

# Gender and the Indonesian pronouns

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## ABSTRACT

The absence of a gender opposition in the Indonesian pronominal system requires special strategies in the translation from languages which do have such an opposition illustrated in the first part of this article. In the second part the lexical and morphological means are discussed with which Indonesian expresses gender, culminating in a description of the use of *perempuan* and *wanita*, *pria* and *laki-laki*.

## KEYWORDS

(Semantics of) gender oppositions, personal pronouns, Indonesian.

It<sup>1</sup> is the rule rather than the exception that the categorical semantic oppositions of languages belonging to different families do not match, or that semantic oppositions which permeate the grammar of language X seem to be neutralized or irrelevant in language Y. It obviously poses problems for the translator, if his/her target language obligatorily differentiates what is left to context or common sense in the source language. Or the other way around, especially if failure to make the particular distinction explicit would cause ambiguity.

## NO SEX

A case in point is the limited function of most personal pronominal forms in Indonesian. Feminist observers of Indonesian have hailed the language for its failure to differentiate between men and women in its personal pronouns.

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference *Langues d'Asie du Sud-Est*, Paris, 17-19 December 2009. As the majority in the audience was not familiar with Indonesian the paper still bears the traces of observations which will be trivial to the average Indonesian reader. I am grateful to the editors of *Wacana, Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya* that they are nevertheless willing to publish the paper without major further adaptations.

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