

Public Speaking: On Indonesian As the Language of the Nation

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In August 1998, an interviewer for an Indonesian news weekly asked Amien Rais, a major figure in national Islamic politics and founder of the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional), why he had altered the name of the party from the originally proposed Partai Amanat Bangsa. He replied, “We chose Partai Amanat Nasional because it would be better translated into English as *National Mandate Party*, not *People’s Mandate Party*. Because the word *people* in English has leftist connotations” (Amien 1998; English words italicized in the original; translation mine). Of course Amien Rais was making a shrewd political calculation in this bid for international support, but it is striking that he expresses the decision with reference to translation so unapologetically. He seems to find it a perfectly ordinary matter to encounter Indonesian as doubly foreign. Having

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been a childhood speaker of Javanese, he already comes to Indonesian as a second language. In addition, he readily imagines it from the perspective of English. Moreover, he has already, and one assumes unself-consciously, incorporated a so-called loan-word, *nasional*, into the Indonesian, as if in anticipation of this future translation.

Readers of Indonesian print media will be familiar with this pattern of glossing backward that seemingly views the language from the position of a hypothetical English-speaker—or of an Indonesian unsure of his or her words. What does a national language offer that so easily invites its speakers to take a view from afar? Certainly not the values of incommensurable local particularity. A dominant strand of Indonesian language ideology challenges assumptions that nationhood always demands to be naturalized with clear boundaries, stable locations, and deep origins. On the contrary, Indonesian, like perhaps Swahili or Filipino, and in contrast to many national, ethnic, and religiously freighted languages such as French, Gaelic, Hebrew, or Tamil, is *not* normally depicted as a language of ancient lineage or as a closely guarded cultural property.¹ Nor has any of this seemed to trouble either its promoters or most ordinary speakers, for whom its “modernity” and relatively cosmopolitan character are taken for granted, if sometimes problematic.

The self-conscious modernity and even cosmopolitan claims of Indonesian as a national standard have been inseparable from a certain projection of otherness. This otherness is related to, but ideologically distinct from, the forms of linguistic difference characteristic of, for example, *lingue franche*, honorific registers, taboo vocabularies, scriptural and high literary languages, or commonplace plurilingualism. Like other linguistic forms, the national standard draws on semiotic features immanent in language per se, which underlie its potential for producing both intersubjectivity and objectification, for being disembedded from and reinserted into particular contexts, for providing speakers with a range of distinctive social “voices,” and for mediating their reflexivity.² It does so, however, in order to underwrite Indonesian’s apparent potential as a superordinate and cosmopolitan language of purportedly anti-“feudal” (*feodal*) and reconstituted social and political identities. This promise is inseparable from the imaginability of the nation as a project of modernity and from the semiotics of its possible publics,

1. *Bahasa Indonesia*, literally “the language of Indonesia,” is a variant of Malay; whether the linguistic distinctions between them matter ideologically is highly context-dependent.

2. Foundational texts on intersubjectivity, voice, objectification, and context in language include Benveniste 1971 and Vološinov 1973; see also Hanks 1996; Lee 1997; Lucy 1993; and Silverstein and Urban 1996.

both domestic and abroad—and it is this promise to which Amien Rais seems to be responding.

The Otherness of the National Language

Indonesian is a language whose ideological value has derived in part from being portrayed to its speakers as a markedly second and subsequent language. If it can seem, in some ways, to demand the sacrifice of one's first language, or at least its relegation to the past, the private, the local, or the subjective, this potential loss often seems to provoke remarkably little mourning: ethnic language politics or revitalization movements have been surprisingly rare in the archipelago. If the national language does not inspire love in all who claim it, this is largely for *other* reasons, having to do with general paradoxes of national subjecthood and with the specific violence and tedium of an authoritarian state. And this suggests that the history of Indonesian still contains alternative futures, streams of heteroglossia lost underground that may yet surface as the post-Suharto state loses its centralizing ambitions or, at least, its ability to realize them. Moreover, for all the peculiarities of Indonesian colonial and postcolonial history, the rise of the national language and its attendant ideologies also reflect pervasive problems in the mediation of translocal identities and large-scale publics by semiotic practices.

As scholars such as James Siegel (1986, 1997) and Joseph Errington (1998) have pointed out, the perceived otherness of Indonesian has at least two aspects. One is biographical: for most of its speakers Indonesian was acquired as a second language, in marked contrast to languages denoted as “local” (*bahasa daerah*; see Keane 1997a). The second is cognitive. In contrast to the first language children learn at home, and even to such second languages as are picked up, say, in playgrounds, plantations, or marketplaces, Indonesian is encountered as relatively objectified, something one learns by way of explicit rules. Unlike that first language, it is commonly spoken of as needing purposeful manipulation, to be “developed,” “modernized,” and made into a cosmopolitan literary vehicle.

In being portrayed as, in some sense, belonging to no one in particular, Indonesian would seem to be open to anyone. This portrayal runs counter to the Herderian tradition that seeks in language the deep roots of an organic people that pre-exists the nation, a search that elsewhere can give rise to a violently exclusionary politics of language, blood, and soil. Paradoxes confound primordialism, of course. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) has observed, even an insistence on distinctive ancient origins is bound up with the categories of “history” whose very claims to universality inevitably return them to a Western frame of reference and

