

# THE PROMINENT CHARACTERISTICS OF JAVANESE CULTURE AND THEIR REFLECTIONS IN LANGUAGE USE

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Keterkaitan budaya dan bahasa sudah dikenal dan diakui secara luas. Penggunaan bahasa Jawa yang sopan dan halus tidak terpisahkan dari budaya Jawa yang memiliki sifat-sifat khas tertentu. Sifat-sifat khas yang teridentifikasi antara lain adalah keinginan untuk menyembunyikan perasaan diri, mengutarakan pendapat secara tidak langsung, menghindari perhatian bagi diri penutur Jawa, menupuk kebersamaan, dan menghormati lawan tutur. Sifat-sifat khas tersebut direfleksikan dengan jelas dalam penggunaan bahasa Jawa yang dipergunakan dalam komunikasi sehari-hari oleh penutur yang berlatar belakang budaya Jawa.

**Key words** : culture, Javanese, feeling, attention, indirectness, status, language.

## INTRODUCTION

Hofstede (1984: 307-308) proposes four dimensions of cultural difference: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. *Individualism* is opposed to *collectivism* in that as individualist culture it is assumed that any person looks primarily after her/ his own interests and the interests of her/ his immediate family such as husband, wife and children, while in a collectivist culture it is argued that any person through birth and possible later events belongs to one or more tight in-groups, from which she/ he cannot detach her/himself. Thus, the extended family, clan or organisation protects the interests of members, but in turn expects their permanent loyalty. The *power distance* dimension defines the extent to which less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in authority and consider it normal, while *uncertainty avoidance* relates to the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or

unpredictable, and which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour. *Masculinity* is opposed to *femininity*, and the dimension of masculinity relates to the degree of distinction made between what men are expected to do and what women are expected to do in a culture. In a masculine culture the rules of men and women are maximally distinct, while in a feminine culture the social rules for the sexes are relatively overlapping.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF JAVANESE CULTURE

Hofstede (1986:309-310) describes Indonesia, including Java, Java culturally into a *large power-distance low individualism, and weak uncertainty-avoidance feminine* category. Though these cultural dimensions were not initially intended for the explication of language study, they may increase our understanding of socio pragmatic considerations underlying the way members of a community use language. Thus, high-collectivism and low-

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individualism suggest that there are strong needs among members of the community to be close to one another, and to be very conscious of any elements which may impede or reduce the quality of their togetherness. Inequality in society may occur in a variety of areas, i.e. physical and mental characteristics, social status and prestige, power, laws, rights and rules (Hofstede, 1984:67). Culture plays an important role in the production of language, and therefore it is useful to discuss prominent elements in Javanese culture viz. indirectness, concealing one's feeling towards others, avoiding responsibility and attention, preference for togetherness, and adherence to status difference.

A preference for hiding feelings is common among Javanese speakers, such that it is considered inappropriate for others to know what a speaker has on her/his mind. While this tendency in some form may be universal, it is taken to greater extremes in the Javanese culture. Wierzbicka (1991:100) argues that in Javanese culture it is considered appropriate to conceal one's wishes and one's intentions, particularly if they are in conflict with other people's wishes or desires. Wierzbicka (1991:128) describes this as "not saying what one feels" and the need "to protect one's own equanimity and peace of mind, which could be threatened by an overt expression of feeling", and proposes that this element of concealment, is typically Javanese (Wierzbicka, 1991:101). Such a bias towards concealment extends to the system of government in which the principle of "traditional Javanese king-where his subjects interpret his utterances" can still be applied in Javanese government leadership.

In Java, hidden feeling (*rasa*) is very important but not clearly expressed, though actually it can sometimes be guessed partly from symbols and facial gestures, and so it is vital for interlocutors to attempt to understand the covert feeling of individuals or community from various symbols and gestures. Thus, children may generally understand that when their fathers have a stern look, this means they are angry. Young people who visit their girlfriends and find their girlfriends'

mothers never initiate a conversation should learn from the situation that they are not well accepted in those families. In Javanese culture truth and straightforwardness may sometimes not be desirable in interaction among people.

