

## Unity in Plurality: *Bahasa Indonesia*'s many incarnations

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The propaganda of a “*Bahasa Indonesia* yang baik dan benar” (“good and correct Indonesian”) hides a peculiar splintered reality. The duplicity stems from *Bahasa Indonesia*'s role as the quintessential symbol of community cohesion and democratic inclusion in Indonesia (Bertrand 282). Although the nation contained more than 700 languages at independence, membership in the post-colonial world entailed knowledge of this one ethnically anonymous and obscure language of commerce (Bertrand 265). Currently over 90 percent of the Indonesian population speaks it and 15 percent acquire it as a first language – a stunning feat, given that it had never been an organic mother tongue (Sneddon 524; Boellstorff 254). Nevertheless, this diffusion has not precluded the bifurcation of *Bahasa Indonesia* into standard *and* colloquial varieties that challenge the myth of a pure, single language. This fragmentation has been strongly influenced by what Bertrand calls a process of “Javanization,” whereby Javanese words enter *Bahasa Indonesia*'s vocabulary while also imparting its hierarchical grammar and corresponding ideology (290). The latter effect deserves attention as Keane notes that linguistic hierarchies are products of, and cannot be understood apart from, an underpinning ideology (1997: 38). The participatory grammar of newer colloquial varieties conveys an ideology of inclusion that counteracts Javanese classism by enabling Indonesians to re-inscribe their subjectivity within the modern state.

Asian studies scholar Benedict Anderson beautifully captures the essence of *Bahasa Indonesia* which, in “forming a new and thin topsoil to the cultures of Indonesia, has proven only too subject to erosion once the winds begin to blow” (141). Germinating just beneath the surface, these brands of informal Indonesian speech alter *Bahasa Indonesia* but do not antagonize it. They redecorate it from *within*, allowing a democratically oriented generation of Indonesians to reclaim ownership of it and distill national concepts of inclusion into their own immediate communities. This paper examines why the breakdown of *Bahasa Indonesia* into distinct formal and colloquial varieties has counter-intuitively reinforced the community cohesion and inclusivity articulated by the “good and correct Indonesian”

project. In spite of “Javanization,” *Bahasa Indonesia*’s expression in *Bahasa Gaul* (Indonesian youth slang) and *Bahasa gay* (the language of the gay community) undermines hierarchical tendencies through participatory grammar which links individual speakers to the broader nation.

This paper will first underscore the origins of *Bahasa Indonesia* to establish the language of study and the ideological value indexed to its structural features. Next, the strong influence from Javanese will be discussed as the precursor to the emergence of Indonesian diglossia<sup>1</sup>, a structural scenario that itself enabled the division of *Bahasa Indonesia* into its standard and informal varieties. Then, a case study of two of these colloquial varieties, *Bahasa Gaul* and *Bahasa gay*, will reveal that the lack of a hermetic standard language does not preclude, but rather intensely promotes, Indonesian expectations of democratic inclusivity and unity. Finally, a discussion of these codes in the media will offer conclusions on the trajectory of this linguistic setting in Indonesia.

### **Neutrality and Receptivity: *Bahasa Indonesia*’s Origins**

Prior to being renamed *Bahasa Indonesia*, the archipelago’s historic language of commerce *Pasar Malay* strongly appealed to nationalists as “a placeless, peopleless tongue” (Boellstorff 254). This strictly utilitarian language facilitated trade between different speech communities within the nation and belonged neither to a particular group nor a particular region. Lacking such a linguistic “center,” it also lacked “best speakers,” measures of “linguistic correctness or failure,” and therefore the raw materials for a linguistic hierarchy (Keane 2003, 517-18). Without the veneers of ethnicity or elitism, it promised political neutrality and geographic reach because it had exhibited such qualities in the economic realm.

