

## The Reflection of the Javanese Cultural Concepts in the Politeness of Javanese

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**Abstract:** Every language may have some entities which may not be owned by another language. The uniqueness of a language is strongly influenced by the culture of its native speakers. Therefore, languages vary cross-culturally. I strongly believe that the way the Javanese people (one of the Indonesian ethnic groups) express politeness is also influenced by the Javanese culture. This article tries to examine the reflection of some concepts of Javanese cultures such as: *tata krama*, *andhap-asor*, and *tanggap ing sasmita* (the language styles, humbling oneself while exalting others, and being able to catch the hidden meaning). The approaches used in this study are based on politeness theory, e.g. Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983), Grice (1975, 1981), and Lakoff (1973, 1990). Finally, this study proves that the forms and the politeness strategies used in Javanese are really bound by the Javanese concepts. As a result, it is almost impossible to conduct politeness in Javanese without comprehending and applying those cultural concepts.

**Key words:** speech levels, politeness, *tata krama*, *andhap-asor*, *tanggap ing sasmita*

Language and culture are two different aspects; however, they cannot be separated from one another because language is the mirror of the culture and the identity of the speakers. This means that culture plays an important role in the language, which makes possible a language can have specific characteristics or properties which are not owned by other languages. As a result, languages are said to be unique (Nasr, 1983). The uniqueness of Javanese, for example, can be found in the properties of speech level (Uhlenbeck, 1970; Poedjosoedarmo, 1979), or speech style (Errington, 1988) as one of the linguistic devices in politeness. Through this speech style, a Javanese speaker will humble himself while exalt the others.

Further uniqueness in Javanese is the ability to understand the speaker's intended meaning although it is not obviously stated. I strongly believe that the uniqueness of Javanese is the result of the reflection of the Javanese culture. Through this article, I will argue and demonstrate how some concepts of Javanese culture which have been well-rooted in the people of Javanese are reflected in Javanese. Therefore, Javanese language is the mirror of the culture and identity of the Javanese people. For the purpose of this discussion, the notion of politeness and the concepts of Javanese culture will be examined, then, it is followed by the analysis of some Javanese speech acts which strongly reflect the cultural concepts. Finally, the conclusion will present the result of the discussion.

## **POLITENESS**

Several theorists have tried to offer definitions of politeness (Lakoff, 1973, 1990; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1980; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Lakoff (1973) defines politeness as a system to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange. The role of politeness is to maintain a harmonious relation between the participants during the interaction. To achieve this goal, she introduces three politeness rules; (1) don't impose, (2) give option, and (3) make a good feeling.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987) the central point of politeness is the notion of *face*. Being polite, therefore, consists of attempting to save face from another, *Face Saving Act* (FSA). These attempts are realized into what they call politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson outline four main types of politeness strategies from the least to the most politeness: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record. Each strategy can be examined respectively as follows.

Bald on-record strategies usually do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face, *Face Threatening Act* (FTA). This strategy only shows low number of politeness (less politeness), so this strategy is commonly used in situation where the speaker has close relationship with the audience (e.g. parents to children). Positive politeness strategies seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. They are used to make the hearer feel good about himself/herself, his/her interests or possessions, and are most usually used in situations where the audience knows each other fairly well (e.g. between close friends). Negative politeness strategies are oriented

towards the hearer's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. These strategies presume that the speaker will be imposing on the listener and there is a higher potential for awkwardness or embarrassment than in bald on-record strategies and positive politeness strategies. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous so the speaker is more apt to include an out for the listener, through distancing styles such as apologies (e.g. between strangers). The final politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) is the indirect strategy. This strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to being imposing (e.g. an employee to his boss). However, the application of politeness strategies will not be the concern of this paper.

In summary, it can be said that the central point of politeness is how to manage 'face' in many different ways so that one's partner of communication will not lose his/her 'face' or how to save his/her face (FSA). The more indirect linguistic forms we use (e.g. passive form, a supposition), the more polite the way of expression will be.

### **SOME CONCEPTS OF THE JAVANESE CULTURE IN RELATION TO POLITENESS**

In their daily lives, Javanese people are greatly influenced by some concepts which are well rooted in the Javanese culture, namely: *tata krama*, *andhap-asor*, and *tanggap ing sasmita* (the language styles, humbling oneself while exalting others, and being able to catch the hidden meaning). In this section, these three concepts will be introduced and discussed respectively.

The phrase *tata krama* culturally means a good conduct or etiquette. Therefore, when Javanese people behave impolitely, for instance when a young man passes in front of his grandparents without asking permission and bowing down his body, he will be credited as an impolite man or one who does not know *tata krama*.