Related to this cultural predilection to the concealment of feeling is the tendency towards indirectness or "indirection" in Javanese culture because people often do not say directly what they mean (Geertz, 1976:244). It is therefore crucial in Javanese to get the *rasa* 'feeling' of what people are saying. Perceived cultural advantages involved in such an attitude include tranquillity, harmony, smooth and peaceful interpersonal relations. In her work on indirectness and dissimulation in Javanese, Wierzbicka (1991: 104) paraphrases this cultural predilection in terms of what she calls semantic primitives as "I don't want to feel something bad" and "I don't want someone to feel something bad". Thus, outsiders, and even non-Javanese Indonesians, find indirect Javanese responses boring and long-winded. In practice Javanese people are not allowed to speak directly about people in order to avoid those people becoming the objects of overly direct reference (Errington, 1988:192-193). They will therefore go to great length to avoid such reference often using expressions such as "There is a man" or "A woman we all know ..." instead of directly mentioning the people they are talking about. In this way, Javanese people hope to avoid bad feeling between themselves and their interlocutors.

Another aspect of Javanese culture, the avoidance of responsibility and attention, is perhaps the most distinct of all. For cultural reasons, Javanese speakers whose first language is Javanese still often consider themselves different from members of other ethnic groups in Indonesia, and frequently prefer to converse with other Javanese people using Javanese, though they are actually able to speak Indonesian (Berman, 1992:5) because they can express their ideas more comfortably in Javanese. In Javanese, unlike in Indonesian, the interactants can frequently and comfortably

use the pronoun “we” instead of “I” (Berman, 1992:5), as the appropriate form to refer to the speaker who is first person singular. This is perhaps a manifestation of how Javanese do not like to “signal their individuality” and “avoid being pushy or forcing oneself upon another, thus become the centre of attention” (Berman, 1992:8) and therefore assume responsibility. By using “we” the speaker assumes that the hearer also takes part in the activities, and by doing so the speaker maintains solidarity and togetherness, which as Hofstede (1986:309-310) argues is important in Javanese society.

The effort not to signal individuality is manifest to such an extent that a Javanese adult often uses *aku* or ‘I’ (low level) which would normally be used only by children (Berman, 1992:11). By linguistically assuming the role of a child, Javanese adults are free from taking responsibility for their utterances because they are distancing themselves from the utterances. Kana (1982:31-32) observes that avoiding responsibility in connection with the production of refusals is done by using excessive apologies and detailed reasons or justifications as to why refusals have to be made. This avoidance of responsibility is so widespread throughout all levels of society, from the lowest to the highest that examples abound in everyday life and are evident in refusals. Thus, for example, although the principal of a high school in Java has the right to refuse the enrolment of a certain student for what ever reason, in expressing this refusal decision either in a written or verbal way, the principal would normally use “we” or “On behalf of all teachers and staff ....” in preference to “I”. Other examples of refusals include recent statements in response to a request for a financial compensation, high ranking Javanese officials that the El Nino was considered the main factor in most recent forest fires in response to a request for a financial compensation. Similarly currency traders were blamed as the source of financial and economic crisis in response to a request for a better domestic economic management.

Members of low individualist and high collectivist communities seem to be prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of maintaining friendship, solidarity and harmonious relationship with other members in the society. Javanese people seem to be particularly keen to preserve their culture, and do not seem to easily adapt to a new culture, so that when they live in another culture, such as the United States, they often become isolated in a new cultural environment (Berman, 1992:5) as they tend to stay with other Javanese only. Javanese people living overseas, for example, often form a Javanese society, where they informally meet once a month in a member’s home to discuss Javanese social events, poetry, novels, arts, music and other cultural elements using the Javanese language. Javanese people, in order not to feel isolated, frequently seek other Javanese and talk about things in ways which are culturally acceptable to them. Perhaps, they feel that they have friends because “the feeling one does not stand alone in this world is very important for Javanese” (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:457). Another reason is perhaps they can interact using the appropriate speech levels suitable to their roles and status and apply the principles of *andhap asor* ‘people respects one another by lowering themselves’ (Errington, 1988:38). A well known proverb “It does not matter whether we have food or not, the most important thing is we stay together” (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:457) illustrates how deeply Javanese value togetherness with other Javanese. It is this preference for togetherness which perhaps prevent Javanese speakers from producing refusals to interlocutors because when they do so they may find difficulties to maintain their togetherness .

