

The Misapplication of Principal Levels of Javanese *ngoko* and *Krama*: A Problem to Javanese Youngsters

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Abstract: This brief study aims to describe the misapplication of the two principal levels of Javanese language that frequently occurs in everyday life. The very use of the Javanese language, and its accompanying manners, clearly expresses hierarchical order. It is not possible to speak Javanese without reference to the position of the person spoken to in relation to the position of the speaker. In its many complicated and formal gradations, such as the first sub-level: *ngoko-andhap*, *ngokolugu* (low *ngoko*), *antya-basa* (middle *ngoko*), the second sub-level: *madyangoko*, *madyantara*, *madya krama*, and the third sub-level: *wredha-krama* (old *krama*), *kramantara* (middle *krama*), *basa-madya* (middle language), *mudha krama* (young *krama*), and in the Court of Yogyakarta there is a specific level called *kedhatonanor basabagongan* the choice of words reflects position, intimacy or formality, age, social distance and rank, together with the nuances of relative expectations, obligations, and rights. Nevertheless, this brief study discusses only two main levels of Javanese, namely *ngoko* (low level) and *krama* (high level).

Keywords: *Ngoko* (low level) and *Krama* (high level).

1. INTRODUCTION

Essentially, there are two principal speech levels (*undha-usuk*) in Javanese language, i.e. *ngoko* (low level) and *krama* (high level) (Moedjanto, 1993) (Soedarsono, 1990). To say it more clearly, one speaks in *ngoko* to a person who is younger than himself (the speaker), or to a person whose social status is considered lower than that of himself, or to a person whose social status is the same as that of himself whom he knows well. *Krama* is contrary to *ngoko* in that it is the refined form of *ngoko*, so in bahasa Indonesia it is regarded as *halus*, and one speaks in *krama* to a person who is older than the speaker, or to a person whom the speaker does not know well.

As a matter of fact, because of quite striking enthusiasm for and widespread use of bahasa Indonesia and also of foreign languages among youngsters in almost every lower and medium level of educational institutions, particularly in East and Central Java nowadays, Javanese younger generation, in particular, often flout speech appropriacy used in Javanese language. Such a situation may also take place in their own family surroundings in which the use of Javanese language is of low priority. Many of the Javanese youngsters, because of the recent modernity in life such as shown by the excessive use of various applications of games in social media, for instance, become rarely exposed to use Javanese language properly. In addition, the use of appropriate levels in Javanese language, involving the precise degrees of respect and the norm of good manners, is often flouted commonly when they go out and meet people with various levels and interests in society. Certainly, inappropriateness in using Javanese may bring about discontentment and may be frowned upon especially among older Javanese *priyayi* (the upper and official class) who might be of the opinion that the youngsters are lacking in proper mannerism, and are regarded as culturally uncivilized.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Geertz, H (1961) is of the opinion that “Basa Jawa” in the *priyayi* circle has two major levels of language, respect (“*krama*”) and familiarity (“*ngoko*”) each has a variant: “*kramainggil*” (high respect) and “*ngokomadya*” (respectful familiarity). A clear example of Javanese speech levels includes one more level spoken by peasants (lower class) and how Javanese kin terms in relation to linguistic etiquette system is used.

Geertz, C (1964) in *The Religion of Java* says that “in Javanese it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and

familiarity.” With a new person he meets, a Javanese has to think what degree of respect he must use to address him. In his family, he must have the ability of language shift to converse with older or younger kins or those of his equal; either expressing respect or familiarity, and to what degree.

Although the language does not change structurally with different speech levels, lexically it does: in “several words may denote the same normal linguistic meaning but differ in status connotation they convey” (Geertz, C., 1964); and, this often misleads their choice of appropriate words. In both speech of “familiarity” and “respect”, Javanese youngsters might make mistakes of choosing wrong word-level or wrong level at all.

3. RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following are some examples of common mistakes when they use the respect level: “Excuse me, I’m going home, Uncle,” they might say:

- a. “*Nuwunsewu, Pak Lik, kulobadhekondur.*” 1) or
- b. “*Nuwunsewu, Pak Lik, kuloajengwangsul.*” 1)

It is certainly incorrect to use the word “*kondur*” as stated in the first expression (a), which is the highest level of “*bali*” or “*mulih*” in that it can be used only by the speaker who has a social status higher than that of the speaker, who, in this example, is “*Pak Lik* (uncle).” The speaker in this example is a cousin (“*keponakan*”), and so he has to consider himself lower in social status than that of his uncle. For that reason, he has to say: “*Nuwunsewu, Pak Lik, kulobadhewangsul,*” instead of saying as that expressed in (a). The mistake of the sentence (b) is the word “*ajeng*” of which is the higher level of “*arep*” (going to) but of the lower class speech level; therefore, it is considered inappropriate because the listener is that of a “*priyayi*” circle. Whereas the choice of word “*ajeng*” (going to) which turns out to be that of a higher level of “*arep*” is of a lower class speech level; thereby, it is regarded as showing inappropriateness in that the listener is of a “*priyayi*” circle. The speaker, therefore, has to use “*badhe.*” The use of “*krama*” level is of course a representation of another example of a lower class speech: “What time will you be going, Father?” which might be expressed by a misunderstood Javanese youngster: “*Panjenenganajengkesahpukulpinten, Pak?*” 2) to his father. This expression is appropriate to a lower level elderly listener whom he does not know well, but certainly, it may cause his father upset. Such an expression should have been expressed with a high degree of respect such as this: “*Panjenenganbadhetedhakpukulpinten, Pak?*” 2)

The mistake with speech of familiarity usually happens when the youngsters, consciously or unconsciously, do not “elevate” the words they use referring to third person superior. For example, “Has father gone to the office, brother?” An elder brother talking to his younger brother might say “*Bapak wis lungomenyangkantor, Dik?*” 3) This mistake occurs because he uses the word “*lungo*” instead of “*tindak*”. Another mistake is that of an overgeneralization of a familiar level when the speaker and the listener talk about themselves: “I am going to Adi’s house. Where are you going?”—“*AkuareplungomenyangomaheAdi. Koweareplungomenyang endi?*” 4) in this situation the speaker could use all “*ngoko*” words.

On the basis of the examples above, it seems that youngsters actually know that they have to show respect to their seniors or those whose social status is their superior: not only by their manner but also by their language. In their mind, being polite means using higher word levels which turns out to be wrong. At the same time, they think that being familiar is completely “*ngoko*” regardless of whom they are talking to. In other words, they seem to misunderstand the concept of respect and how to apply respect using linguistic items.

The concept of respect in Javanese is to give respect to the listener and the third person they are talking about, and the speaker must be low-profile, humble (“*andhap asor*”), although they do not really mean it—they pretend to be one (“*ethok-ethok*”). For instance: an aunt (“*BuDhe*”) talks to her nephew: “*BuDhearepdhaharsaiki, Le.*” 5) She will not say “*Bu Dhebadhedhaharsameniko, Le*” (of which is the highest level she deserves). The use of the verb “*dhahar*” is enough to indicate who she is towards her listener; the time-phrase “*arep*” and “*saiki*” is to indicate familiarity because she talks to her nephew or “*andhap asor*” if she talksto people of lower class. The same word “*dhahar*” with the same status connotation is also used when her nephew is talking about her to her brother or sister.

However, such mistakes may cause repugnance among traditional older “*priyayi*.” They would consider such sentences wrong and coarse, showing that the speakers are “*durung Jawa*” (are not yet Javanese). Because “being a Javanese is to be a cultured person. . . . a person who knows orders, speaks appropriate words. . . .” (Mulders, 1978), a Javanese must not simply learn Javanese language to communicate, but also to understand the philosophy behind it: to give respect and to be “*andhap asor*.”

The dislike of these older “*priyayi*” generation is based on the traditional opinion that Javanese must be able to distinguish the “*alus*” (pure, refined, civilized) from “*kasar*” (impolite, rough, uncivilized). This world view of “*alus*” and “*kasar*” covers all aspects in the life of Javanese. Therefore, their view of seeing the world also determines their language: “*basaalus*” (refined/high language) for the “*alus*” people, the *priyayi*, and the “*basakasar*” (rough/low language) for the “*kasar*” lower people: “the proper form for the proper rank. . . .” (Geertz, C, 1964) Therefore, the youngster’s inability to use proper Javanese is considered as their failure to understand this particular Javanese view.

4. CONCLUSION

However, older generation of Javanese must understand, too, that Indonesian Independence brings a great deal of changes with which they have to cope. They have to accept new values of democracy that every citizen is lawfully equal, new social behavior of youngsters who often are children of intertribal marriage; new ways of seeing the wider world around them: the nation of Indonesia, including its unifying language.

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