mode of knowing. This paradox is often taken to undermine nationalism's promises of autonomy and liberation. By contrast, the rise of Indonesian has been associated with a rather cheerful view of the claim that nationalist aspirations are founded on universal categories. And, no doubt, this involves other paradoxes. According to Benedict Anderson (1996), the Indonesian language for many early nationalists seemed to lend itself to openness, a universalism into whose referential categories—politician, striker, citizen—anyone, in principle, might enter. But this is more than a matter of introducing new words and ideas. The apparent universalism involves self-conscious efforts to take advantage of language's general pragmatic capacities for abstraction and decontextualization in order to make possible new and expansive modes of circulation. Indeed, when those nationalists imagined liberation—from colonialism, to be sure, but also from kinship, villages, and what (under this universalism) came to be thought of as “feudal” (*feodal*) traditions—they envisioned a language purposefully stripped of social indexes and cultural particularities. At times they seemed to strive for what Michael Warner (2002: 59) has called that “indefinite and impersonal address, [without which] the public would have none of its special importance to modernity.” Thus it would seem to be this very otherness, its sense of openness and even the historical agency it evokes, that makes it peculiarly suitable as the language of the nation as a project of modernity. But as the failure of Indonesian (so far) to fulfill these visions suggests, such projects do not come into being—or fail—as thought-worlds or representations alone. They require both practical embodiment in concrete semiotic forms and the ideological specificity by which those forms are interpreted within political contexts—with the forms and their interpretations existing in unstable and even contradictory relations to one another.

In terms of linguistic ideology (Kroskrity 2000), Indonesian makes two claims to universality that reflect the claims of modernist nationalisms more broadly, since the language is in principle available to anyone and is supposed to be semantically transparent to other languages. It should therefore be a suitable medium for the projection and fostering of a persona suitable for speaking in a public and for identification with the nation. And it should take a recognizable place in the cosmopolitan plane of *other* languages understood to be modern. Indonesian may turn out to be only an extreme instance of a common circumstance in the semiotics and linguistics of nations and their potential publics. The language that carries the greatest political and cultural weight may involve a sense of willful self-displacement, as speakers understand themselves to be giving up, or at least subordinating, a local language, retrospectively construed as their “mother tongue,” in favor of one deemed to transcend the local in both space and

historical time. Indeed, this process, in one form or another, is widespread, as linguistic standardization is recasting normal plurilingualism into a hierarchy of localities encompassed within larger linguistic spheres that explicitly aspire to hegemony (Silverstein 1998: 410).

Yet we should not assume we know in advance just what speakers see themselves as giving up. The perceived value of a “mother tongue” does not necessarily lie in its ties to local group identity. People may associate it with negative character traits, like Taiap speakers in Papua New Guinea who contrast their supposed antisocial willfulness to the public spirit imputed to Tok Pisin, the national language (Kulick 1992). Or the links between local identity and language may be sustained by a variety of conflicting strategies as the latter comes under increasing pressure from the national standard (Hill and Hill 1986). And given the enormous variation of circumstances, from the Javanese spoken by millions to the linguistic microecologies to their east, the local meanings of Indonesian are surely not uniform. But even the most localized responses to Indonesian will reflect the national discourses about it.

These are questions of language ideology, but not all possible claims about language are equally plausible. Ideologies of national and postcolonial languages, and their supposed benefits for development, modernity, or, say, rationality, draw on the historically specific interpretations and the exploitation of universal, but not fully determinate, semiotic features. Indonesian has been a central part of a self-consciously “modern” project of national self-creation. With this problematic word, I refer to the ubiquitous *concepts* of modernity that orient both high-level policies and everyday activities. Of particular relevance here are popular ideas about historical rupture with what gets cast as tradition and the implications of that rupture for the capacities of humans to be the agents of their own transformation (Berman 1988; Taylor 1989). For such ideas to be inhabitable requires concrete forms of semiotic mediation, among which linguistic habitus, given its sheer pervasiveness, holds a privileged role. But this habitus is never sufficient unto itself and inevitably involves the metalinguistic and, by extension, meta-cultural (Urban 2001) interpretations offered by linguistic ideologies. And these come to the fore especially to the extent that a heightened sense of agency, for instance in the guise of instrumentalist policies of language reform, makes them the special focus of attention. As the example of Indonesian suggests, an account of the historical particularities of languages and the power relations they involve cannot overlook the endemic problems posed by the semiotics of language and the resulting implications for the identification of speakers with “their” language—and their potential alienation from it.

Babel As the Semiotic Condition

National languages have usually been posed, in part, as solutions to the problem of divisiveness figured by the biblical Tower of Babel. Babel is an account of social difference that focuses on the material forms of lexical signifiers. In his classic discussion, George Steiner (1975: 58) portrays the story of Babel as the loss of a world in which Adam's act of naming brings things into being. We may see this as implying two kinds of separations. One is a rupture between two linguistic functions: reference and denotation, on the one hand, and performativity, with all the active and interactive features of speech, on the other hand (see Lee 1997; Silverstein 1976). Thus, the story would go, once upon a time to name was already to act; subsequently, in our postlapsarian world, naming has become distinct from action proper or, at most, merely a certain, highly attenuated kind of act, the (mere) saying of words. The other separation follows on the first: if naming is only a linguistic act (and if denoting is the only act language legitimately performs), then there must be a rupture between what exists in the world and the names for what exists. This is the foundation for the arbitrariness of the sign, the semiotic condition of possibility for linguistic diversity. Only, according to this narrative, it is the rupture in language that brings about the subsequent social diversity. By combining two kinds of distinction—between linguistic functions and between signifier and signified—the story implicates the loss of socio-linguistic *unity* with the loss of the full *power* of words. The disunity among the speakers of now disparate languages merely compounds a second linguistic problem, that of the speakers' relationships to their own words.