Furthermore, *Pasar Malay* retained an invaluable open-endedness as a pidgin devoid of a concrete grammar or comprehensive vocabulary. *Bahasa Indonesia* became synonymous with inclusivity as nationalist leaders literally invented new words to construct the language based on democratic values: for instance, the newly minted civil religion Pancasila incorporated the Qur’anic notion of “*permusyawaratan* (deliberation)” to appeal to Muslims, while appealing to the Javanese through the inclusion of the

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<sup>1</sup>According to Ferguson's original definition: the coexistence of dual forms of a language, the standard (High) form and the colloquial (Low) form, used in exclusive societal domains (cited in Sneddon 519).

Javanese concept “*gotong royong* (mutual cooperation)” (Bertrand 275). In this “multipolar state,” where no two ethnic groups together comprise more than 90 percent of the population, *Bahasa Indonesia*'s sparseness has allowed it to develop alongside regional languages, not provoke them (Bertrand 419).

The strong correspondence between *Bahasa Indonesia*'s inclusive grammar and ideology differentiated it from the other languages available to Indonesian nationalists who desired to link all members of the archipelago through a shared language (Bertrand 274). Despite the fact that at independence 45 percent of the population already spoke Javanese, its grammatical complexity was seen as “incompatible with such values as directness, clarity, and speed of communication” desired for democracy (Errington 5). In addition to the difficulty it posed for learning, its blatant ethnic tones would have alienated non-Javanese language communities (Bertrand 273). Dutch, on the other hand, had consistently been the language of the inner colonial elite, and carried a classist legacy contrary to the democratically inclusive vision of Indonesia (Anderson 132). *Bahasa Indonesia*'s strength lay in its ability to not privilege or exclude any particular group. This quality enabled a fringe language linking the archipelago economically to be the gateway of inclusion into a new national identity. Ironically, though, *Bahasa Indonesia*'s titular roots come from “*Bahasa*” (old Malay) and “*bhāsa*” (Old Javanese), which referred to the “language” of elites, not of the common people (Makoni 44). While the language may have avoided this legacy in the early twentieth century, Javanization has textured the current Indonesian speech community with hierarchy.

### **Diglossia and Javanese: *Bahasa Indonesia*'s Self-Divide**

Because Javanese words have begun to appear in the *Bahasa Indonesia* lexicon, it is important to analyze the hierarchical source of these echoes (Bertrand 265). Given the parallel between language and ideology seen in *Pasar Malay*, the presence of Javanese in *Bahasa Indonesia* can be read as influencing not just its grammar and vocabulary, but also its underlying ideology. Javanese never presents an impartial, democratic scenario; spoken interactions are textured by its three registers that correspond to progressively higher degrees of respect or deference – *ngoko*, *Madya*, and *krama* – which themselves

contain internal registers (i.e. *krama Inggil* and *Krama Andhap*) (Poedjosoedarmo 115; Smith-Hefner 2009, 60). One's social class and rank are always indexed in Javanese speech through this "internal translation" (Keane 2003, 516). While these aspects of Javanese provide greater detail to speech interactions, they also create a rubric of superiority or inferiority. As a result, the language filtering into *Bahasa Indonesia* directly challenges its appeals to democratic inclusiveness evidenced in a lack of comparable registers.

And yet, Javanization has transposed not just words, but also the ideology behind such linguistic registers into *Bahasa Indonesia*. Its main colloquial variety, Jakartanese, gathers much of its lexicon from informal Javanese while standard Indonesian borrows words from High Javanese (Errington 1986, 341). These lexical pathways create a similar hierarchy within *Bahasa Indonesia* based on their unique degrees of respect that replicate the Javanese diglossia (Sneddon 520; Errington, 1986 338). This correspondence leads Sneddon to contend that *Bahasa Indonesia* itself has become diglossic and marked by a comparable internal hierarchy (Sneddon 519). In the context of Keane's earlier point, the High form corresponds to a linguistic "center" that earns prestige while disavowing colloquial forms. The center operates to protect and replicate the dominant status of the standard language.