In Javanese society, status is connected primarily to social structures, and it is these structures which create and maintain inequality in society. Members of the lower classes realise their position within the social structure and consider it normal to use Javanese high

language level to people of higher status, and to let higher status people use lower language level in interactions with them in order to maintain harmony and togetherness (see the last paragraph of this section for discussion of Javanese language levels). In a situation of intense and continuous social contact, the maintenance of harmony with one's social environment becomes a key virtue which extends to other spheres beyond the family. In most collectivist cultures, direct confrontation of another person is considered rude and undesirable. The word "no" is seldom used, because saying "no" is a confrontation: "You may be right" or "We will think about it" are examples of polite ways of turning down a request. In the same vein, the word "yes" should not necessarily be seen as an approval, but as maintenance of the communication line (Hofstede, 1991:58).

The structures of Javanese society and the way the Javanese view social structures of their society have not changed much despite in the modern age. Social structures in Java may be divided into two basic classifications, i.e. *priyayi* (of hereditary aristocracy), and *nonpriyayi* (Geertz, 1976:361). The *nonpriyayi* is further subdivided into several layers from the top downwards (1) government officials, (2) high clerks, administrators, high school teachers, (3) petty clerks and lower teachers, (4) traders, land owners, land-owning peasants, (5) small craftsman, petty traders, plantation workers, (6) landless agricultural workers, handymen, the unemployed, beggars, etc. Thus, the highest level is occupied by government officials, and the lowest, who are the majority, are mostly landless agricultural workers, or in Javanese *buruh tani* 'Farmer Labour' and beggars (Geertz, 1976:361). There are at present thousands of prosperous traders who have become rich, richer than government officials, however, the rural Javanese social structure seems relatively unchanged (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:460-463). In terms of social structures, government officials are still considered higher than rich traders.

## REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE USE

In Javanese society, status is closely related to language use (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:15), and status difference normally denotes authority difference. Javanese etiquette makes it imperative for a person first to determine accurately the exact status of the other person before engaging in an interaction. The higher the status members of a Javanese community have, the higher the authority they possess. This authority can perhaps be clearly seen in the manifestation of Javanese speech levels. For example, people have to decide which speech-level to use when engaging in a conversation with other interlocutors after taking into account their status. People of lower status do not normally start a conversation with people of higher status, and to a certain extent may find it difficult to refuse higher status people's requests. On the other hand, people of higher status may find it easier to refuse requests from interlocutors of lower status. Javanese government officials, for example staff of the agriculture ministry, may use *ngoko* (low level language) and *madya* (middle level language) when conversing with farmers in a village. Farmers, however, have to use *krama* (high level language) to government officials. High ranking government officials, of both civilian and military background, have the highest authority because they can impose their self-evaluation on other groups in the social structure. Javanese people's attitude towards status difference is a salient characteristic of Javanese culture.

Attitudes towards status difference are reflected in the system of naming and addressing in Javanese culture (Errington, 1988:112; Kartomihardjo, 1981:118). Javanese language has three levels, namely, *krama* (high or refined language), *madya* (middle level) and *ngoko* (low or informal level). Naming and addressing systems play an important role in interaction, and the wrong use of the system may disrupt harmonious interaction. This system will be discussed in this section. The first part covers

first person and second person pronouns used by Javanese people when they are interacting with one another, the second part discusses kin-terms used in present day Javanese society, and the third discusses the use of certain pronouns along with high level language in Javanese for honorifics and face redress.

