Decoding *Basa Walikan* - A preliminary analysis of Yogyakarta ‘reverse’ language

*Nicholas Jackson and Rahmat*

**BIODATA**

Nicholas Jackson completed his undergraduate studies at Monash University majoring in Indonesian Studies and Linguistics in 2013. He also studied at Universitas Gadjah Mada and Universitas Sanata Dharma for a year in Yogyakarta as part of his degree. Email: nicholas.jackson@live.com.au

Rahmat was born in Sleman, Yogyakarta and completed his undergraduate degree at Universitas Gadjah Mada in 2006. He majored in Javanese Literature specialising in philology. Rahmat completed his Master of Arts in 2009. He currently works as a lecturer of Javanese Language Education in FKIP Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta.

**ABSTRACT**

Although there have been several recent studies in non-standard registers of Indonesian, little has been studied about similar varieties of regional languages spoken in Indonesia. This preliminary study aims to provide a brief description of a social register of Javanese spoken around Malioboro, Yogyakarta, and Central Java, known as *basa Walikan* (Javanese: reverse language). Qualitative interviews about its form and usage were conducted with a small sample of street traders from Malioboro over a period of a few weeks. Our preliminary findings were consistent with other studies of social registers in Indonesia. The primary function of *basa Walikan* appears to be socio-pragmatic. In some contexts it may also be used as a speech disguise code.

**Keywords**: Javanese, Basa Walikan, Indonesia

**Background**

Indonesia is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse nations in the world. Over 550 languages are spoken throughout the archipelago and in 1945 Indonesian was selected as the official language of government, mass media, and education. Although Indonesian is rapidly becoming the first language of many Indonesians, especially in urban centres, many Indonesians still learn and speak regional languages and their dialects (Sneddon, 2003). Social and regional varieties of Indonesian and regional languages are dynamic and constantly developing. Despite language purists lamenting these varieties as a degradation of correct and proper
forms, these non-standard registers, or stylistic variations, are a very real reflection and representation of Indonesia’s diverse communities and their members.

Recent studies of non-standard Indonesian registers include colloquial Indonesian (Errington, 1986; Ewing, 2005; Sneddon, 2006), bahasa prokem (Collins & Chambert-Lois, 1984), Jakarta Backwards Youth Slang (Dreyfuss, 1983), bahasa gay (Boellstor, 2004; Oetomo, 2003) and bahasa gaul (Smith-Hefner, 2007). With the exception of colloquial Indonesian, these registers have also been described as codes and secret languages (Collins & Chambert-Lois, 1984; Dreyfuss, 1983; Boellstor, 2004; Oetomo, 2003; Smith-Hefner, 2007). Although some of these varieties may have emerged as speech-disguise codes, the above studies all suggest that the primary role of these different registers is to promote and foster a shared identity and sense of community among their speakers.

Although there is significant scholarship on regional and social varieties of Indonesian, less has been studied about similar varieties in other languages spoken in Indonesia. In this paper, the authors present a brief linguistic description of a social register of Javanese spoken in Yogyakarta, Central Java, known as basa Walikan that is synonymous with the street traders of Malioboro.

Javanese

Javanese is an Austronesian language and is the largest regional language spoken in Indonesia, with around 80 million speakers (Oglobin 2005). Javanese is primarily spoken in central and eastern Java, but there are also large Javanese speaking communities in Banten, West Java and in Lampung, South Sumatra as well as in countries outside of Indonesia such as Surinam and New Caledonia (Robson, 2002; Wedhawati et al., 2005).

Early Dutch and English linguists were intrigued by Javanese’s complex speech levels that can be broadly categorised into two main registers: ngoko and krama. Robson (2002) defines ngoko as “the style in which one thinks to oneself and uses to one’s intimate family and friends of the same age or younger” and krama as the speech style one uses to speak to and talk about “a stranger or someone who is socially superior” (12). The two styles are used in different proportions to indicate distance, respect and familiarity.
More recent studies, however, have focused on regional variations present in Javanese. Javanese is usually classified into three main regional dialects; East Javanese, Central Javanese, and Standard Javanese that is spoken in Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Keeler, 1992). These dialects are characterised by variations in pronunciation, grammatical and discourse features. However, as Robson (1991) notes “geographically defined variations can also occur on the micro-level of the villagers” (3).

While there has been a lot of research into Javanese speech levels and regional variation, fewer studies have explored non-standard social varieties of Javanese (see Robson, 1991). One non-standard social variety of Javanese that has not been subject to in-depth analysis is a register, or stylistic variant of Javanese known as *basa Walikan*.

**Basa Walikan**

*Basa Walikan* is a register based on the *ngoko* level of Javanese spoken in Yogyakarta, Central Java. It is encoded using a formula based on the arrangement of the Javanese script *hanacaraka*. There is another register of Javanese also known as *basa Walikan* spoken in Malang, East Java, but its form is different from the *basa Walikan* spoken in Yogyakarta. *Basa Walikan* Malang is derived from Javanese, Indonesian and English words that are reversed, and if necessary, modified to conform to Javanese and Indonesian phonotactics. *Basa Walikan* is not based on the Javanese script.