How can a view of language that is so general shed light on the more particular questions of national identity and its language ideologies? Certain semiotic properties come to be topics of interest or sources of concern only under certain circumstances. Not everyone at every historical moment, for instance, has taken the existence of the sound/sense distinction to be troubling. That the mediation of language itself must necessarily involve some sort of alienation or violence is, however, a common theme in some contexts. For example, some religious reformers have seen the distinction between sound and sense in hierarchical and historicizing terms. If sense should be dominant, sound perpetually threatens to disrupt it. Thus, for instance, Protestantism saw Catholic uses of language as insincere, archaic, and even idolatrous (Keane 1997b). Since Catholicism's fixed liturgies apparently emphasize the iterability of texts, they seem to privilege material form over immaterial content, tempting the worshiper to fetishize ritual rather than attend to the spirit. Conversely, orthodox Muslims respond to the same semiotic problem by asserting that the Qur'an can exist only in the original divine Arabic forms.

Aspects of this worry were echoed early on by Wilhelm von Humboldt (Steiner 1975: 82), who portrayed language as external to humans and thus a source of violence to them. What Humboldt shared with Protestantism was a devaluing of the materiality of the word relative to the autonomy of human spirit. Playing up the post-Adamic separation of words from the world, Humboldt implicitly portrayed language as standing between humans and the things themselves, a view whose implications persist in Ferdinand de Saussure's (1986) doctrine of the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relation. These worries about the form/sense distinction produce a variety of alternative scenarios. According to some utopian thought, if humans can get beyond differences of form, they might find translation's underlying enabling condition: a deeper universality. And this recurrent theme animates an important strand in ideas of "modernity."

The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign underlying most academic theories, at least since John Locke (Bauman and Briggs 2000), can be a source of ambivalence for modernizing projects. Potentially a source of alienation, it also allows one to see language as the object of human actions.³ Language may be manipulated, improved, developed, perhaps even created anew. That which renders language a possible object of suspicion at the same time makes it available for optimism about what language engineering can achieve. Thus the promise of the national language often seems due to its subjection to human agency. This language should share certain properties of divine language (transcending existing disunities both within the nation itself and between it and others), but also, being public, it remains human. It should translate both in a vertical sense, elevating speakers out of the social and semantic confines of their local languages, and in a horizontal sense, permitting them to circulate among other languages of the world. This potential for publicness and circulation is a function, in part, of the suppression of those indexical links to particular contexts—to social interactions, parochial memories, traditional hierarchies, obscure places—that are part of what make "local" languages supposedly unfit for the nation.

These fundamental semiotic issues bear specific historical entailments. Whether people are interested in the decentering that language involves and how they respond in practice are historically variable questions. This decentering also raises

3. Locke and Johann Gottfried Herder both assumed that ordinary people are unable to reflect on their language (Bauman and Briggs 2000). Similarly, Johann Gottlieb Fichte saw the authenticity of language as resting on its being not malleable (Irvine and Gal 2000: 63). Saussure (1986) reflected these views in holding that arbitrariness precluded purposeful manipulation of language *in principle*, since there would be no reason to choose one signifier over another. Note, however, that this also precludes any principled *obstacle* to change, should speakers decide to do so on nonlinguistic grounds.

questions about the political status of languages. If national language takes the decentering inherent in language and carries it to a higher degree, making it an objectified focus of ideological concern, then what does it mean to say the national language “belongs” to the people of the nation?

Babel and Domination in Postcolonial Critique

The story of Babel invites us to wonder why there should be differences when once there was unity—and, it would seem, expresses a yearning for that lost universality. This question, most puzzling when language is viewed primarily as a vehicle for the making of (potentially) true statements, becomes less mysterious when the social and political pragmatics of language are considered. Sociolinguistics has long recognized, for instance, that distinctions of language do not simply reflect but help construct social boundaries. The need for translation, then, is not simply contingent but displays speakers’ and listeners’ political *insistence* on their distinctiveness from others. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) have argued, the constituting of identities involves ideologies about language differences, including shifting perceptions about the very existence of linguistic boundaries. Moreover, it is clear that boundaries do not simply separate but also hierarchize. Linguistic differences are rarely if ever neutral, typically involving both ideological and practical relations of encompassment, subordination, and dominance (Silverstein 1998).

In the postcolonial context, these basic semiotic problems underlie arguments about efforts to reclaim local linguistic identity and discursive powers from the effects of colonial domination. On the one hand, a modernist and development-oriented position tends to portray a standardized national language as a vehicle of the movement toward universality, bringing peoples together in a global ecumene. For instance, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1994) has argued that African writers should use English because it allows them to communicate across Africa and with the world at large.

An opposed position stresses the ways in which translation offends against the self-possession of the speaker. Translation requires some sort of explication or contextualization that is not necessary in the original and thus offends against the shared tacit knowledge that defines intimates. Explication can seem aggressive or alienating if performed on words that should have been left for the recipient to interpret. In colonial situations, the Western claims to understand and master indigenous others that are enacted through translation may be crucial to the everyday workings of power. Here the claims of universality mask and legitimate

a historically specific set of political relations. Thus the reinstatement of opacity between languages becomes a means of resisting domination and fostering autonomous agency (Mahrez 1992; Niranjana 1992; cf. Liu 1995; Spivak 1992).

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1994: 438) wrote that when he was a child, he spoke Gikuyu: “The language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.” This harmony was broken when he went to the colonial school, which introduced a rupture between the language of education and that of home. Invoking this experience to attack Achebe’s modernist optimism, Ngũgĩ (1999: 436) treats language as owned by its speakers. Thus colonial education is a form of expropriation—it takes away one’s property—and alienation—it forces one to use a language that belongs to colonizers and the indigenous “petty bourgeoisie.” Ngũgĩ links this property model of alienation to another, a rupture within linguistic experience. As he portrays this rupture, the distinction between speech and writing parallels that between language that carries one’s own culture (1994: 439) and language that communicates with outsiders. He thus seems to conflate two kinds of “violence”: that which transpires in the power relations of colonialism and a more general schism that lies between authentic speech (that of the mother, the hearth, and “real-life struggles” [1994: 437]) and the semiotic properties that decenter language—its learnability, its iterability (Derrida 1982), and the decontextualizing effects of writing. But by conflating these semiotic properties, which are inescapable characteristics of language, with colonial relations, which are historically specific forms of power, Ngũgĩ risks making any challenge to actual relations of domination unthinkable or at least unspeakable.