The next concept of the Javanese culture is *andhap-asor*. This term is lexically composed of two words *andhap* 'low' and *asor* 'humble'. Thus, to conduct the *andhap-asor* in Javanese means humbling oneself while exalting the others. This concept dictates the Javanese to be low profile. As a Javanese, one will not denigrate the interlocutor and praise him/herself. If s/he breaks this rule, as it applies to *tata krama*, s/he will be considered impolite; s/he may get the social sanction. Hence, these two concepts have

a close relationship. Being polite in Javanese, one must know how to behave politely or to know *tata krama*, and being polite also means one should have a sense of *andhap-asor*. Finally, as a good Javanese, one should also have a sense of *tanggap ing sasmita* which can be translated as the ability to read between the lines. Grice (1981) introduced the term 'implicature' for the case in which what the speaker meant, implied, or suggested is distinct from what the speaker said. It means that a speaker may express his/her idea indirectly to the speaker. It is considered less polite or it may hurt the addressee's feelings if it is delivered directly. In Javanese, it is not always necessary for the speaker to express his/her feeling directly because of the culture of having *tanggap ing sasmita* 'a good feeling' or implicature, according to Grice.

### **THE REFLECTION OF THE CONCEPT OF TATA KRAMA**

Linguistically, the phrase *tata krama* consists of two words *tata* and *krama*. The word *tata* is the basic form or the base. This word can be changed into a verb by adding the active prefix *n-* (*n-* + *tata*) being *nata* which means 'to arrange', as in the expression of *Anita nata bukune ing ndhuwur meja* 'Anita arranged her books on the table'. The noun form of *tata* is *tatanan* 'arrangement'. Next, the word *krama* in the phrase of *tata krama* is also similar to the word *bhasa* which means language. In the same way, the phrase *tata krama* can be linguistically interpreted as the *tatanan bhasa* or *unggah-ungguh bhasa* 'the arrangement of language'. As the reflection of the concept of *tata krama*, Javanese is arranged according to the *tatanan bhasa into undha usuk bhasa* which is known as speech level (Uhlenbeck, 1970), or speech style (Errington, 1988).

As for speech level, some linguists (e.g. Herrick, 1984) distinguish this language into two social levels, namely Ngoko and Bhasa (non-Ngoko) levels (low and high levels). Some others, (Poedjosoedarmo, 1979; Errington, 1988), claim that there are three levels: Ngoko (Ng), low level, Krama Madya (KM) (intermediate level), and Krama Inggil (KI) (honorifics). For the purpose of this discussion, however, I will follow the second classification.

In the speech levels, each level expresses the level of politeness. That is, the Ng level may express the lowest level unless it encodes honorifics, and the KI style indicates the most polite one. In between these two levels

is the KM style. In addition, each level is different from one another in their lexical items which can be demonstrated by the following examples:

- (1) KI : Menapa panjenengan sampun dhahar ?
- (2) KM : Napa sampeyan mpun nedho ?
- (3) Ng : Apa kowe wis mangan ?  
           ‘Lit. Did you already eat?’  
           ‘Have you had breakfast/lunch/dinner?’

Sentences (1) and (2) are classified as *bhasa or krama* (KI and KM respectively) because they contain non-ngoko lexical items, such as: *panjenengan and sampeyan, dhahar and nedho* which are from the Ngoko lexicon items *kowe* ‘you’ and *mangan* ‘to eat’ respectively. Since the Ng level is the basic level, every concept which can be expressed in Javanese will be covered by the Ng lexicons. By contrast, not every Ng word will have a counterpart among the KM or KI words. In cases where the KM and KI words do not possess the equivalent items for the Ng words, the Ng words are used. The word *pitu* ‘seven’, for instance, which belongs to Ng can also be used both in KI and KM.

As for the meaning, sentences (1), (2), and (3) demonstrate the same referential meanings; they refer to “whether someone has taken a meal”. However, the sentences pragmatically denote different meanings. The meanings are related to “who takes the action” and “what verb form is appropriate to describe the action”. In English, this phenomenon can be associated with subject-verb agreement (SVA). The difference between English SVA and Javanese SVA lies in the properties which control this agreement. The English SVA is controlled by the number of the subject (e.g. singular vs. plural) and the verb tense (e.g. present vs. past). The Javanese SVA, however, is neither controlled by the subject number, nor by the tense (Javanese does not have tense-system). Its agreement is determined by non-linguistic factors, such as: social status, age, and distance of the subject (which will be further discussed in the section of *andhap-asor*).