The significant point remains that the diglossia inherited from Javanese facilitates a breakdown within the "good and correct" language into standard and low varieties. The division between these two camps is itself not formalized, although various titles exist: for example, *Bahasa resmi* ("official language"), *Bahasa formal* ("formal language"), *Bahasa halus* ("refined language"), *Bahasa sehari-hari* ("daily language"), *Bahasa non-baku* ("non-standard language"), *Bahasa percakapan* ("conversational language"), and more (Sneddon 532). Like High Javanese, standard Indonesian acts as the language of formality in the domains of law, government, bureaucracy, education, media, and popular culture; the colloquial varieties remain domestic, relaxed, and highly diverse (Sneddon 521). Compared to the openness of *Pasar Malay*, Javanized Indonesian has split into two distinct and opposed domains.

The use of Javanese terms to name new bureaucratic institutions results from a belief that, regardless of their original meaning, such terms offer the state the legitimacy and "majesty" of history

simply because they are Javanese (Anderson 146). Javanization also confers a sense of superiority onto the bureaucrats working within state enterprises and institutions. These elites have incorporated the politesse of High Javanese into face-to-face speech interactions, such as through the use of the honorifics “Pak,” “Bu,” and “Dik” before names to convey the status of the speech subject; the expression of “Mari-Mari” or “permisi” before leaving a conversation; and the use of Javanese words to create technocratic vocabulary (Bertrand 287). The latter practice certainly has a utilitarian function given that *Bahasa Indonesia* lacks corresponding terms; however, Javanese is used both because it has words to meet this need *and* because the words themselves are regarded as superior (Bertrand 287). By implication, from the perspective of the center, informal language has a de-legitimizing function within the Indonesian nation.

And yet, while one would expect this diglossia to preclude unity, in the Indonesian case it offers a pretext for unity even if hierarchy remains present in its grammar. While Javanization helps Indonesians distinguish class and formality in official discourse, it has also contributed to the democratic, inclusive national model. As an example, the foundations of Pancasila in an ancient Javanese text (the Nagarakrtagama) present a twist on this supposedly zero-sum logic (Anderson 146). Javanese grammar and vocabulary have enabled the split into formal and informal varieties, conferring validity to the former, but without completely invalidating the latter. As a result, the informal varieties retain room for expression and expansion. Two examples in particular reveal that such language, while distinct from standard Indonesian, are not incompatible with the nation that this language represents

***Bahasa Gaul and Bahasa Gay: Specialized codes with exoteric value***

Speakers of *Bahasa Gaul* (Indonesian youth slang) and *Bahasa gay* (the language of the nation’s gay communities) actively reject the “feudal” and “patriarchal” elements found in Javanized Indonesian (Boellstorff 260; Smith-Hefner 2007, 184). Proponents of *Bahasa Gaul* and *Bahasa gay* enjoy a deliberate and “playful disregard” of these features in favor of camaraderie (Smith-Hefner 2007, 184). They manipulate local languages and *Bahasa Indonesia* but their grammar never deviates from *Bahasa Indonesia*’s (Smith-Hefner 2009, 65; Boellstorff 252). It functions as the source of all linguistic experimentation and anchors all the derivatives.

Stylistically, both variations manifest through individual words or brief phrases, not whole clauses or sentences (Boellstorff 255; Smith-Hefner 2007, 187). In terms of grammar, the words or phrases in each variant emerge from shared tactics: syllable swapping, word borrowing between standard Indonesian and Javanese, and abbreviation or acronym formation (Smith-Hefner 2007, 191; Boellstorff 255). The latter activities highlight the subversive aspects of the languages as they mimic the governmental methodology for naming bureaucratic institutions, in this case to craft deeply personal codes amongst identity groups (Smith-Hefner 2007, 192; Boellstorff 257). The unifying effect of standard *Bahasa Indonesia* remains accomplished, though on a more circumscribed scale.