Achebe and Ngũgĩ represent two versions of high modernism—cosmopolitan and identitarian—that flourished in the early postcolonial world. Since that time, complexities and contradictions have become increasingly evident. Cosmopolitanism (see Pollock et al. 2000) draws indigenous elites into foreign allegiances that may exclude those without access to the requisite education and control over mobility. The essentializing claims common to national historiography and identity politics are marked by their colonial genealogies. With the poststructuralist turn in postcolonial studies, the respective language ideologies of the cosmopolitan and the nationalist have become equally suspect. The presumption of universal transparency that allows Achebe to assume that the African writer could enter freely into English literature has been thrown into doubt; likewise Ngũgĩ’s romantic assimilation of ethnic group to language and of both to an originary self-presence.

One Language, One People: From Malay to Indonesian

The modernizing projects that have been so central to nationalist movements and postcolonial states therefore reflect certain older anxieties that respond to persistent semiotic features of language. One of these is the notion that language, consisting of forms external to, and not fully possessed or controlled by, the individual speaker, is a form of violence to human self-presence. Thus, for example, Ngũgĩ sees the move between languages to involve not merely a political domination whose medium includes language, but an assault on the intimacy of one's relation to one's own words in a violence both parallel to and serving that of colonialism. But what if one's own most politically vital identity is constituted through a language whose greatest strength lies in its supposed *distance* from the intimacies of the mother tongue? What if that identity even seems to demand a certain willing *sacrifice*, a letting go, of one's first language? The Indonesian case raises questions about what it means to "possess" a language and to translate between that and other languages also felt to be one's own or others'.

Indonesian, the official language of nationhood, government, education, formal communication, and, in less standardized forms, of most mass-mediated communication, is a variant of Malay. The transformation of Malay into the increasingly standardized language of, by turns, a colonial administration, a nationalist movement, a state apparatus, and a national culture was, if nothing else, an effective response to an extreme linguistic situation. Even now some five hundred languages are spoken in Indonesia, fourteen of them by over one million speakers each (Steinhauer 1994). But the choice of Malay as the national language was not obvious. It was the native language of a small minority, in contrast to several numerically and culturally dominant groups. For the first half of the twentieth century, the educated elite was far more comfortable with Dutch, and many agreed with their Dutch teachers in considering Malay—"that preposterous language," as one called it (quoted in Sutherland 1968: 124)—to be too crude for serious undertakings. Yet compared to, say, the more contested position of Hindi in India, Indonesian is remarkable for its apparent success. Due in part to the absence of the ethnic or political resistance encountered by many postcolonial national languages, being identified directly with neither the colonizer nor any privileged ethnic group, Indonesian has spread rapidly in the last fifty years.⁴

4. In 1928, 4.9 percent of the population of the Indies spoke Malay as a native language, compared to 47.8 percent Javanese and 14.5 percent Sundanese (Moeliono 1994: 378). In 1990, 15.5 percent claimed Indonesian as a first language (compared to 38.8 percent Javanese), but over 70 percent called it their second language (Hooker 1993: 273; Mühlhäusler 1996: 205; Steinhauer 1994).

Malay originated along the Straits of Malacca between Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, but by the time Europeans arrived in the area in the fifteenth century, Malay had become a well-established lingua franca from the Moluccas in the east, to the Philippines in the north, and westward into the Indian Ocean.⁵ Dutch colonial policies and practices further reinforced its position across the Indies. Unlike the British in India and the French in Africa, the Dutch never seriously attempted to inculcate their own language as the medium of rule and until the twentieth century often tried to prevent even indigenous elites from speaking it (Groeneboer 1998). Instead, missionaries and local officials tended to rely on some form of Malay, introducing it to new localities and contexts of use. By the end of the nineteenth century, Dutch scholars were attempting to produce a standardized “high” variety of the language for administrative purposes to replace what they called the “babble-Malay” of many officials. They took as their model the literary forms of the Riau sultanate, which were quite distinct from the existing practices of most Malay speakers. The nationalist standardizing project during and after the colonial era continued along similar lines.

The birth of “Indonesian” under that name is conventionally dated to the Youth Oath of 1928. From that moment, Dutch and Javanese rapidly ceased to be serious contenders as languages of the nationalist movement. The oath committed the movement (whose leaders commonly debated in Dutch) to one land, one people, one language. But the language, called “bahasa Indonesian” even before there was an entity legally called “Indonesia,” was increasingly viewed not just as a useful medium for communication but as an emblem of nationhood. Propagation was largely a top-down process, and it is perhaps a fitting irony that one of the most effective forces for its dissemination was the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Under the Japanese, use of Dutch was prohibited and Indonesian was promoted as the chief medium of schooling and propaganda—even the talking bird in the Batavia zoo was retrained to greet ladies in Indonesian instead of Dutch (Wertheim 1964).

A growth in self-conscious efforts by both government and nationalists to produce an Indonesian literature for the tiny reading public can also be dated to the 1920s. In contrast to “low Malay” writing, which had thrived in urban centers since the nineteenth century, these ventures were marked by strenuous efforts at standardizing, “improving,” and “modernizing” the language.⁶ The rise of Indonesian

5. For the history of Indonesian, see Hoffman 1979 and Maier 1993, 1997; and, among the participants, Drewes 1948; Takdir 1957; and Teeuw 1973.