Further difference between Javanese syntax and English syntax lies on the correlation between object and verb. Let me call these phenomena *object-verb agreement* (OVA). English does not have OVA because the verb form is not determined by the object, what happens in English is the existence of an object is determined by the kinds of the verb (e.g. transitive vs. intransitive) which also applies to Javanese and many other languages.

To some extent, the Javanese verb form is obviously bound by the object, as it applies in SVA. Let us consider the following examples.

- (4) Bapak arep **ngeterake** (Verb) **adik** (Object) menyang stasiun.  
 ‘Father will accompany my younger brother to the train station’
- (5) Adik arep **nderekake** (Verb) **Bapak** (Object) menyang stasiun.  
 ‘My younger brother will accompany Father to the train station’

Sentences (4) and (5) have the same referential meaning; however, they have to use different verb forms because the objects of the sentences are socially different. In (4) the object *adik* (my younger brother) who has low age-related status only requires the Ng lexicon (less polite form) *ngeterake*, while in (5) the object *Bapak* (Father) who belongs to socially high status needs the more polite form ‘*ndherekake*’ (accompany). When the rule of OVA is broken (the choice of the verb forms is incorrect or in the wrong way, for instance: the object *Bapak* takes the verb form of *nderekake*, and the object *adik* takes the verb *ngeterake*, this will result in impolite forms, though grammatically it is still correct.

Both SVA and OVA motivate the speakers to study the cultural concept of which the speech style is used according to the rules of *tata krama*. It is not easy to choose the appropriate level in practice because there is no clear-cut rule which can guide us to use the right level. Some Javanese linguists (Poedjosoedarmo, 1979) put forward two main factors—the level of formality and that of the social status of the speaker and the hearer – which may help us to select the levels. In my experience, the choice of these levels is also influenced by the age of the speaker/hearer and the purpose of the utterance. What follows is a brief discussion of the principal factors.

The first and probably the most common factor is the age of the speaker (S) and the hearer (H). Based on this feature, the speech levels are used in the following way.

- (a) If S is older than H, e.g. parents to son/daughter, s/he will use the Ng level.
- (b) If S and H are equal in the age, S prefers to use the KM level.
- (c) If S is (much) younger than H, s/he will choose the KI level.

Secondly, the choice of the speech style can be determined by the social status of the S and H. This status may be obtained from various ways such as: education, position (rank), and wealth (riches). This factor, then, may

violate the previous factor, the age of the S and H. For example, the S who is much older than H chooses the KI level simply because he realizes that the H's social status is higher than his/hers, e.g. an employee or servant who speaks to his/her employer who is much younger than him/her.

Next the degree of intimacy between S and H (distance) can also play the role of choosing the speech levels in Javanese. Regarding this factor, KI is the mutually respectful speech which is used between strangers, or comparative strangers. People who speak to each other in KI, however, may gradually begin to use KM even Ng, if they become closer friends or become more intimate. Accordingly, this feature often overrides the two previous factors (e.g. S < H but he/she does speech-level switching, e.g. from KM to Ng, as soon as they become closer friends).

Finally, whether the speaker will use Ng, KM, or KI is also determined by the situation in which s/he will deliver the utterance. For example, some people who have known one another well (and therefore normally use Ng or KM) will change the level of the language into KI as soon as they come into a formal situation such as: in a meeting, in giving a speech at a wedding party, or in delivering a sermon.

In summary, there are some rules which should be considered carefully in choosing the speech styles, whether the linguistic forms should be in the Ng, KM, or KI style. Ignoring these rules may produce the wrong styles which, in turn, can have a disagreeable effect on the listener.

## THE REFLECTION OF THE CONCEPT OF *ANDHAP-ASOR*

The next concept of the Javanese culture is *andhap-asor*. The term is lexically composed from two words *andhap* 'low' and *asor* 'humble'. Thus, to conduct the *andhap-asor* in Javanese means lowering oneself while exalting others. This cultural concept is reflected in the politeness of Javanese through the choice of the KI lexical items or honorifics (H) for the others, and the Ng or KM lexical items, or humilifics/non-honorifics (NH) for him/herself in the speech style. Let us consider the following sentence.

(5) Menapa *panjenengan* (H) sampun (KI/KM) *dhahar* (H)?

*Kula* (NH), nembe *nedha* (NH).