The origin and current status of *basa Walikan* Yogyakarta are topics of popular legend. One popular view describes *basa Walikan* as a secret code that was created by young Javanese nationalists during the 1940s. It is said that *basa Walikan* was used by young patriots in order that Javanese speaking Dutch government officials would not be alerted to their nationalist activities. Another popular view is that *basa Walikan* was created to serve as a means of secret communication among local criminals in the 1970s and 1980s. However, there is limited evidence to substantially support either view (Ernawan, 2004).

In this pilot study we aim to identify the role of *basa Walikan* in Yogyakarta and begin a preliminary analysis on its use. Malioboro was selected as the location for this pilot
study because it is popularly considered to be the heartland of basa Walikan today. Malioboro is a vibrant and colourful street lined with street hawkers, souvenir and batik shops, malls and a traditional market that leads from the northern city square in front of the Sultan’s palace to Tugu railway station. Due to limited time, the study was conducted over a period of two weeks in Malioboro in early January, 2013. During the two weeks, fifteen speakers, aged between 16-60, were interviewed about their knowledge and their use of basa Walikan. The interviews were conducted by the co-author of this paper, a Javanese academic and native Yogyakartan. The interviews consisted of a series of structured questions and an informal discussion about the participants’ knowledge and use of basa Walikan. The following are our preliminary findings on the patterns of use of basa Walikan by street traders in Malioboro based on our interviews.

**Derivation, usage and function**

Basa Walikan words are derived from a formula that is based on the Javanese script hanacaraka. The Javanese script is an Indic type script that is composed of twenty symbols standing for syllables consisting of a consonant and the vowel –a; this vowel can be changed by the use of other signs (Robson, 2011). The twenty symbol alphabet is usually arranged in four horizontal lines with each line containing five consonant vowel (CV) pairs.

![Figure 7 - Hanacaraka with arrows showing how sound syllables switch with each other in basa Walikan](image-url)
**Basa Walikan** words are formed regularly from *ngoko* standard Javanese words by moving each CV pair in a word two lines vertically. Line 1 switches with line 3 and line 2 switches with line 4. The original consonant in each CV pair is replaced by the new consonant, but the vowel (or lack of vowel) does not change.

As an example, the Javanese kinship term *mas* consists of two CV pairs “ma” and “s(a)”. The first syllable “ma” is in the fourth line and when it is moved two lines vertically it becomes “da”. The second syllable “s(a)” is in the second line and when it is shifted two lines vertically becomes “b(a)”. The final result is the *basa Walikan* term *dab*.

Words that begin with a vowel are represented “ha”. For example: *ibu* (Jv. mother) consists of two sound syllables; “(h)i” and “bu”. The first syllable can now be used in the formula.

\[
ibu \rightarrow “(h)i” + “bu” \rightarrow “pi” + “su” = pisu
\]

Although most words are formed regularly using this formula, some of our informants reported forms that deviated from the formula, but are similar in place, or manner of articulation. One notable example was the *basa Walikan* term for *mangan* (Jv. to eat). The predicted form is *daladh*, however, our informants regularly reported that the *basa Walikan* term was *halat* not *daladh*. Our participants explained that the form of *basa Walikan* words is sometimes altered to help with pronunciation. Another example is the *basa Walikan* word for *wedok* (Jv. girl, woman), which is realised as *themon*, and not *themony*. Similarly, *motor* (Jv. motor) is *togos/dogos* and not *dogoy*. There were several examples of this appropriation to help with ease of pronunciation.

Many of our informants, however, were surprised to learn that there was a formula for encoding *basa Walikan* words and almost all informants reported learning *basa Walikan* by memory. Many of our informants were not local Javanese, but they understood and would use *basa Walikan* terms themselves. Below is a list of common *basa Walikan* terms used by our participants.
The above *basa Walikan* words, along with a majority of others used in Javanese or Indonesian utterances retain their original meaning. However, a few *basa Walikan* words have also undergone a shift from their original meaning.

*Dab* is perhaps one of the most well-known and common *basa Walikan* terms. *Dab* is used as a term of address among young males in Yogyakarta. For example:

*Piye kabare, dab?*

*How are you going, bro?*

Dab is the *basa Walikan* form of mas. Mas is a Javanese kinship term that means ‘older brother’. It is often extended and used as a term of address for young men. The *basa Walikan* term dab however, no longer shares the same meaning as the original Javanese term mas. Dab has shifted in meaning; narrowing to roughly mean bro. Evidence of this can be seen in the way dab is used interchangeably with other terms for bro such as coy, mas bro and gan. Further evidence of this shift is the acceptability of dab as a substitution for bro in the common non-standard address term mas bro. The resulting term is mas dab. If speakers still associated dab as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basa Walikan</th>
<th>Javanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dab</td>
<td>Mas</td>
<td>Kinship/Address term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Older brother.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jape methe</td>
<td>Cahe Dewe</td>
<td>Mate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halat</td>
<td>Mangan</td>
<td>To eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotse</td>
<td>Ngombe</td>
<td>To drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togos/dogos</td>
<td>Motor</td>
<td>Motorcycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poya mothik</td>
<td>Ora duwit</td>
<td>To have no money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themon</td>
<td>Wedok</td>
<td>Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pisu</td>
<td>Ibu</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahan</td>
<td>Bapak</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagadu</td>
<td>Matamu</td>
<td>Your eyes!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soco</td>
<td>Bojo</td>
<td>Partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
meaning mas, then this form would be unacceptable since it would then mean *mas mas.

