THE USE OF SPEECH LEVELS IN SUNDANESE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The use of lexical variables to represent social meaning has been commented on for various languages, most notably Javanese, Japanese and Korean. An update which does justice to these studies, even of the Javanese material only, is beyond the scope of this article, but the reader is referred to the monograph by Errington (1985), which appears to be the most recent treatment of Javanese.

Sundanese speech levels have been treated by Kern (1906), Kats and Soeriadiradja (1927), Eringa (1949), Satjadibrata (1956), Wirakusumah and Djajawiguna (1957), Noorduyin (1963), Wessing (1974), Djajawiguna (1978), Ayatrohaedi (1980), and Soedradjat (1986).

Although Sundanese speech levels have been discussed by a number of scholars, these studies have not been based on the analysis of actual usage, but of reported usage. This has yielded a standard model which, in the words of Wessing (1974:12), appeals to "features of the social environment in which the speech event is taking place", most notably, "(a) social status of the addressee or referent, (b) social status of the speaker, (c) the difference (if any) between (a) and (b) [and], (d) the degree of friendship (intimacy) between the speaker and the addressee".

This paper presents this model in some detail, then discusses the results of the analysis of 60 or so texts to observe how speech levels are actually used by Sundanese interlocutors. Results of this analysis reveal previously unreported aspects of interlocutors' knowledge governing use of speech levels.

2. THE SPEECH SITUATION

The estimated 1994 population of Indonesia is about 200 million, of which over 118 million reside on the island of Java. Of those 118 million, an estimated 28 million are speakers of Sundanese, the regional language of West Java.¹

The Sundanese language situation is succinctly summed on the macro-level by Harsojo (1983:300–301):

Nowadays Sundanese is used widely among the population of West Java. In villages, the language of instruction is Sundanese, whereas, in towns,


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Sundanese is utilized primarily in the family circle, in conversation among friends and intimate acquaintances, and also in public and official places between people who are aware they both know Sundanese. With regard to language refinement, it is often said, that pure and refined Sundanese is to be found in the area of Priangan, that is, in the regencies of Ciamis, Tasikmalaya, Garut, Bandung, Sumedang, Sukabumi and Cianjur. Even now, the Cianjur dialect is still considered the most refined Sundanese. From Cianjur came the songs for lute and flute referred to as Cianjuran. Considered less refined is the Sundanese near the north coast of Java, for example, that spoken in Banten, Karawang, Bogor and Cirebon. [Furthermore,] The language of the Baduy, which is spoken in south Banten, is archaic Sundanese.

MAP OF RELEVANT PARTS OF WEST AND CENTRAL JAVA

The Baduy people have fascinated other Indonesians and foreigners alike for some time now. A subgroup of Sundanese people, the Baduy have lived apart from Islamic and Western influences with which most Sundanese people have been interacting for centuries. Unlike other Sundanese they have resisted cultural change. They did not convert to Islam. The Baduy reside in the mountains at the extreme western end of Java, in south Banten. Here they remained out of reach of imperial and Islamic cultural incursions. One story has it that their ancestors, defeated warriors of the pre-Islamic Kingdom of Pajajaran, fled there after suffering defeat in battle at the hands of the Islamic kingdom of Banten, probably in
the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, but this is now believed to be a romanticised view.\(^2\)

In modern times, the psychological impact of meeting some Baduy people has been recorded by the Sundanese literary scholar, Ajip Rosidi, who highlighted their social characteristics which may be close to those of pre-contact Sundanese people. Included in these characteristics are, of course, those of their language. Rosidi (1980:128) writes:

I have never done a formal study, but when meeting several of the Baduy, I noted no unique physical characteristics. There were, however, striking contrasts to other Sundanese people. Immediately evident were features developed as a response to their environment, to nature and as a result of their education – in short, culture traits: the distinctive black or dark blue clothing, the ancient head scarf, the behavior so full of self-confidence [as opposed to the shyness, *malu*, of other Sundanese], and 4) the language, which does not symbolize relative social levels of speaker and addressee.

