

THE SUNDANESE PARTICLES TEH, MAH, AND TEA

Franz Müller-Gotama

California State University, Fullerton

1. Introduction

Sundanese is a Western Austronesian language spoken by more than 25 million people in the Indonesian province of West Java, where it is the principal mode of communication in everyday life. It is taught in primary school, and there are several Sundanese newspapers and magazines as well as a literary tradition, even some radio and television broadcasts. Still, Sundanese is steadily losing ground to the national language. This process is evident, for example, in the fact that current Sundanese publications deal only sparsely with topics transcending strictly local interests. Such matters are the domain of Indonesian, which consequently also feeds a steady stream of loanwords referring to properties of the modern world into Sundanese.

As a subject of linguistic investigation, Sundanese has long been neglected as linguists' interests focussed on Indonesian and the much larger Javanese, both of which are closely related and share many basic typological properties with Sundanese, for instance with regard to morphology and basic word order. Modern linguistic work was pioneered in a series of articles by Robins (1953a, 1953b, 1957, 1959, 1965, 1968). Hardjadibrata (1985) is a tagmemic grammar, while linguistic work published in Indonesia tends to concentrate on morphology. Djajasudarma Idat (1986) is an outstanding study of inchoative particles in Sundanese.

The particles teh, mah, and tea have not been discussed explicitly in the literature. Hardjadibrata (1985: 33) distinguishes them as a group from other types of particles, characterizing them as markers of "emphasis" and as "phrase markers", but he provides no discussion or examples. The present paper intends to show that these three particles form a unified functional system for marking the information structure

of a text, even though they have different structural characteristics. mah is shown to be a focus marker introducing new or contrastive information, teh a marker of known, topical information, and tea a marker indicating that a previously mentioned participant is being reintroduced into the discourse. Structurally, mah and teh adjoin to the right of any maximal constituent while tea behaves like a special kind of determiner. The existence of this functional system in Sundanese constitutes a major typological contrast with the closely related Bahasa Indonesia.

The data for this study come from various types of texts, including the novel Paeh di Popotongan, the weeklies Giwankara and Mangle, the school text series Piwulang Basa and a collection of children's stories entitled Warna-Warna Kaulinan. Additional data were provided by Sundanese language consultants.¹

2. Functional considerations

The distribution of the three particles cannot be uniquely established on the level of individual sentences. All three occur interchangeably in many of the same syntactic environments, as shown in 1a-c, where each follows the same noun phrase; use of the particles also seems to be grammatically "optional" in the sense that a sentence will still be well formed without either mah, teh, or tea, cf. sentence 1d:²

- (1) a. Lanceukna mah digawe di kantor.
 older:brother-3 work in office
 'His older brother works in an office.'
- b. Lanceukna teh digawe di kantor.
 older:brother-3 work in office
 'His older brother works in an office.'
- c. Lanceukna tea digawe di kantor.
 older:brother-3 work in office
 'His older brother works in an office.'

- d. Lanceukna [---] digawe di kantor.
 older:brother-3 work in office
 'His older brother works in an office.'

As soon as the analytical domain is extended beyond the sentence, the distinctive functions of the particles begin to emerge. In question - answer sequences, for example, teh is associated with the constituent which sets the domain for the question whereas mah marks the constituent which provides the requested new information in the answer, as shown in examples 2 and 3. It is not possible to use mah in place of teh, or vice versa, in any of these cases.

- (2) Q: Eusina buku eta teh naha kataji?
 content-POSS book that Q interesting
 'Is (the content of) that book interesting?'

A: Komo bae kataji mah.
 above:all interesting
 'Very interesting.'

- (3) Q: Anu indit ka pasar teh saha?
 REL go to market who
 'Who is (the one) going to the market?'

A: Nu indit ka pasar Dadas mah.
 REL go to market Dadas
 'The one who went to the market is Dadas.'

In other words, the function of teh is to identify the setting (to use the term of Mathesius 1939, cited in Bosson 1989:28) which the question refers to, i.e., that information which the speaker assumes to be known or shared by the hearer. mah marks the core new information provided in the answer. teh therefore functions as a prototypical topic marker and mah as a prototypical focus marker.

The function of the focus marker mah includes that of contrastive focus, which in some other languages like Korean

or Japanese is usurped by the topic marker. Sentences 4 and 5 illustrate the contrastive use of mah:

- (4) Galah Bandung mah nu maenna cukup ku tiluan,
REL play-DEF enough by 3-NOM

sedengkeun galah biasa mah paling saeutikna
while normal most little

oge kudu aya dalapan urangna.

also must exist eight person

‘As for the Bandung variety of galang, the ones who play are enough as a group of three [i.e., it requires only three players], while for the normal galang there must at least be eight persons.’

- (5) Nu penting mah, hayang boga anak.

REL important want have child

‘The important thing is, I want to have children.’

The particles have the same functions in simple declarative sentences:

- (6) Silaing mah, Ya ditugaskeun jadi mata-mata
you Ya PASS-duty-TRAN become spy

teh belegug pisan.

stupid very

‘As for you, Ya, being made a spy is very stupid.’

In sentence 6, the speaker is just turning to Ya, contrastively singling him out from a group of his friends and thus addressing him with a mah phrase. The fact that Ya had worked as a spy had become evident in the course of the children’s war game and was thus known to all; consequently, it is expressed as a nominalized verb phrase marked with teh. In sentence 7, a previously mentioned person surprisingly turns out to be Sundanese despite his outward appearance: