

Death of Linguistic Subsystems: Javanese Speech Levels

Javanese is rightly famous for its elaborate speech level system: distinct lexical items, morphology, and even syntactic patterns that encode distinctions in the relative social status of interlocutors. Although shared (borrowed) by several nearby languages such as Sundanese and Balinese, none is as elaborate as the Javanese system, with three fully articulated levels in addition to two specific sets of honorific and humbling vocabulary that can be used with any of the basic levels (1-7). Unlike more common register systems which are symmetrical in nature, speech participants in the speech level system engage in asymmetric exchanges. So that a child will use *Krama* with or in reference to, say, a parent, *Krama Inggil* with or in reference with a grandparent, where each of those would use *Ngoko* in response to the child (8). The successful functioning of this system requires a detailed knowledge of the relative social standing of each individual participant in the speech act.

The speech level system in Javanese (and related languages), however, is moribund in all but the most restrictive contexts in those areas closest to the traditional courtly centers of Central Java: Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Javanese itself, with over 100 million speakers is the 11th most widely spoken native language in the world, but this subsystem is highly threatened. This paper explores the various pressures that have led the current situation. First, I demonstrate that the fully articulated speech level system is both a relatively recent phenomena, and that it has never been as pervasive as has been previously reported. In fact, there are many dialects of Javanese which have no native tradition of speech levels, including the Tengger and Banten speakers. Further, the system that obtains in many other dialects was never as elaborate as those associated with the exemplary centers.

The rise of the more egalitarian national language, Indonesian, has played a significant role in the loss of the speech level system as most speakers are now fully functionally bilingual. I argue, however, that the major contributing factor to the decline of the speech level system has been greater mobility, both social and more importantly geographic, within and among various villages, cities, and communities, which has led to a breakdown in a system built upon implicit knowledge of relative social standing of all speech act participants. The existence of a possible alternative mode of communication, in this case, Indonesian has further facilitated the loss.

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Ngoko	Madyo	Krama	Krama Andhap	Krama Inggil	English
1. wong		tiyang			person
2. iki	niki	punika			this
3. kandha	sanjang	criyos	matur	ngendika	say
4. mata		mripat		paningal	eye
5. aku		kula	dalem		1 st
6. kowe	samang	sampeyan		penjenengan	2 nd
7. ratu					king

8. a. Punika punapa inggih kagungan panjenengan? Krama
- b. Niki napa nggeh gadhahan sampeyan? Madyo
- c. Iki apa yo dhuwek--mu? Ngoko
- this interr yes possession 2nd
- 'Is this yours?' (Errington 1998:37)