedarmo 1968: 74). It is obvious therefore that the Javanese language and the social-status structures as a part of its culture are mutually reinforcing, as 'vocabulary is a very sensitive index of a culture of a people' (Sapir 1949 cited in Wierzbicka, 1997: 1).

D. Philosophy Behind The Javanese Language

Another interesting aspect about the Javanese culture is the philosophy standing behind the language reflected in its lexicon. It is acknowledged by Wierzbicka (1997: 1) that there is a link between the life of the society and the lexicon of the language that is spoken. Javanese has a strong patriarchal culture which can be seen from its lexis, as an example, Javanese people call women as '*kanca wingking*' which means a partner who has to follow her husband obediently; a woman has to be a good looking, able to cook what her husband would like, and have children for her husband (Kuntjara, n.d: 78). As a saying goes *swarga minut neraka katut* (a woman has to follow her husband either in heaven or in hell). A good woman is she who stays at home without any complaint. This is different from men as '*pencari nafkah*' (breadwinners) who have authority and power in their households (Kuntjara, n.d:78). People in Java also still sometimes call women '*wanita*', which mean '*wani ditata*' (able to be dominated by men).

Furthermore, the social pattern reflects that traditional Javanese status hierarchies put the woman's status in rank below that of her husband

within the family. The gender-biased perspectives about women also affect how women express their ideas. In Javanese culture, woman should not speak loudly to others. Even their ideas are not considered as brilliant as men's, hence the society still prefers to have men to be leaders than women although women may have higher capability. However, gender plays a very minor role in the selection of a speech level. Close friends of the same sex tend to use *Ngoko*. Social customs in Java call for unmarried people of the opposite sex to preserve a more distant relationship than is reflected by that level, and they tend to use *Kromo* to each other (Poedjosoedarmo, 68: 76). This point of view has marked a lot on the manner in which Javanese women should behave related to their language.

Age as such is not a very important factor in determining the choice of speech level. It will only be considered after the factors already mentioned have been weighed. Generally speaking, if two people are on familiar terms and no hierarchical relationship between them dictates otherwise, they will use *Ngoko* to each other regardless of their respective ages. On the contrary, a great difference in age may tend to make a relationship more distant. Generally, though, anyone who uses speech levels to show respect to age indicates that he is very polite, since not everyone will do this.

One exception to this generality is that, in speaking to an elderly stranger, a child is expected to use *Madyo* or *Kromo*, at least as well as he/she is able to do so. In rural areas, many adults will address a small child who is a complete stranger in *Ngoko*, if he/she is obviously of *wong cilik* (low class social level) family, even though they would address his/her parents in *Madyo* or *Kromo*. There are several reasons for this. First, it is a way of 'making friends with the child so that he/she will answer questions, otherwise he/she might be shy and reluctant to speak. Second, *Ngoko* is the speech which the child certainly knows well since he is addressed in it by his family and friends, whereas he may not yet have mastered *Madyo* or *Kromo*. Also, the adult may feel that he himself is deserving of some respect and may wish to indicate this by using *Ngoko* to the child. Though, this last factor is usually quite a minor consideration. The child of *priyayi* parents, however, will always be addressed in *Kromo* by a stranger, regardless of the speaker's age or social class (Poedjosoedarmo, 68: 75).

3. METHOD

This study is conducted by using study case for 3 samples of students and lectures who are involved in learning environment of overseas university.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Javanese International Students in Western Academic Environment

These language-cultural phenomena have had an influence on the way of the people's behavior relates to a certain culture in education. Franson and Halliday (2009: 40) concede that much of prevailing second language education practices remains dominated by an essentialist view of culture. As an example, one of the characteristics of Asian languages, such as Indonesian and Javanese, is considered as turning in a widening gyre which never looks the subject directly. This culture often effects to the Javanese students' writing and speaking style or the way in which they express their opinions which do not go directly towards to the topic (Croft, 1980: 89).

In addition, there is a survey finding that 'Asian students adopt passive style in learning, avoid debate or criticism of the material raised in the class' (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991:80 cited by Chalmers & Volet, 1997: 90). However, attributing to students quietness in the classroom to passivity is misleading. Being quiet does not necessarily mean being mentally passive. This is the result of the students' beliefs of what is culturally appropriate when interacting with people of different status and their concerns about use of language. In relation to the Javanese culture, children should be obedient, speak politely, and not criticize the teacher or older people (Smith-Hefner, 1988:544).

Moreover, based on my observation, there are some International Javanese students who will finally get involved in the discussion after having had an explanation about the different styles and learning in relation to teaching of the western culture. Actually they like to be critical but their culture has already taught them not to do so.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

As a conclusion, learning about the cultural depiction in a foreign language should lead to intercultural understanding, tolerance and harmony between cross-cultural people (Crozet & Liddicoat 1999: 122). This paper has shown that the Javanese language is very complicated owing to its speech level system. People in Java believe that to speak appropriately, a person has to choose the right vocabulary, using specific gestures, and presenting specific intonation. These language factors contribute a lot to their cultural beliefs, and hence to Javanese students' behaviors which can lead to misunderstandings from a western culture perspective. Being obedient is one of the important values which is learnt by the Javanese children. Without understanding these issues, people and especially western teachers who concern themselves with Javanese students will find difficulties. This, has said previously is due to politeness aspects and implicit expression of their language. As a consequence, miscommunication and misinterpretation between the speakers and addressee will probably happen.

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