Another popular basa Walikan term that has undergone a shift away from its original Javanese meaning is dagadu. Dagadu, which is derived from matamu, ‘your eyes’ in standard Javanese, is an expletive term. The meaning is dependent on the context, but can mean anything from “Hey, watch where you’re going!” to more strongly “What the fuck are you looking at?” However, the basa Walikan form dagadu does not have the same connotations. Even though our participants knew that it derived from matamu, they almost exclusively associated it with the type of t-shirt produced by the company of the same name, or cheaper lookalike t-shirts. Dagadu is most commonly used by sellers spruiking their products. For example:

‘Dagadu-dagadu, mas, asli Jogja’

Dagadu t-shirts, dagadu t-shirts, mate! From Jogja!

It appears that the use of basa Walikan forms in this manner has a pragmatic function, similar to that described by Boellstorf (2004) in his article detailing bahasa gay. Boellstorf (2004) contends that the use of a few bahasa gay lexemes in Indonesian move the register of conversation to bahasa gay, invoking a sense of sameness and belonging between interlocutors. The same appears to apply with basa Walikan. The use of one or two basa Walikan words in Javanese or Indonesian moves the register to basa Walikan and creates a sense of sameness and belonging for speakers. For example:

“Piye dab saiki socomu kerja nang di?”

Hey bro where is your girlfriend working at the moment?

“Rombongane pelit poya mothik kabeh”

What a stingy group, they have no money

“Piye kowe mrene numpak dogos apa dosing?”

Are you coming here by motorbike or car?

The utterances above are in Javanese except for the basa Walikan terms in bold type. The use of one or two basa Walikan terms moves the register to basa Walikan
and serves to ‘in-group’ both the speaker and the hearer as members of the same social sub-group.

This is in line with the perceptions of our informants who described basa Walikan as a language used to greet someone (basa undang-undang), as a type of street slang (basa ndalanan) or as a language that young people use to joke around with their friends (bahasa anak muda untuk guyon-guyon agar lebih akrab). Basa Walikan is sometimes referred to as bahasa gaul Yogyakarta. It is useful to draw a distinction here between basa walikan and gaul, or the language of sociability as defined by Smith-Hefner (2007). There are some similarities between the two registers; however, there are also some salient differences. Basa Walikan, similar to gaul, is fun and care free. Furthermore, the use of basa Walikan also rejects fixed social hierarchy and formalities. However, unlike gaul the use of basa Walikan marks place membership and is not socially sophisticated or modern like gaul. They are two separate registers and basa Walikan is not a regional register of gaul.

Although its origins appears to be as a code, basa Walikan today seems to be used primarily on Malioboro to index a place identity, that is, ‘Yogyakartan-Malioboro’, and to create a sense of belonging among users. However, some of our informants still suggested that basa Walikan continues to be used in certain environments as a code. There is some evidence that basa Walikan forms are used to ‘censor’ taboo terms.

One example of this is how the basa Walikan term lotse is used. Lotse, which is derived from the standard Javanese word ngombe, meaning ‘to drink’, is used by speakers to refer specifically to alcoholic drinks which are rarely consumed publicly in the predominantly Muslim city.

Similarly, the co-researcher of this study recalls that when he was at high school, the basa walikan terms lajel, lojon and libil were used to replace the Javanese words ngaceng, ngocok and ngising, ‘to have an erection’, ‘to masturbate (of a male,) ’ and ‘to defecate’ respectively.

Woo….. marakke lajel

Ooo… It gave me a hard-on
Bocah suwe banget neng wc, mbokmenawa lagi lojon.

He’s been in the toilet for ages, maybe he’s jacking off.

Aduh wetengku lara, aku tak libil dhisik ya!

Aaah, my stomach really hurts, I need to go to the toilet quickly!

There are a few examples of basa walikan being used in specific contexts to substitute standard Javanese terms. These basa walikan lexemes are used when, for whatever reason, it would be considered inappropriate to use their Indonesian and Javanese equivalents.

Conclusion

Our preliminary research indicates that basa Walikan is not a secret language, but a social register of ngoko Javanese that is used to invoke a sense of belonging and sameness between interlocutors. Although there is a regular formula for producing basa Walikan forms, it appears that forms are instead learnt as individual lexical items. The primary function of basa Walikan appears to be socio-pragmatic, but basa Walikan also appears to have a code-like function and can be used by speakers to censor taboo topics in some contexts. Future research conducted with a larger sample size and over a longer research period could provide more accurate and representative data on usage patterns of basa Walikan. Particular attention could be given to the manner in which basa Walikan is used as a means to censor talk. Further studies could also investigate similarities and differences with similar registers in Javanese and related Austronesian languages.

Reference