'Have you already eaten? I have already had it'

Both the words *dhahar* (H) and *nedha* (NH) in (5) have the same meaning with 'to have a meal (breakfast/lunch/dinner). In the first clause,

the speaker chooses the verb *dhahar* (H) because it refers to the subject (or the addressee) *panjenengan* (H) ‘exalted you’. However, when the speaker refers to her/himself ‘kulo’ (NH), s/he does not use the verb *dhahar* (H) anymore; s/he chooses the word from the KM lexicon *nedha* (NH) for the same verb. The use of the different levels for the same meaning (*dhahar* (H) vs. *nedha* (NH)) proves the reflection of the concept of *andhap asor* in Javanese, that is the speaker must humble her/himself and exalt the other (the hearer/addressee). This reason, of course, is closely associated with the rules of SVA as well.

Although a KM lexicon could be found in (5), this sentence is still considered as KI style. Similarly, a KI honorific lexicon (H) may also be used in an Ng level if the context (pragmatically) requires it. Let us consider (6) and (7).

- (6) Apa Bapak (H) wis **dhahar** (H)?  
 ‘Did Father have breakfast/lunch/dinner?’
- (7) Aku wis **ngaturi** (H) Pak Lurah (H)?  
 ‘I have invited the village leader?’

Both (6) and (7) are considered Ng level although we can find some KI lexicons (H). In (6) the word *dhahar* (KI) is used to show respect for the subject *Bapak* ‘Father’ the person whom we usually respect, and so is the verb *ngaturi* (KI) ‘to invite’ is chosen to indicate that the addressee (or the object of the verb) is the person whom the speaker respects ‘*Pak Lurah*’ (the village leader). This follows from the fact that one could not be polite in the Ng level completely. It implicates that only KI expresses politeness. So, even in Ng conversation, expressions of politeness are made possible by using honorifics. This fact also follows the rules of SVO and OVA, that the choice of the appropriate verb form is determined by the properties of the Subject (SVO), and to some extent it is controlled by the object (OVA). These agreements are more frequently used in terms of politeness, rather than in terms of the linguistic forms. Therefore, violating the agreements may cause impoliteness or disagreeable effect on the listener. For example, to use the verb *mangan* non-honorific lexicon (NH) or *nedha* (NH) for a highly respectful person is a serious affront, as demonstrated by (8), and speaking ‘up’ in the wrong cases is ridiculous as indicated by (9).

- (8) \*Menapa panjenengan (H) sampun mangan (NH)?  
 ‘Have you had breakfast/lunch/dinner?’
- (9) \*Aku (NH) wis dhahar (H).  
 ‘Yes I have.’



There is a contradiction in (8). The speaker addresses the listener with *panjenengan* 'respective you' (H) means s/he respects her/him, but s/he chooses the verb *mangan* (NH) instead of *dhahar* (H) to describe the addressee's action which humbles or disrespects him. Similarly, in (9) the speaker uses the Ng style which is signaled by the use of the Ng lexicons *aku* 'I' (NH) and *wis* 'already'. By contrast, the speaker makes her/himself higher than the listener by choosing the KI lexicon *dhahar* (H) to describe his own action (self-exaltation). Thus, the use of the word *dhahar* (H) in this sentence is in the wrong place, and so it means the speaker may be ridiculed by the listeners who know the style better. In addition, both (8) and (9) are contradictory with the concepts of *andhap-asor* (which does not allow other denigration (8) and self-exaltation (9)).

In short, it should be noted that the concept of *andhap-asor* and the concept of *tata krama* are closely related. Since both *andhap-asor* and *tata krama* concepts are really reflected in the politeness of Javanese, what applies to *andhap-asor* will also be relevant to *tata krama*. Breaking the rules of SVA and OVA, for example, will make our sentences less polite as well as ridiculous, and the speaker can be credited as one who does not know *bhasa* or *tata krama*.

## **THE REFLECTION OF THE CONCEPT OF *TANGGAP ING SASMITA***

Finally, as a good Javanese, someone should also have a sense of *tanggap ing sasmita* which means one should have an ability to catch the idea delivered by the speech partner indirectly. As suggested by Grice (1981), one may express his/her idea implicitly, what s/he said may be different from what s/he meant. Following the Javanese cultural concept 'tanggap ing sasmita' or *implicature* according to Grice, the use of direct speech acts can be considered less polite because it may embarrass the interlocutor or s/he can lose her/his face. In other words, doing polite is to save face of the speech partner or FSA (Brown and Levinson, 1987). To Javanese, the implied meaning of utterances can be understood from the context of conversation. Consider the following dialogs.

