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in *Dewi pulang*

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Why Don't You Get It?

Reflections on Language and the Idea of (Mis)Understanding in Dewi pulang

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between language and mutual (mis)understanding in Candra Aditya's short film *Dewi pulang*. The film follows Dewi, a young Javanese woman, as she travels from Jakarta to her natal home in Central Java to attend her father's funeral. The tension between Dewi's multiple and often conflicting obligations is marked by the use of language—from the colloquial Indonesian she speaks with her friends in Jakarta to a brief exchange with her English-speaking boss on the telephone and the various forms of Javanese employed 'at home'. Drawing on examples in both Indonesian and Javanese, it is argued that the film's use of language may be understood as a form of social commentary, reflecting critically on the complex and at times incongruous desires, expectations, and aversions at play in the lives of a growing number of young Indonesians.

Keywords

Javanese language – colloquial Jakartan Indonesian – code-switching – cinema – short films

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What's going on with you? Why don't you get it?

Dewi's mother, line 64

• • •

But even just a little, Mum ... please ... try to understand how I feel.

Dewi, line 91

• • •

Dewi, you're the one who's gotta try to understand her.

Dewi's uncle, line 94

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My aim in this brief essay is to explore the relationship between language and mutual (mis)understanding in Candra Aditya's short film *Dewi pulang*. As we have seen in prior contributions to this special issue, the film follows a young woman as she travels from Jakarta to her natal home in Central Java to attend her father's funeral. The tension between Dewi's multiple and often conflicting obligations is marked by the use of language—from the colloquial Jakartan Indonesian she speaks with her friends at the café to a brief exchange with her English-speaking boss on the telephone and the various forms of Javanese employed 'at home'. It is important to bear in mind that these uses of language are not 'natural' in any straightforward sense of the term. Albeit partially improvised, the conversations we encounter in the film were scripted and enacted with an eye to exemplifying (Goodman 1976:52–7) the circumstances they represent. It is for this reason that these examples of simulated language-in-use may be understood as a form of commentary—reflecting critically on the complex and at times incongruous desires, expectations, and aversions at play in the lives of an increasing number of young Indonesians.¹

¹ For references to the recent scholarship, see footnote 1 in the editorial introduction to this issue.

1 In the Café

Let us begin with the opening scene, with Dewi and her friends hanging out at a hip Jakarta café—smoking, drinking, and joking with one another about their ‘troublesome’ parents. Their conversation is marked by a cosmopolitan sensibility, and a collective if casual intimacy mediated by language, gesture, and affect. In contrast to the various forms of Javanese spoken in the second part of the film, they speak a broadly colloquial Jakartan Indonesian (Sneddon 2006), employing elements that scholars of Indonesian linguistics have described in terms of *bahasa gaul* (‘cool’ or ‘sociable language’; see Sahertian 1999; Smith-Hefner 2007), *bahasa gado-gado* (‘mixed’ or ‘mixed-up language’; Martin 2018), and more recently *bahasa JakSel* (Rusydah 2020)—a style of speaking that is stereotypically associated with the fashionable youth of certain neighbourhoods in southern Jakarta.² In addition to distinctive morphological and syntactic patterns, this includes frequent lexical appropriations from English and the use of interactive discourse particles, pronouns, and terms of address that clearly distinguish their speech from the canonically ‘good and correct’ (I. *baik dan benar*) Indonesian taught in school and promulgated by the state.

Consider, for instance, the events that Agnes relates at the start of the film. Although ultimately addressed to the group as a whole, her story begins as a riposte to Dewi’s boyfriend, Satria, who had teasingly suggested that her mother’s effort to find her a suitable marriage partner might be a ‘good thing’. Agnes’s response is summarily to dismiss Satria’s remark, implying that her mother has bad taste in men. To illustrate the point, she then turns to Satria and provides an example:

So, Mister, the other day I was having **dinner** ... Everything’s ready, right ... just the four of us. **All set up**. Then outta the blue there’s this extra chair ... Who’s gonna sit there? So ... alright then ... I’m just quietly sitting there ... till suddenly this guy shows up ... knock knock knock ... comes and sits down. Like straightaway kisses my parents’ hands, right?³ So alright, I chat

2 In September 2018, the hashtag #anakjksel marked a debate on Twitter over what constitutes *bahasa anak Jaksel*, who speaks it, and with what implications. See Fadjriah Nurdiansih, ‘Kolom bahasa: Gaya bahasa anak Jaksel, cuma tren atau keruwetan berpikir?’, *Liputan 6*, 15-9-2018. <https://www.liputan6.com/citizen6/read/3643014/kolom-bahasa-gaya-bahasa-anak-jksel-cuma-tren-atau-keruwetan-berpikir> (accessed 6-8-2020). For examples of this linguistic style in use, see Rusydah 2020.