First and second person pronoun usage follows speech level classification. In modern usage Javanese, that is since the end of the second world war when Indonesia declared its independence, the first person pronouns in Javanese are *aku* (*ngoko/low*), *kula* (*madya/middle*) and *dalem* (*krama/high*), while second person pronouns are *kowe* (*ngoko/low*), *jenengan/ sampeyan/ penjenengan* (*madya/middle*) and *panjenengan* (*krama/high*). Speakers would therefore use *panjenengan* to address a person of higher status, and use *kula* or *dalem* to refer to themselves (Errington, 1988:111-120). The pronouns *dalem* is also used for honorifics. .

Besides personal pronouns, kinship terms, which may be used in all speech levels, are also important in daily interaction among Javanese. Kin terms may be used within family relationship such as: *bapak* (father), *ibu* (mother), *adik* or *dik* (younger brother/ sister), *mas* (older brother), *mbak* (older sister), *mbah* (grandmother/ grandfather). These are the widely accepted standard kin terms. There are some alternatives which are used among Javanese people depending on the areas where they live, and the social class they are from. In rural areas, for example, older brothers are addressed as *kang/kakang* , older sister as *yu* or *mbakyu*. A young, respectable Javanese lady is also commonly addressed with *jeng*, but the people addressing her that way should be older, and of equal level with her. It is normally acceptable to address any young man with *mas* and any young woman with *mbak*. High class Javanese address their grand mother or grand father with *eyang* instead of *mbah*. Members of the Javanese royal families also

have their specific kin terms (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:264-273).

Kin terms are also used outside of the family system. Thus, the kin terms *pak* (short form of *bapak*) and *bu* (short form of *ibu*) are kin terms which are very popular, because these can be used as terms of respect to anyone old enough to be put in the generation of the speakers' parents (Koentjaraningrat, 1985: 272). *Mbak* ( kin term for older sister) is also used to address senior cousins, and *dik* (kin term for younger brother) for junior cousins, mature men with *pak* and mature women with *bu*. Girls and boys may be addressed with *dik*, but not young women. Outside the family system, young women are addressed with *dik* only by young men with whom they normally have a close or intimate relationship. *Pak lik* is used to address mothers' and fathers' younger brothers, and *bu lik* for fathers' and mothers' younger sisters. *Pak de* for mothers' and fathers' older brothers, and *bu de* for mothers' and fathers' older brothers. *Lik* is a short form of *cilik* meaning little and *de* is derived from *gedhe* meaning big.

The wrong use of various types of kin terms both within and outside the family system in Javanese may cause confusion, and sometimes embarrassment. Errington (1988:143) provides an example of three older people who were addressed with *eyang* (the higher class term) but who did not feel they deserve this mode of address and therefore they become embarrassed because they themselves had always addressed their grand parents with *mbah* (the lower class term). For the three older people the term *eyang* felt too refined. On another occasion, a young lady felt annoyed because she was addressed with *jeng* by a driver she did not consider her equal and who should therefore have addressed her with *mbak*.

Kartomihardjo (1981:87) claims that the choice of pronouns and terms of address clearly states the speaker's relationship vis-a-vis the other participants, and thus is important

in predetermining the future course of dealings. Javanese speakers respect their interlocutors with higher status by choosing their language and terms of address carefully. To Javanese people, showing respect is related to the perception that the other person is superior (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:248) and Javanese people have a feeling of *ajrih* 'fear' towards superior people. Javanese people feel *ajrih* when they do not know what the other persons will do to them (p.249). This notion of fear significantly differs from the Western concept of fear which emerges in anticipation of ideas about discomfort, physical pains, loss of property and death.

The pronouns briefly reviewed above may also be used as honorifics as a way of showing respect and self-denigration. Two honorifics (*dalem* first person and *nandalem* second person) are used by Javanese people in interaction to show this respect to higher status people, *dalem* is used to people of higher status than themselves and *nandalem* is used to put hearers higher than themselves. Errington (1988:105) claims that the two terms were historically used by *priyayi* (members of the Javanese royal family). Before the common usage at the present time, in the royal circle, the second person pronoun *nandalem* was used to address superiors, while the first person pronoun *dalem*, formerly *abdi dalem* meaning your servant, was used to denigrate themselves when interacting with superiors. In addition to the appropriate use of pronouns, in Java, academic titles are considered significant social symbols, along with military ranks and other social positions in government. Thus, titles and whole names are used to show respect (Errington, 1988:127). So, it is commonly acceptable and preferred in Javanese to say the following: Mrs. Professor Doctor followed by full name, or Mr. Colonel followed by academic title plus full name, or Mr. Governor plus academic titles plus full names.