6. Before the nationalist movement adopted the model of standardization, some editors had rejected “High Malay” writing due to its colonial associations (Salmon 1981). By the 1960s, the Low Malay literary tradition was succumbing to standardizing pressures.

after independence (1945) was marked by highly self-conscious acts of elites attempting to make language the object of their deliberate actions, such as its recognition in the first constitution (1945) and state sponsorship of several language conferences (Halim 1984). The rapid increase in centralization and development under Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98) greatly expanded the infrastructure for disseminating and controlling the standard, through vast expansions of the school system, publishing ventures, and television. In this light, Indonesian is modern by virtue of the very processes through which it has come into being.⁷

Many nonstandard varieties of spoken Malay have flourished across the archipelago (Collins 1980; Steinhauer 1994), and some serve as speakers' first languages for much of the stigmatized but important Chinese minority (Oetomo 1987). But these variants are often so distinct from standard Indonesian, both linguistically and ideologically, that to switch between them is a highly marked discursive move; indeed, some speakers of one may not even fully command the other. In certain ways, therefore, Malay speakers' relationship to Indonesian differs from that of speakers of other local languages only in degree. For the switch from a "local language" (*bahasa daerah*) into Indonesian is, in metalinguistic and ideological terms, distinct from other kinds of code switching. This may be a function of a common productive aspect of linguistic ideology, what Judith Irvine and Susan Gal (2000) have described as "fractal recursivity," the projection of ideological oppositions from one level to another. By this logic, the distinction between Low Malay and Indonesian can be identified with that between the local and the national, along with the private and the public. The recursive process interprets and reinforces at the plane of ideology Malay speakers' practical experiences of *both* Indonesian *and*, by projection, the local language (see Keane 1997a). In this way, the authority and alterity of the Indonesian language may impose themselves over even those who speak closely related variants of Malay as their first language (see Kumanireng 1982).

Official Cosmopolitanism

According to the scholar Ariel Heryanto (1995), it is the Indonesian language more than anything else that gives substance to the idea of there being a national

7. In the 1930s, some advocated a more "natural" uncontrolled growth (Mrázek 2002: 34–35) or celebrated Malay's "enjoyable mess" (Takdir 1957: 62–64), but this was increasingly a minority position. On the extraordinary polyglot wordplay and grammar-bending of Sukarno's oratory, see Anwar 1980: 124–35; and Leclerc 1994.

culture at all. Yet by the 1990s, Indonesian had come to be identified by many of its speakers with an oppressive and violent state apparatus, its ideologies, and its heavy-handed models of development; moreover, for some the language is felt to lack subtlety, beauty, or depth (e.g., Anwar 1980: 1). These two perspectives, I want to suggest, are two faces of the same coin, the peculiarly “modern” character of Indonesian in its ideological attributes and practical functions. The perceived otherness of Indonesian is what makes it particularly well suited as a language for national and personal development, an emblem of modernity and its cosmopolitanisms. It has been a preeminent enabling medium for what Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma (2002; see also Urban 2001) have called a distinctively modern “culture of circulation,” in this case between the local and the national and between Indonesia and the rest of the world. What for the romantic nationalist may seem to be liabilities, such as the lack of deep historical roots in a core ethnicity, have for most of the history of Indonesian nationalism been virtues. But since the rise of the New Order, the hegemonic power of the standard has suppressed the public legitimacy of numerous inventive spoken varieties. Some of these vernaculars, like the urban pop culture of teenagers, represent alternative visions of cosmopolitanism; others, such as latter-day versions of Jakarta’s “Betawi” dialect, display forms of local distinctiveness that do not depend on claims to deep traditions. The question remains open whether Indonesian can be detached from the hegemony of school and officialdom or whether its promised virtues are inseparable from the sense of flatness and alienation so often imputed to it.

For the vast majority of the population at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Indonesian remains a clearly defined second language, acquired after the language of childhood. Even when linguistically close to that first language, it bears a distinct social, political, and cognitive status. The uses of Indonesian tend to follow the patterns of register or code-switching familiar from other high and official languages. It is the most appropriate idiom for public, official, national, educated, and technological settings and topics, for mass media and the economically higher-order marketplaces, a mark of sophistication, and a medium for speaking across social distance.⁸ These contexts and associations, however, may not all function in the same way or open up the same sets of possibilities. Schools, speeches, and official documents quite explicitly attempt to authorize the standard’s claims. These are contexts in which the capacity of the language to index

8. See the sociolinguistic accounts in Errington 1998; Kumanireng 1982; Moeliono 1994; Oetomo 1989; and Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo 1982.

other contexts, apart from abstractions like statehood and rationality, is suppressed. As such they are meant to impose ordering effects on uses of the language in other situations. But there is no reason to assume the centralizing project of the state has been fully effective. It is too soon to predict how this standardizing project will fare in post–New Order Indonesia. If anything, however, has become clear since the fall of Suharto, it is that we should be wary of taking the attempt for the result.

Hierarchy and Internal Translation

The modernity of Indonesian does not lie in the mere fact of being a marked linguistic alternative to some “prior” language, nor even in being an object of metalinguistic awareness and ideology. After all, plurilingual societies (that is, perhaps, most societies before the development of nation-state modes of standardization) have always involved movement among linguistic varieties. This movement can be habitual and unconscious but also subject to highly self-aware actions and forms of linguistic self-objectification (Vološinov 1973; see Lucy 1993). For instance, in 1978, the people of one village in Papua New Guinea decided to “be different” from other speakers of their language by changing their word for “no” (Kulick 1992: 2–3). The ubiquity of taboo and avoidance vocabularies, respect registers, ritual speech forms, scriptural and mystical languages, and the secretive jargons of underworlds shows the widespread power of linguistic forms perceived as markedly apart from ordinary speech. Marked linguistic varieties can be highly productive, drawing on speakers’ metalinguistic awareness to create new forms, commonly by putting the materiality of signifiers in the foreground, as in puns, acronyms, and morphological inversions.