3 *Langsung salim*. The phrase marks Agnes’s surprise that the young man seemed to know her parents in making this familiar yet deferential greeting (*salim*) that one would make to a teacher or figure of similarly intimate authority.

with him. Till eventually I raise the question of film ... just **in general**, as somethin' to talk about.

line 5

*Pak, saya kemarin dinner ... Udah kan ni ... berempat ni tuh kan. Formasi-nya. Kok tiba-tiba ada kursi nambah ... siapa nih mau duduk? Trus ... yaudah déh ... gué diemin aja tuh ... ampé tiba-tiba ada cowok nih dateng ... tuk-utuk-utuk dateng duduk. Langsung salim nih sama bokap nyokap gué kan ... Yaudah gué ngobrol. Sampé akhirnya gué ngobrol soal film lah nih ... **in general** lah ya topiknya.*

line 5

As if speaking directly to the young man, Agnes then asks, 'What's yer favorite film?' And, in mock reply, she intones a deep and serious voice to report his answer, which is also the punchline of the story: 'Well, as I see it, the best Indonesian film is ... *Ayat-ayat cinta*.' The group immediately erupts in laughter, with Dewi herself going on to ridicule the pretensions of Agnes's suitor, who might imagine himself as likened to the romantic lead in the film.

The humour of the incident, and indeed the conversation more broadly, turn on a shared understanding of parental interference, underlined by Dewi's parallel story of an unwanted suitor (lines 14–16). Yet the group's common disregard for their parents' wishes does not appear to be premised on outright defiance or disrespect. Simply put, *Dewi pulang* is not a story of youthful rebellion. Rather, their attitude appears to reflect a self-consciously cosmopolitan sophistication, as signalled by the *mis-en-scène* of the café's décor—smart, modern, understated—coupled with the group's urbane attire, stylized gestures, and knowing humour.⁴ The way they are seated—neatly but comfortably, casually gesturing to one another, laughing and blowing cigarette smoke into the air—exemplifies a sense of ease with themselves and the world around them, an attitude that is inextricably tied up with their use of language.

As Agnes relates her story, this sense of ease in conversation is oppositionally highlighted by her lightly burlesqued formality in addressing Satria ('Pak, saya kemarin dinner'), poking fun at the conventions of formal Indonesian by showing playfully undue deference to a friend of more-or-less equal status (Satria as

4 It is worth noting the contrast between this more recent urban aesthetic and Paramaditha's (2011) account of 'city and desire' in earlier post-authoritarian Indonesian cinema. An interesting term to explore in this connection would be contemporary Indonesian uses of 'cozy' in online reviews and commentary on 'Instagrammable' cafés and restaurants.

Pak, and herself as *'saya'*).⁵ The opposition is further marked at the end of the story by the contrast between Agnes's casually stated question and the comparatively stiff response from her suitor. While her question is stated informally, using an English loanword (*favorit*) and a colloquial pronoun characteristic of Jakarta slang (see below), he is presented as replying with comparatively formal syntax, proper diction, and a polite first-person pronoun (*saya*)—all delivered by Agnes in a comically serious voice. The young man's style of speaking is perhaps appropriate for a suitor visiting his prospective in-laws. But, viewed from the café, both he and the broader situation appear ridiculous—as typifying the sort of filial obligation and parentally negotiated marriage that Dewi and her friends wish to avoid. They are also presumably laughing at his earnest praise for the film—perhaps for its naïvely melodramatic style, but also on account of its association with a form of piety that would appear gauche from their self-consciously urbane perspective.⁶

In contrast to the formal style of speech Agnes has parodied, the group is shown at the café using the informal first- and second-person pronouns *gué* and *lo*, both to refer to themselves and to address one another.⁷ Although commonly employed on television, social media, and in some communities elsewhere in Indonesia, the use of *gué* and *lo* (or *gua* and *lu*) exemplifies a youthful and street-savvy sensibility most commonly associated with the capital city of Jakarta.⁸ Unlike many other Indonesian and Javanese forms of address and self-reference, these pronouns do not mark a gendered or generationally differentiated relationship between speech partners. This is not to deny that their use more generally connotes youth, which in most cases it does. What I mean to suggest, instead, is that the relationship these pronouns help to mediate is (at least linguistically) posited on equal ground, without any of the gender- or generation-based expectations of deference and condescension so carefully nuanced in spoken Javanese—on which more in a moment.

Returning briefly to the café, I would argue that the conversation rides on an implicit assumption of mutual understanding embodied in the group's manner

5 As one of my Javanese consultants noted, this form of burlesqued formality is often used to comic effect on television, radio, and social media.

6 The film's more general treatment of Islam is arguably ambivalent and is a topic warranting a separate essay.

7 See Sneddon 2006. Here it is also worth noting in passing the manner in which Dewi shifts from *gué/lo* to the more romantically appropriate *aku/kamu* when speaking to her boyfriend, Satria.

8 As Djenar, Ewing and Manns (2018:37) observed, 'this association with Jakarta is one of the key perduring social semiotics of *gua* and *lu* which informs their use by speakers in other parts of the country'.

of speaking—bringing together the use of *gué/lo* with colloquial verb forms (*nambah, diemin*) and clipped words (*trus, aja, udah, [s]ampé*), in-group kin terms (*bokap, nyokap*),⁹ the knowing use of English (*dinner, in general*), and a more general style of engaging and addressing one's cohort.¹⁰ In relating her story, Agnes plays on this sense of collective intimacy, co-opting her interlocutors as sharing in her experience of surprise and bemusement. Her use of rhetorical questioning ('there's this extra chair ... who's gonna sit there?'), interactional particles (*ni[h], déh, tuh, kok, kan*),¹¹ and meta-commentarial phrases ('so alright then', *yaudah déh*) work to distance her from the events she is recounting, while at the same time aligning her experience with the presumed (or at least desired) perspective of her listeners. In this respect, her style of speaking at once presupposes and intensifies a common experience of parental interference—as antithetical to their shared aspiration for an independent life and an expansive future.¹² I would argue that it is precisely this sense of shared understanding and common desire that Dewi finds so painfully missing from (and impugned in) her interactions with her family, and particularly her mother—as exemplified by their conversations on Dewi's return home.

2 Dewi Goes Home

The sequence of scenes that signals Dewi's arrival at her family home in Central Java draws an almost point-by-point contrast with the Jakarta café. The sights, sounds, and conversations depicted at her family's rural Javanese home speak eloquently to a slower pace of life, and a different style of sociality. In contrast to the mixed company of the Jakarta café, men and women are shown separately engaged in the formalities and domestic preparations associated with her father's funeral, which it seems is already well underway. It is clear from her

9 On *bokap/nyokap*, see Sneddon 2006:106–7.

10 This assemblage of linguistic elements is well documented in the literature on colloquial Indonesian (see, for example, Sneddon 2006; Martin-Anatias 2017; Djenar, Ewing and Manns 2018).

11 The use of these particles can be extremely difficult to translate, but no less important for that—forming 'a link between the speaker and listener, functioning as intimacy signals or sharing devices, reinforcing the social links between speaker and listener' (Sneddon 2006:117).

12 The film's brief interlude in English (line 57), when Dewi speaks to her boss on the telephone, points to the obligations—and aspirations—that 'home life' would prevent Dewi from fulfilling.

initial interaction with her uncle that Dewi is helping to pay for the proceedings (line 58). And we later learn that she has also been a substantial source of material support for the upkeep of the family home (line 71). Yet, these contributions notwithstanding, the depiction of Dewi's interactions with her family serially highlight her failure to meet expectations. Her résumé of alleged transgressions includes not coming home, either with adequate frequency or on time; not attending her father's *brobosan* rite, or accompanying his body to the graveyard; not remaining home for his three- and 40-day death ceremonies; not dressing or comporting herself properly (shoes; tattoo; smoking); not remembering her mother's *bathik* from Rama, and various other items she 'ought to know already'; as well as, perhaps most stingingly, what her mother regards as a callous (J. *téga*) failure to display appropriate affection for her deceased father.

As foreshadowed at the café, the tension between Dewi's life in Jakarta and her obligations at home has become concentrated in her relationship with her mother—whose continual scolding eventually brings the film's central antagonism to a head. However, on the way to open conflict, Dewi is subjected to a series of increasingly direct criticisms from other members of the extended family—starting with a rebuke from her auntie (Bulik). The following exchange (lines 67–9), which is conducted in Javanese, takes place as Auntie finds Dewi behind the house sneaking a furtive cigarette.

Bulik	<i>Lho, 'Wi!? Dèning kowé ora mèlu ngeteraké bapakmu?</i>	<i>What, Dewi!? Why didn't you join them in taking your father (to the cemetery)?</i>
Dèwi	<i>Boten, Bulik. Saweg alangan, dados ... boten saged tumut.</i>	<i>No, Auntie. I'm on my period, so I couldn't join them.</i>
Bulik	<i>Oalah, ndhuk ... mesakaké kowé. Dèning barengan karo pas bapakmu pas ora ana ... dadi kowé ora bisa ngeteraké, ya?</i>	<i>My goodness, ndhuk ...¹³ you poor thing. Coming right when your father's passed away ... so you can't take him (to the cemetery), eh?</i>
	<i>Mau ya ora mèlu brobosan?</i>	<i>Didn't join 'em earlier for the brobosan, either?¹⁴</i>

13 *Ndhuk*. Term of address for a young, unmarried girl; short for *gendhuk*. See below for further discussion.

14 On *brobosan* death rites, see Koentjaraningrat 1985:363.

[Dèwi shakes her head]

[Dèwi shakes her head.]

<i>Mesakaké banget kowé, ndhuk. Ya</i>	<i>Oh you poor, poor thing, ndhuk.</i>
<i>muga-muga waé bapakmu ... nang</i>	<i>Well, let's just hope your father ...</i>
<i>kana ora kakéan pikiran, ya?</i>	<i>his thoughts aren't overly burdened</i>
	<i>up there, eh?</i>

Auntie's initial reaction on finding Dewi at home is one of surprise and disbelief (*Lho, Wi!?*). Why is she not out with the others, accompanying her father's body to the cemetery? Dewi responds politely, if evasively, explaining that she cannot go because she is menstruating.¹⁵ To this Auntie offers but lightly veiled reproval, expressing pity for Dewi over the coincidence of her period occurring just as her father has passed away. Auntie then presses on, asking whether Dewi attended the *brobosan* rite earlier that day, to which Dewi shakes her head indicating she did not. It is at this point that Auntie delivers a more explicit reprimand—once again expressing pity for Dewi, professing her hope that Dewi's negligence will not unduly burden her deceased father in the afterlife.

As with Dewi's other conversations with family, her exchange with Auntie is conducted in broad accord with the conventions of speaking Javanese that Errington has glossed in terms of 'the relative values of language' (1988:10; J. *unggah-ungguh ing basa*).¹⁶ In this particular exchange, the two most overtly apparent conventions are those of linguistic register and terms of address. As a younger member of the family, Dewi speaks to her auntie in a formal register (*krama*) marked by comparatively refined vocabulary (J. *boten, saweg, dados, tumut*) and a relative 'flatness of affect' (Geertz 1960:240). In response, Dewi's auntie condescends to her using an informal speech style (*ngoko*) that is more affectively explicit, employing a less-refined vocabulary (J. *ora, mèlu, waé*) interspersed with exclamations of surprise, pity, and disapproval (J. *lho, mesakaké, oalah, ya?*).¹⁷

The hierarchical relationship between Dewi and Auntie is further marked by the terms they use to address one another. In contrast to the Jakarta café—and its relatively unencumbered exchanges between *gué* and *lo*—the terms of address and self-reference employed 'at home' embody a set of hierarchically ordered privileges and obligations. So, for instance, Dewi addresses her auntie

15 See footnote on *saweg alangan* in line 68 of the transcript.

16 Compare Uhlenbeck 1978; Keeler 1984; Geertz 1960:248–60.

17 See Quinn's study on 'Teaching Javanese respect usage to foreign learners' (2011) for an instructive overview of the linguistic distinctions in play as they might appear to a non-Javanese student.

as Bulik, a kin term for the younger sister of a parent. This situates the aunt as senior to Dewi, but junior to her mother and father. Meanwhile, Dewi herself is frequently addressed as *ndhuk* (short for *gendhuk*), a kin term reserved for younger, unmarried girls. Although commonly used with affection in contemporary Javanese, Dewi is only ever addressed as *ndhuk* when she is being informed of an obligation (lines 74–6) or subjected to reprimand and correction (lines 64, 69, 88–90). Reflecting on this usage, one might argue that the film's central problematic turns on Dewi's refusal to accept the obligations ascribed to one who may rightly be called 'ndhuk'—as, for example, when her mother chides her for a 'heartless' lack of regard for her deceased father.

Ndhuk, won't you feel pity for your father later? [...] Your father will still be in the house for forty days, ndhuk. Are you so heartless as to walk out on your father again? Why don't you get it?

lines 88, 90

Ndhuk, apa kowé ra mesakké karo bapakmu mengko? [...] Bapakmu kuwi jik nèng omah nganti patang-puluh dina, ndhuk. Apa kowé téga ninggalké bapakmu menéh? Kok kowé ra ngerti-ngerti ta?

lines 88, 90

In response to her mother's exasperation, Dewi implores her to 'try to understand' how she herself feels (line 91). But it appears the request was in vain. For in the next scene we learn that it is Dewi alone who is obliged to understand—a point of stark contrast with the mutuality of understanding exemplified at the Jakarta café. With the Islamic call to prayer audible in the background, her uncle explains, 'You're the one who's got to try to understand her (J. *kowé iki sing kuduné isa ngerténi dhewéké*). [...] You're the child here ... you've gotta be more patient. Don't give in to your emotions. Just do as yer told ... so your mum's thoughts aren't unduly burdened' (line 94). For the film, it seems this is what it means to be *ndhuk*. It is Dewi's job to make up the gap between her mother's wishes and her own desires. And it is only by virtue of the letter from her deceased father—in language that is, significantly, hidden from the film's viewers—that Dewi resolves to accommodate herself to the situation, and perhaps begin to 'understand' her mother.

3 On the Way to Understanding?

Given its seeming importance for the film, how then are we to understand this ‘understanding’? What exactly is it that Dewi experiences in Jakarta with her friends but misses so sorely in her interactions ‘at home’? Is it analogous to the condition or quality that her mother finds lacking in Dewi herself, and that her uncle exhorts her to cultivate in relation to her mother? The operative term in each of these exchanges derives from the Javanese base-word *ngerti*, which is conventionally glossed in English as ‘to know’ or ‘understand’ (see opening quotations). But what does it mean here to understand (J. *ngerténi*, *ngertèkké*), or to ‘get it’ (J. *ngerti-ngerti*)? The figure of understanding looms large in the history of the human sciences, and it can sometimes be difficult to disentangle its various associations. Reflecting on the examples cited above, the film’s call to understanding does not self-evidently entail a shared ‘meaning’ (J. *teges*, I. *makna*), or an idealized state of intersubjectivity, of the sort favoured by interpretive approaches to human action. This is not to discount the importance of collective intimacy and ease of interaction. On the contrary, through an analysis of the film’s language-in-use, I have tried to show that these qualities are at least partially constitutive of Dewi’s relationship with her friends at the café. Although I have not addressed the issue, one might also argue that a parallel sense of intimacy is evident *mutatis mutandis* in relations among Dewi’s neighbours and family members—as exemplified by a series of casual exchanges at the funeral (lines 42–3; 44–8; 49–56; compare 70–2). To be sure, in neither case would this preclude tension or disagreement. But it does point to a manner of being together that the film at once valorizes and renders problematic through a series of failures to ‘understand’. The question is, in what sense? If a certain mutuality seems crucial to relations between Dewi and her friends, the same cannot be said for the injunction to understand ‘at home’—which is at once emphatically gerundive and hierarchically unidirectional in application.¹⁸ Reflecting on *Dewi pulang* as a whole, I would argue that the film’s action is driven by the antagonism between these two modes of understanding and the broader possibilities for both personal fulfilment and collective life that they embody. As a commentary on contemporary social life, this speaks directly to the experience of many young, educated Indonesians with their eye on the wider world.

18 I wish to leave as an open question the relationship between this injunction to understand and such traditional Javanese virtues as *trima*, *sabar*, and *iklas* (see Geertz 1960:240–1).

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