Speculation about how speech levels came to be an integral part of Sundanese in the areas of West Java has yielded various explanations. The following appears to be the most credible, given geographical factors:

Aside from an emotional, literary evaluation, the existence of the distinction between refined and less refined, and pure and less pure Sundanese may perhaps be explained from the point of view of Sundanese history: **Priangan, for example, was known to have been culturally influenced by the Islamic Javanese Kingdom of Mataram. In the 19th century, there were familial and cultural relations between Sundanese nobility, specifically in the area of Sumedang, with Javanese nobility in Solo and Yogyakarta. In addition, it is possible that the psychological climate and environment exerted an influence upon certain aspects of language.** (Harsojo 1983:301)

The location of Sumedang in the easternmost part of West Java, along with Ciamis, Tasikmalaya, and Garut (that is, close to what is today Central Java) gives credence to this theory.

On the personal level of interlocutors in actual conversations, historically, Satjadibrata reports (quoted in Soedradjat 1986:108):

The higher speech level was employed among members of the regents’ [= chief district administrators’] families. In fact, only upper class people, descendants of the royal families, knew the speech level system. The speech levels were formally taught in [Dutch] schools only in the early 20th century. Speech levels thus became a part of the life of educated Sundanese people (Rosidi 1980).


The use of speech levels has changed over time in such a way that some levels are now used differently from the way they were used very much earlier. Some of these levels [i.e. P (medium) and LP (very high level)] are rarely used nowadays. Only in the *wayang* [puppet drama] performance is the high level now used [in the way that it was used socially in the past]. In the past, the high level was used to show respect to the *menak* ‘aristocrats’. Nowadays, however,

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\(^2\) Prof. Noorduyn has called my attention to the challenging of this interpretation by Bakels (1989).
the distinction in class based on blood is not significant, and therefore the high level [i.e. L] is used to any addressee whom a speaker thinks should be given respect.

Variant terminological systems and models of speech level use exist. Of these, Satjadibatra's (1956) seems to be somewhat of a standard formulation, because Noorduyn, Wessing and Soedradjat rely heavily on it.

According to Satjadibatra (1956:11), two levels constitute the frame for the system: Kasar (K) 'low level' or 'general conversational speech' and Lemes (L) 'high level' or 'speech in which polite (i.e. Lemes) vocabulary is used'.

People are said to be 'speaking Lemes' or 'speaking Kasar' according to the overall impression the listener derives from the utterances s/he hears.

Finer distinctions are possible within this framework, though very infrequently used: Lemes Pisan (LP) 'very polite', Panengah (P) 'rather polite', and Kasar Pisan (KP) 'crude, earthy'.

3. SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF SPEECH LEVEL USE

The nature of the social relationship of interlocutors influences selection of speech level. Social relationship is a function of the interaction of the relative statuses of interlocutors in the conversation.

Types of social relationships can be seen against the backdrop of social groupings in Sundanese society. Harsojo (1983:305) writes:

Economics, politics and modern ideology, governmental administration, communications, and education have created an upper social stratum, consisting of village administrators, teachers, information specialists, office workers, students, members of the armed forces, merchants and entrepreneurs, all of whom possess an outward looking orientation. On the other hand, there is a lower stratum, farmers, whose number is great, most of whom are still illiterate and whose life style is still traditional. People on the upper stratum possess economic skills based on the principle of seeking profit and possess connections with middlemen and large merchants in cities. It may also be said that all economic power of the village is centered in the upper stratum, and, generally, the bond between the upper and lower classes takes the form of debt or contracts which do not benefit the lower stratum, whose economy is weak. However, whenever we investigate in West Java, of course, not all villages have experienced the same changes.

Surjadi (1974:22–24) also provides an insight into the social structure of Sundanese people, in the context of modernisation:

Hildred Geertz (Geertz 1963:16–18) made a connection between means of livelihood with the social system. In cities she proposed a social composition consisting of "the urban elite, the urban middle class and the urban proletariat." The urban elite consists of the diplomatic community and businessmen, communities of foreign businessmen from China, Arab countries, and India. Next, “an Indonesian metropolitan superculture” is in the process of forming itself by cultivating symbols such as higher education, ability to speak foreign languages, overseas experience and possession of western produced luxury goods such as automobiles.