Another way of showing respect is by using *krama* (high level language). The use of this high level language is so important that in a

Javanese environment, it is very common to see parents speaking in high language on behalf of their children when conversing with other older interlocutors as the children have not been able to master high Javanese language, because if the children use low language, the parents will be embarrassed and the hearers may be offended. The correct use of pronouns, terms of address and language level seems to greatly determine the success of communication in the Javanese system. Errington argues (1988:242) that use of *krama* could be construed as redressive of negative face in accordance with the maxim of 'give deference'. As an example Errington cites a situation while doing research in central Java, where he used *kula* (middle) instead of *dalem* (high) to converse with elder people. This pronoun did not lower himself sufficiently in relation to the elder people who were therefore uncomfortable. This situation improved when *dalem* was used to replace *kula*.

Speech levels in Javanese language and this system of naming and addressing aid successful interaction in Javanese culture since the use of the right level of language to the right person and addressing the person in the correct way help to maintain harmonious relationships. Harmony in relationship is particularly important in Java where, as characterised in Hofstede's dimension classification, collective sentiments are very strong and members of Javanese society need to feel close to one another.

Concealing one's feeling as well as indirectness is perhaps best reflected in a type of refusal which does not really function as a refusal. In Javanese culture, refusals may be genuine, i.e. actually mean "no", or unreal or ritual, i.e. do not always mean "no". For example, when guests visit a family, and they are requested to decide what drink they would like to have, their first reaction will likely be a prompt refusal. This is not, however, a true refusal, because it is only an implementation of Javanese cultural concept of *ethok-ethok* 'pretence' (Wierzbicka, 1991:100) by which the guests may hide

their real feelings. The Javanese people will not show that they actually would like to have certain drink or food. After the third or fourth request, they may reluctantly and hesitantly say what they would like to drink. However, if after the forth request the guests still refuse, the hosts should conclude that their refusal is genuine. This tendency to conceal their feelings may seriously disrupt communication with native speakers of English whose culture may appreciate straightforwardness, openness and frankness. It might be inconceivable to native speakers of English who make requests to Javanese speakers that they do not receive direct responses simply because the Javanese people do not want their feelings to be exposed and become known.

Indirectness is preferable in Javanese culture and boldness, straightforwardness and directness are often considered offensive. In connection with the language of refusing, the more indirectly the refusals are made, the less harm they may result in relationships with interlocutors. Expressions of refusals to requests, using the equivalent of the verb "to refuse" are hardly ever heard. Direct refusals (Kana, 1982:31) are considered impolite in Javanese culture, thus refusing indirectly is very common and acceptable. People from other cultures, including native speakers of English, may frequently find it difficult to perceive the real meanings behind Javanese speakers' indirectness, particularly when they expect clear responses to requests. This results in uncertainty on the part of the requesters as to whether the request they have made is actually accepted or refused, and may lead to misinterpretation (Kana, 1982:32). Therefore, when Javanese culture and English culture meet, there is potential for misunderstanding, miscomprehension and perhaps disappointment to both sides, as the Western speakers may be frustrated at the Javanese disinclination to refuse, and on the contrary, quite frequently the Javanese people may be shocked by the "bluntness of the Western speakers" (Kana, 1982:32).

## CONCLUSION

People often consider that Javanese is a complicated and unique language. Speakers of Western languages are frequently astonished to learn the ways Javanese speakers use Javanese language in their efforts to conceal their feelings, to avoid hurting their interlocutors, to show indirectness and to lower themselves whenever considered necessary. All these characteristics are reflections of the Javanese culture. Understanding Javanese culture is, therefore, crucial for people from other countries in order for them to communicate with Javanese speakers successfully and to avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding which may block further communication.

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