**Dialog 1:** between a teacher (T) and a student (S) who visits T in his house.

- (10) a. T: “Wah untung aku durung budhal, jathokno rak ora ketemu”  
‘I am lucky that I don’t leave yet, otherwise I cannot meet you’  
b. S: Menapa badhe tindakan to Pak?  
‘Are you going to go out, Sir?’  
c. T: “Ah ora, mung arep mlaku-mlaku”  
‘Oh no, not really, I just want to take a walk’

In (10a), the teacher welcomes the student with an ambiguous utterance. This is ambiguous because on the surface it means that he is happy to be able to meet the student, but implicitly it means that “I must go now, even, I should have gone by now”. Although the teacher then neglects his utterance (10c), as a good Javanese, the student should be able to understand the implied meaning delivered by the teacher. Therefore, the expression of “*untung aku durung budhal*” should be interpreted as “the host indirectly asks the visitor to leave immediately”

**Dialog 2:** between Safik and Azan (Safik is Azan’s younger brother who wants to borrow Azan’s motorcycle).

- (11) A. “Mas adoh mas, mengko kesuwen’, Mengkono tembungé Safik.  
‘Dear, it is very far, it will take me a very long time”, said Safik.’  
B. “Iki kontake aja banter-banter”, wangsulane Azan karo ngelungake kunci kontak sepeda montore.  
‘This is the key, don’t ride too fast”, replied Azan while giving the key of his motorcycle’ (Partana, 2006).

From this dialog, it can be demonstrated that the concept of *tanggap ing sasmito* is reflected by Azan’s reply, by lending his motor cycle to Safik. It is right that Safik does not directly express his willingness to borrow a motorcycle to Azan. However, his expression “Mas adoh mas, mengko kesuwen” should be interpreted that “he needs a motorcycle to go there”. As a good Javanese, Azan can catch the implied meaning stated by Safik by offering him his motorcycle to Safik. If Azan cannot catch the implied meaning, Safik may change his strategy of politeness to the more direct one which may impose his speech partner, Azan. To some extent, Azan may lose his face because he can be considered as a miserly person.

**Dialog 3:** between a father (F) and his daughter (D) who came home late at night.

(12) F: *Iki isih jam piro kok wis mulih ?*

‘It is still early in the evening, why have you come home?’

D: *Ngapunten Pak, wonten acara dhateng sekolahan*

‘I am sorry Dad; I have some business at school’

F: *Ya, senajan akeh acara mosok ora ngerti waktu.*

‘I know, but don’t you have any other time/why did you go home so late?’

D: *Inggih Pak ... mboten badhe kula wangsuli malih.*

‘Yes, Dad.... I promise it will not happen again’

In the first utterance F greeted his daughter by a question *Iki isih jam piro kok wis mulih?* ‘It is still early in the evening, why have you come home?’ On the surface, this utterance means that his daughter was too early to come home, but the question implicitly means that his father was angry with his daughter because she went home so late. As a grown-up girl, it is not culturally accepted to come home late at night. His real meaning is not directly stated to her daughter, or what he meant is distinct from what he said (implicature). As a Javanese girl, she understood that her father was angry with her. Therefore, she directly apologized to her daddy by saying, *Ngapunten Pak*, ‘I am sorry Dad’, then she gave the reason for being late *wonten acara dhateng sekolahan* ‘I have some business at school’. This reason is only an attempt of the girl to protect her face since her reason seems less reasonable. Her father knew that she did not tell the truth. Accordingly, her parent repeated his statement that it is not good culturally for a girl coming home at such time by giving more direct expression (and higher intonation) *Ya, senajan akeh acara mosok ora ngerti waktu* ‘I know, but don’t you have any other time?’ As a good Javanese girl, she also understood that her father was angry because she made a mistake, so that she promised not to do it any more, by replying *Inggih Pak ... mboten badhe kula wangsuli malih* ‘Yes, Dad.... I promise it will not happen any more’.

## CONCLUSION

As the language of the people of Java, Javanese is strongly influenced by the Javanese culture. Some concepts of the Javanese people, such as:

*tata krama*, *andhap-asor*, and *tanggap ing sasmita* play the vital role in the politeness of Javanese. These concepts are clearly reflected in Javanese, especially as the devices of politeness. The reflection can be examined through the details analyzing the linguistic data of Javanese, especially in relation to politeness. As a result, it is almost impossible to speak Javanese politely without comprehending and applying these cultural concepts. Speaking Javanese, therefore, cannot only rely on one's vocabulary and grammar (morpho-syntax), but also on the comprehensiveness of the Javanese culture (pragmatics). In other words, the uniqueness of the Javanese politeness is the result of the reflection of the Javanese culture.

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