Crossroads like the Indonesian archipelago have long been swept by linguistic currents, and even the relatively hegemonic monologism of precolonial Java was permeated with words and phrases of Arabic, remnants of scriptural Sanskrit, Malay, and perhaps bits of Hokkien. With these resources to draw on, the region is well known for certain highly elaborated register differences. “Internal translation” (Zurbuchen 1989) is the hallmark of traditional Javanese and Balinese performance, in which archaic languages steeped in Sanskritic vocabulary alternate with commentaries in contemporary idioms that permit audiences to follow the action. Central Java is especially famous for its elaborate register differences by which minute distinctions of social hierarchy are marked by lexical choices among the vocabulary sets of “high,” “middle,” and “low” Javanese. One register forms the unmarked category, often conceptualized as the speech of casual rela-

tions and intimacy figured as that between mother and child (Siegel 1986). Against it, the marked category is the speech of seriousness, formality, adulthood, and, often, maleness. It is this analogy of Indonesian to other such forms of register shifting, especially in Javanese, that has stimulated some of the most insightful contemporary interpretations of the national language. Benedict Anderson ([1966] 1990a; see also Hooker 1993) pointed out that within a generation of independence, formal Indonesian had appropriated so much foreign and archaisitic vocabulary that it was growing increasingly incomprehensible to all but the elite and taking on many of the social functions of high Javanese. Errington (2000) has argued that this is part of a linguistic authority alternative to that of the rationalist modernist standard, a persistence of the authority of “exemplary centers” characteristic of much older Javanese and other Southeast Asian forms of hierarchy. These functions, however, may go beyond the strategic play of status and exclusion. Thus, James Siegel (1986, 1997) has argued that Indonesian is functionally similar to high Javanese in that children learn to replace what they would have said in their original language with words imposed by others. To speak the high language is thus to display the suppression of the low (even if the apparent intimacy of that low version exists only by retrospective projection), with profoundly decentering implications for the speaker’s sense of having an “own” language.

But if taboo and slang languages aim to create barriers to entry, Indonesian, by contrast, is ideologically supposed to open outward. Indonesian thus differs from earlier forms of internal translation in its links to the modernist and cosmopolitan aspirations that underwrote its adoption, its vision of referential transparency, and its portrayal as an alternative to hierarchical registers. Despite its roots in Old Malay, Indonesian has not generally called on primordialist ideologies for its legitimacy. Rather, it has always been portrayed as modern and as a vehicle for the modernization of Indonesian subjects and society. This is more than a matter of explicit claims on its behalf. As I have noted, the very practices through which Indonesian emerged bear the marks of modern language ideologies, treating language as a set of arbitrary signs that are subject to self-liberating forms of human agency.

Free, Egalitarian, and Vulgar

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the elites typically considered Malay to be vulgar. But both its apparent crudity and foreignness were also sources of its appeal. Even today Indonesian is widely perceived to lack two things sup-

posedly common to other languages (but in this respect, it perhaps only displays openly what is ideologically obscured for other languages). It is not usually perceived to possess either a clear social-geographical “center” or exemplary “best” speakers (Goenawan 1982: 321; see Silverstein 1996).⁹ But in the heyday of modernist nationalism, the lack of centers was taken to be an advantage. Thus the common assertion that Indonesian (like Swahili [Fabian 1986] and Hindi [Cohn 1996]) is an “easy” language (Anwar 1989; Moeliono 1994) expresses a degree of ambivalence: its supposed lack of subtlety and depth is inseparable from its accessibility.

Spatially and socially demarcated linguistic centers enable speakers to measure their linguistic correctness—or failings. Lacking a presumed “center,” Indonesian, by contrast, is supposed to be open to all. As a late-colonial-era Javanese guide to etiquette advised, “If you are asked a question by someone, what language should your answer be in? Use the language of the questioner. But if you cannot speak that language, use Malay” (quoted in Errington 1985: 59; see also Maier 1997). Unlike a Herderian notion of language as belonging to a specific people, Indonesian does not, in principle, exclude any potential speakers.

A major value of Indonesian lay in the possibility of escaping from register systems altogether. This was one source of the perception that Indonesian was vulgar, since it failed to provide speakers with clear positions of hierarchy relative to one another. Nobles in early-twentieth-century Sumba, for instance, avoided Malay as the demeaning “language of merchants” (Wielenga 1913: 144). The very lack of status markers they decried was something others sought. As one Javanese man recalled of the late colonial era, although Malay “lacked intimacy,” it was a good way to speak with a friend: not too distant, too close, or too condescending (Errington 1985: 60). At least in the early years, the use of Indonesian seems to reach for this neutrality and freedom from hierarchy. The modernity and rationality imputed to Indonesian produced its supposed egalitarianism, which was seen as a function of its apparent ease. For young Javanese, at least, this ease is reportedly less a matter of linguistic code than of interaction; the risks concern the projected self and its presupposed others. What is remarkable is that this ease is granted not by the speaker’s intuitive and habitual mastery of a first language, but by the conscious control associated with the second.

9. Despite early efforts to locate the “best” Malay in its supposed “homelands” (Maier 1997) or in a canon of authors (Takdir 1976: 93), such claims seem not to play significant roles in its legitimating ideologies. Even the speech of some of the most likely candidates for exemplarity—e.g., Presidents Sukarno and Suharto—has been criticized (Anwar 1980: 132–33; Ali 2000: 189).