In light of this perceptible challenge to government, three important points must be made about the tone of *Bahasa Gaul* and *Bahasa gay*: neither functions as an “anti-language” (Halliday 1976) or a “counter-language” (Morgan 2002) because they do not antagonize the dominant social order, envision an alternative society, or produce a countercultural narrative to challenge subjugation (cited in Smith-Hefner 2007, 187; Boellstorff 255). For instance, *Bahasa Gaul* does not act as a “secret code” for youth to engage in irreverence or vulgarity when amongst adults or peers (Smith-Hefner 2007, 187). In a similar way, *Bahasa gay* situates queer reality within the dominant heterosexual reality, not as opposed to it: there is no prerequisite of being gay, and heterosexuals’ usage marks them as trendy (Boellstorff 259; 264). In short, these informal languages are not a barrier between communities, rather a unifying force within particular communities. In fact, much of *Bahasa Gaul* stems from *Bahasa gay* (Leap and Boellstorff 193). The sense of rivalry expressed by proponents of the “good and correct Indonesian” project is not replicated within or between these informal varieties.

And yet, because neither contains an ethnic community of native speakers, *Bahasa Gaul* and *Bahasa gay* remain inherently artificial. They have an unpolished quality that designates each as a fundamental “work in progress” like *Bahasa Indonesia* (Smith-Hefner 2007, 188). Both perpetually engage Indonesians in a process of linguistic creation that allows speakers to reaffirm membership within distinct sub-communities. For speakers of *Bahasa Gaul* in particular, this agency alludes to the political participation of Indonesian youth in the deconstruction of Suharto’s New Order and the instillation of

democracy (Smith-Hefner 2007, 188). Reflective of the democratic vision for Indonesia, these informal varieties require active participation from their speakers to keep the language alive. Linguistic creation, then, indicates that speakers have a stake in their speech community, the language that inspires them, and the nation that encloses them. Language helps to answer what Leap and Boellstorff describe as “questions of belonging on a transpersonal level,” fixed to the individual but cognizant of the individual’s place in multiple communities (183). In this way, a single *Bahasa Indonesia* cannot aim to accomplish what multiple distinct varieties already do: a plurality of belonging.

In this manner, *Bahasa gay* imitates the pidgin *Pasar Malay*’s stitching of a transnational commercial network by linking localized gay communities to one another. Because the gay community lacks its own civic spaces or institutions, the language fills that void (Boellstorff 264). Speakers of *Bahasa gay* themselves recognize this effect through its lack of regional variation across the archipelago, such that there “is no such thing as a *Bahasa gay Bugis* ‘Bugis gay language’ but only a *Bahasa gay Indonesia*” (Boellstorff 253). The language of sexual identity transcends ethnic identity. It facilitates bonds between members of a community that, in the way *Bahasa Gaul* unites Indonesians by age, overcomes geographic and ethnic diversity (Smith-Hefner 2007, 198). At the immediate level, the creation of new words signifies one’s membership within the immediate *Bahasa gay* speech community (Boellstorff 255); however, this process and its replication throughout the archipelago achieves the inclusion of gay Indonesians in the national Indonesian linguistic culture.

Similarly, youth see themselves reflected not only in *Bahasa Gaul*, but also as stakeholders in *Bahasa Indonesia*, without which *Bahasa Gaul* cannot be formed. As a result, *Bahasa Gaul* links Indonesian youth to the national linguistic identity. They see *Bahasa Gaul* as a means of making *Bahasa Indonesia* a “more communicative, expressive, and egalitarian” language, which creates a feedback loop making *Bahasa Indonesia* more appealing to younger generations (Smith-Hefner 65; 186). Data from the 1971, 1980, and 1990 censuses reveal that *Bahasa Indonesia* has consistently gained most speakers in younger generations, while educated urban youth have functioned as the main drivers of both *Bahasa*

*Indonesia* and *Bahasa Gaul* (Steinhauer 757; Smith-Hefner 2009, 58). Rather than diglossic tension, therefore, it appears that synergy has emerged from this breakdown within the standard language.

### **Language, Media, and Youth: Bahasa Indonesia's Future**

The presence and treatment of informal Indonesian in popular culture and media reveal efforts to combat the deconstruction of a standard *Bahasa Indonesia*, yet the progressive introduction of informal language into publication. As the government continues to demand “*Bahasa Indonesia* yang baik dan benar” (good and correct language), a new “language advice industry” has emerged to help individuals enhance how they speak formal Indonesian in public domains (Sneddon 524). This industry reinforces the grammar, punctuation, pronunciation, and vocabulary of *standard* Indonesian only. Meanwhile, many print publications italicize informal words in interviews to distinguish them from standard Indonesian, while others actually translate those words into standard Indonesian (Sneddon 522). This practice occurs with multiple dialects: Boellstorff notes that *Bahasa gay* terms are also italicized in magazines and Errington describes standard Indonesian newspapers which provide a miniscule corner for the “pithy,” gossipy news printed in Jakartanese (Boellstorff 262; Errington 1986, 340). This trend leads one to believe that linguistic purism resulting from diglossia is more pronounced in written than in verbal speech. Yet, youth-based informal languages appear to be more resilient to such currents. Jakartanese in particular has experienced a surge in popularity among youth due to the fact that as the epicenter of film, television, music, and publishing; the powerful; and the wealthy; Jakarta has become a symbol of popular culture, the middle class, and upward mobility (Sneddon 528).

Youth have also emerged as the community bridging the use of spoken informal Indonesian with their own written form. Musgrave notes Manns (2007) who found that in urban environments such as Jakarta, young people employ Jakartanese in the online messaging language *Bahasa chat* (Musgrave 10). Jakartanese has also become the language of an online “teenlit community” of youth that critique published works and produce literary reviews (Djenar 246). It also remains the language of magazines and “pulp novels” for youth, a market that has become the fastest growing publishing sector in the country (Sneddon 522; Simamora 2005 cited in Djenar 238). For example, Smith-Hefner notes the



existence of *Kamus Bahasa Gaul* (the Gaul Dictionary) as well as *Gaul*, a weekly tabloid magazine for youth printed in *Bahasa Gaul* (Smith-Hefner 2007, 191). This codification of the informal variety represents a victory against the mythologizing of *Bahasa Indonesia*. The youth population has instigated a potent shift in the ways that Indonesians have begun to respond to the reality of a national language that has multiple subnational expressions.

### **Conclusion: Embracing the pieces of a deconstructed myth**

Ultimately, there does not exist a “*Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar*” (“good and correct Indonesian”). Its artificial adoption as a mother tongue to meet the needs of commerce and nationalism in the early twentieth century has transitioned into a new era where many Indonesians *do* speak it as a first language. Nevertheless, the archipelago’s diverse sub-communities repurpose the national language to reflect and reinforce their distinct group identities. This reaffirmation of community occurs within the grammar of *Bahasa Indonesia*, and in this way pays homage to the national language, incorporating it deeper within the psyche of these groups. The youth slang *Bahasa Gaul* in particular seems poised to spur a nationwide reevaluation of the language myth of “*Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar.*” Just as Indonesian youth have distinguished themselves for advocating views of political inclusion and democracy, their linguistic practices have come to reflect these same values.

Anderson is correct when he writes that *Bahasa Indonesia* differentiates itself from other manners of speaking because it “looks to the future” (140). In spite of containing certain classist aspects, diglossia has enabled the language to become more dialectical, involving its speech community more creatively in its development. Language informs the creation of distinct “life-worlds” that are subject to change like the languages that inform them (Leap and Boellstorff 198). Rather than acting as a hindrance to the Indonesian nation, multiple versions of *Bahasa Indonesia* can be regarded as constructing what Dasgupta calls a “pluralist framework” for democracy that facilitates greater integration of speech communities into national political discourse (3). As a result, this author expects that Indonesians will experience a linguistic liberation that, like the Indonesian nation itself, will paradoxically affirm that *Bahasa Indonesia*’s unity now lies in its plurality.

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