Even if Indonesian failed to sustain this egalitarian promise through the New Order period (1965–98), the sense of otherness remains a component of its modernity. The formal learning process and the association with writing encourage a sense that one ought to have an active, self-conscious, and rational control over this language, in contrast to the relatively unself-conscious mastery of one's mother tongue (Kumanireng 1982). This sets up Indonesian as peculiarly the object of metalinguistic discourses and fosters the notion that it can be subject to purposeful action. Unlike one's mother tongue, Indonesian is commonly portrayed as incomplete, its speakers feeling their command to be imperfect. Both language and speaker would thus need improvement. To these ends, the state since its inception has actively promoted “good and true” Indonesian by means of institutes, publishing projects, the school system, television programs, and official exhortations. But this effort is not restricted to the state. From the beginning, Indonesian usage and vocabulary have been the subjects of advice columns, pamphlets, and letters to editors (Adam 1995). Not surprisingly, the plethora of public criticism seems to have generated insecurity, a combination of personal and national anxiety captured in the book title *Have You Sufficiently Cultivated Our Language of Unity?* (Tjokronegoro 1968).

The ordinary experience of learning Indonesian and the critical discourses surrounding it reproduce one of the central features of its supposed modernity, the privileged role of rational human agency. In 1948, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, a crucial figure in the forging of language policy and perhaps the most rationalist of the high modernists, attacked primordialism by asserting that Indonesia is a creation of the twentieth century (1977: 14–15). Writing in Indonesian, with a sprinkling of Dutch words, he said that the task of the young Indonesia is “culture creation [Dutch *cultuurscheppen*], building a new culture that will be in accordance with the passion of the spirit and its age” (1977: 16). To the extent that it is seen to be nonnatural and “external” to the actor, language is also, in principle, available as an object of manipulation. Indeed, the notion that humans can and *must* make their own destiny, which I have taken to be central to ideologies of modernity, suggests that one's language *should* be improved.

In the egalitarian aspirations of early Indonesian nationalists and many speakers today as well, the move into Indonesian is meant to avoid the overt display of status differences. In practice, this means a language supposedly abstractable from interactive contexts and the cultural presuppositions they invoke. Such abstraction denies the indexical, performative, and poetic dimensions of language in favor of reference and semantics—an emphasis that seems to be endemic to ideologies of the public (Warner 2002: 83; see Bauman and Briggs 2000: 197).

This is evident even in simple lexical innovation. For example, Indonesian takes advantage of the alternatives afforded by preexisting register differences. According to then-minister of education and culture Daoed Joesoef (1983), one might replace the everyday form *sakit* (ill) with high Javanese *gering*, or *makan* (to eat) with *dahar*, to indicate respect without necessarily implying adherence to the entire register system of Javanese. These suggested changes aim to remove words from the cultural context that made them indexical of status differences or other aspects of interaction and locality. Linguistic innovation thereby is supposed to fulfill the early nationalist project of eliminating the more “feudal” elements of local culture. It does so by seeking a language *beyond* any particular culture. Thus the transparency of Indonesian as a modern language should work in collaboration with its egalitarian promise: both presume an ability to transcend the limits of interactive contexts.¹⁰

A language removed from the supposed restrictions and hierarchies of localized cultural contexts should, it would seem, be free to become cosmopolitan and egalitarian (see Gal and Woolard 1995).¹¹ There should, for instance, be no puns, significant rhymes, difficulties of phrasing due to syntactic peculiarities, deictics with specific topographical anchors, pronouns indexical of interaction-relative status, phrases with magical powers, expressions presupposing local knowledge, proper nouns in which semantic sense clashes with sense-less reference, and so forth. In contrast to the workings of, say, taboo languages or underworld slangs, a modern national standard, in this view, should seek to render its denotative functions transparent and work against the materiality of signifiers. It should aspire (however impossibly) to eliminate those aspects of meaning that might be altered when repeated in different contexts or that might be lost in translation. In common with some religious utopias, this aspect of the idea of modernity might even, at the extreme, imply an urge to escape from semiotic mediation itself (Keane 2001).

10. If Anderson (1990a) is correct that by the mid-1960s Indonesian was taking on the social functions of high Javanese, we might distinguish here between social indexicality insofar as it *presupposes* given social hierarchies and that which productively *entails* them and contributes to the emergence of new ones (Silverstein 1976). However much the modernist may seek to abolish the former, the new hierarchies demonstrate that the latter can be reasserted creatively. For decontextualization in Javanese-Indonesian code-switching, see Errington 1998.

11. The strong decontextualizing possibilities of Western literary forms may be one reason why nationalist modernists such as the literary critic H. B. Jassin (1983) insisted that Indonesia must become a “citizen” of world literature, and why existing literary models in Malay and Javanese, despite their antiquity, refinement, and prestige, were so sweepingly abandoned in favor of the imported genres of the novel, short story, lyric poem, and play (Anderson 1990b; see Pramoedy 1963; Salmon 1981; Sutherland 1968).

Pragmatic Paradoxes of the Public

This story contains many ironies. Here's one: Indonesian was supposed to replace the social hierarchies built into local languages with a modern egalitarianism. As in other language reform movements, such as the Quaker refusal to say *you* in seventeenth-century England, the most direct attack was to eliminate the most obvious—that is, lexicalized—indexes of status.¹² To that end, there have been many experiments in replacing those most fraught elements, first- and second-person pronouns. For second person, for instance, one occasionally encounters the use of English *you*, and the supposedly neutral *anda* coined in the 1950s has found its true home as the term for the universal addressee of advertising and public announcements. The fact that *anda* has met very limited acceptance in spoken interaction suggests how difficult it is to inhabit so abstract a social position.

Among the attempted reforms, the once intimate word *aku* was promoted as the preferred first-person singular of literary writing. According to Goenawan Mohamad (1995), when the poet Chairil Anwar used the word in the 1940s, it seemed a heroic challenge to hierarchy. By the 1990s, however, it had come to sound arrogant and egotistical. Goenawan says that this is because the authoritarian climate of the Suharto regime made individualism seem dangerous. This is surely true, but it does not explain why the supposedly neutral and egalitarian *aku* should have those particular connotations. I want to suggest this may be due, at least in part, to its associations with certain aspects of the modernist project. The conscious choice of this word seeks not only to dislodge the speaker from existing social relations, the world of his or her birth, but also asserts a modernist claim to personal autonomy. This autonomy is manifested in the speaker's agency relative to language itself, in the choice to step out of—even to sacrifice—one language and not only to speak another one (this, after all, has always been an option in multilingual situations) but to improve it and, in the process, to claim a public persona markedly apart from some presupposed prior self and its social relations. One may hear echoes of a common theme in early Indonesian literature (as elsewhere): the clash between modern urban freedom and the constraints of village,

12. By reducing the options among even those pronouns available in Malay (see Errington 1998), standard Indonesian has sought to deny their social implications. In the process, pronouns were subsumed within an objectivistic ideology by which language was seen to function primarily to refer to and denote an external world. On the problem of pronouns and Indonesian national identity, see Anderson 1990a and Siegel 1997. For a succinct statement linking proper choice of first-person pronoun and the “anti-feudal principle of democracy,” see Ali 2000: 153–56.

kinship, and tradition, resulting in ambivalences and anxieties that are far from resolved (see Siegel 1997).

By the time of the New Order regime, the cosmopolitan aspirations of the Indonesian language faced a conjoined set of paradoxes. In political terms, a medium whose most powerful claims on its speakers included the promise of liberation had become deeply associated with the centralizing project of the authoritarian state. Indeed, the paradox may be implicit in some modernist visions of freedom to the extent that they couple enhanced agency with increased control over an object world. And, second, in semiotic terms, what had begun as a rationalist effort to escape the indexical links to interaction and localized contexts had itself become a metadiscursive index in its own right. The elites of the New Order increasingly laid exclusive claims over the language through the proliferation of Javanisms, Anglicisms, Sanskritisms, and an ever growing number of opaque acronyms. As critics of such usages made apparent, the weight this put on the sheer materiality of signifiers as well as their capacity to index access to restricted sources of knowledge was a direct threat to the cosmopolitan openness of a transparent language that had been sought by high modernists. Overall, the effort to create a national public through language reform either failed (by producing an exclusive and controlling “high” language of the state) or succeeded only ambiguously (by offering speakers only the most notional public identities and constrained rhetorical possibilities). Yet wordplay, subversive slangs, new vernaculars, and growing Islamicist uses of Arabic continue to emerge outside the officially constituted public. They commonly focus on the materiality of linguistic form, as if to deny the modernists’ claims for transparency.¹³ Perhaps these linguistic innovations hint at alternatives to engineered standardization that may emerge after the fall of the New Order, as the state’s centralizing projects come to be discredited or at least less effective.

To the extent that the project of asserting historical agency retains its genealogical ties to ideologies of the modern, however covertly, it seems to exist in a paradoxical relation to the claims of national cultural identity in two respects. First, the process of associating language with projects of development and especially with literary culture entails not just an obvious elitism, but a certain disembedding of what a national “culture” could mean. As a modernist project,

13. In contemporary Indonesia, subversive manipulation of linguistic form includes middle-class teenager slang adopted from the Jakartan criminal world (Chambert-Loir 1984), the politicized punning of the 1990s reform movement (Ali 2000: 25–27, 186–89; Heryanto 1996; Zimmer 1998), and evasive wordplay long maintained by separatist religious communities in Java (Widodo 1997).

national identity commonly seeks culture in a variety of language that the speaker can stand outside of. This project does not seek culture in language that escapes translation—something one could call uniquely one's own, as, for instance, Ngũgĩ would have it. Rather, it seeks it in that which is most translatable, most open to being understood from within other languages, least confined to particular geographical, historical, or interactive contexts. Such openness to other languages through translation would seem to render problematic the nationalist claim to “possess” that language for oneself. Recall the anecdote with which this essay began: Amien Rais at his most authoritatively public, founding a national party in a moment of historical crisis, seems to aspire to a cosmopolitan transparency. To do so requires that he (like earlier leaders such as Sukarno) imagine the perspective of his most distant potential interlocutors. Seeking their recognition begins with an effort to recognize who they might be (say, American political observers). It entails a degree of risk. For if they fail to translate his words correctly, they may fail to recognize him. They may fail to accept that which he would be for them.

Second, to the extent that it aspires to the most textual and most translatable pole of language, the standard language as an emblem of national culture and political identity seems to depend on an ability to take the materiality of semiotic form to be plastic matter, subordinate to immaterial denotations and the intentions of those who could somehow stand apart from it. So functionally reductive and objectified a view of language—which certainly has had many incarnations in the Euro-American West as well—would seem to presuppose and promote the self-possession of subjects for whom nothing important eludes translation and everything can be made explicit. As a dominant language ideology, this vision of Indonesian, however betrayed and disappointed, thus retains a certain modernist austerity and even heroism. By the same token, it ties the project of asserting historical agency to a more problematic one of mastery over language itself—a tie that, as it unravels, may yet unleash new possibilities.

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