

# **LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY ON MATCHMAKING DISCOURSE (JAVANESE AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES)**

**Ribut WAHYUDI**

English Language and Letters Department, Faculty of Humanities and Culture,

Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Malang, Indonesia

rwah5054@uni.sydney.edu.au

## **Abstract**

Matchmaking is one of unique phenomena in Indonesian society, primarily in Javanese culture. It is said unique as it does not always happen in all circumstances. Religious consideration, shyness among both parties or one of them (either boy or girl), are factors to be match-made . Matchmaking is usually performed by the one having a closed relationship with both boy and girl considering to start a serious relationship. In this article, matchmaking is elaborated in the context where one of the parties is typical of a shy girl. The match maker is the girl's relative who facilitated 'relationship establishment' with the writer. It is done through chatroom as the writer and the matchmaker were in a faraway distance (different countries). As the girl being mediated, match maker, and writer are from the same province having the same religion (Islam), the discourses performed were highly connected to the ethnic background, and Islamic discourses as the value system. In the case of Javanese perspective, the factors such as profession, wealth, religion and education are considered the satus of Individual Javanese (Dhofier, 1980). While, in Islamic teaching, having a religious husband or wife is highly recommended (see. [www.islamweb.net](http://www.islamweb.net)). The interplay of these discourses highly govern the chatting interaction.

## **Keywords**

Javanese identity, Islamic discourse, value system, matchmaking and marriage

## 1. Background theory

Identity is a sort of a fluid characteristic of someone. Seen in this way as it is changing, actively constructed and co-constructed as well as gaining recognition by others through interaction. Furthermore, identity is reciprocally constructed in someone's entire life (Paltridge, 2006; Cameron, 2001; Thornborrow, 1999; Gee, 2005). Blommaert (2005) states that identity is 'what and who you are' (p.203). This can be seen through the involvement in diverse activities (individually, socially, institutionally) with regard to certain roles being assigned which enables someone to have multi identities (Thornborrow, 1999). Further, these identities can also be observable through the language used, dressing (multi-modal activities), communities in which he/she is in, and constructed through the use of discourse (Paltridge, 2006). Thus the same person may be displayed as lecturer, a religious man, husband, mother, princess etc. In a broader scope, Identities can be reflected through gender, class, national identity etc (Delanty 2003 cited in Block 2006a).

In this article, the discussion is mostly focused on Javanese ethnic identity and Islamic discourses and less discussion on the features of gendered languages in the process of 'relationship matchmaking'

The emphasis on ethnic identity is due to the fact that the most parts in writer's chat were about belief system and religion. Block (2006b cited in Ominiya and White, 2006) describes that ethnic based identity covers 'a shared history, belief system, practices, language and religion, all associated with cultural group' (p. 39). More specifically, this article will deal more with practices and theory of Javanese and Islamic Discourses as the matchmaker and the writer are from this background. These two factors are important in matchmaking as they are regarded as the indicator of successful marriage process. Nilan (2008) mentioned that faith, family and finances are three prominent factors for successful marriage in Indonesia. Bütünheim & Nobles (2009) mention that 'adat (local ethnic) norms are strong predictors of marriage behaviour' in Indonesia (p.277). This is what might Hofstede (1998) includes as *value system*, the way in which individuals or group of individuals organise their ethical and ideological values. The case of Javanese norms and Islamic discourses govern *spouse choice* might indicate this *value system*.

On the other hand, writer's concern is in the chat room languages. This will describe the features of how generally man and woman use the language (Lakoff 1970s cited in Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, 2003; Litosseliti, 2006; Tannen, 1990; Tannen 1998) that woman tend to use *question tag, hedges, boosters or amplifiers, indirection, diminutives, euphemism* etc, and man

tend to use *more interruption, more assertions* etc. But as the chat is from Yahoo Messenger which was not audio recorded, the pitch, intonation etc can not be explained and yet the language use was also constrained to technical properties through the use of emoticon. The use of emoticon may be to show digital presence (Thomas, 2004) as well as ‘conversational coherence and communicative register’ (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003, p. 713).

## **2. The profile of data**

The data was taken on March 23, 2010 through Yahoo Messenger, in which Indonesian language was used. The participants involved the writer himself and his match maker, Sara (pseudonym). She was 26 year old young woman who mediated the writer with her relative. Sara and the writer are both from the same Javanese cultures and of the same religion as well (Islam). Thus, the language used in this ‘negotiation process’ works within the framework of those variables. The chat contains the writer’s plan to propose ‘love’ to her relative (26 year old age girl). The mediation is required as her cousin is a kind of ‘shy’ girl, the case which is common in Javanese culture, especially those from conservative family. Blommaert (2005) says that ‘dating or developing friendships involve *intricate narratives* about ones’ self and request for such narratives from the interlocutor, a matter of getting to know one another’ (p.203). Therefore, due to the typically of being ‘shy’ girl, the matchmaking is necessary. The patterns in the data mostly denote the dominant variables of Javanese culture and religious Islamic discourse in relation with spouse choice. While other variable which is man and woman language is partially shown as the text is only written one done through chatroom in which the nature of conversation itself may be constrained.

## **3. Discussions on ethnic identity from the perspective of Javanese culture and Islamic discourse)**

The use of language is really governed by the context of discussion and the relationship between the speakers. Ideological orientations also shape the nature of the chatting as the writer and the matchmaker hold the same religion. These factors interplay each other in the writer’s chatting with her. See the following conversations:

**Excerpt A**

- Writer: doing assignments?
- Sara: No, but is about to go, purchasing my friend's baby's need.
- Writer: ok if that's the case...go a head (do it)...
- Sara: having just finished chatting with my relative)?
- Writer: not yet, I already sent messages to her FB inbox to be on-line in Yahoo Messenger but seems that she is in bad mood.
- Sara: ooo...often on-line?
- Writer: if we appear to be on-line at the same time, we chat in Yahoo Messenger as via Facebook, many intruders are coming'
- Sara: often?
- Writer: depending on her visiting to internet rental...(the place where can rent internet)

In the above chat, it can be seen that Sara is clarifying whether the writer was chatting with her relative as her relative that time was also on-line. Her questions about the frequency of our chatting might imply her attention of writer's intimate-relationship with her relative. While the writer's responses signal that the writer is concerned with his relationship by stating that he always initiates the chat with her elder relative and his being considerate to accept her not willingness to talk. Yet, it is in Javanese culture that a boy establishing relationship with a girl usually takes initiative and then the girl responses. If the girl initiates first, it is considered being *impolite* and it *violates* the norm in Javanese culture. These might reflect Javanese speech pattern which links to 'social structural variables such as patterns of socialization, model of appropriate male and female linguistic behavior, men and women social roles, and typical sphere of interest' (Smith-Hefner, 1988, p.535).

**Excerpt B**

- Writer: is she having problem?
- Sara: what do you mean?
- Writer: wondering whether she got a problem so that she is not willing to chat.
- Sara: if she got a problem what are you gonna do?
- Writer: I'm asking means I want to know...only if you want to let me know..
- Sara: I'm also asking, if she' got a problem, what are you gonna do?

Writer: depending on the problem...if i am able, I will help..if I can't..I will just pray for her..

Sara: good...

In the above talk, the writer was trying to show his care to her elder relative by questioning what was happening. In response Sara asked back what he was going to do if her relative got a problem. This typical question may indicate that she was probing whether the writer is ‘‘a good candidate’’ for her relative. In response to this the writer tried to moderately answer that he does willing to give her a hand but that would depend on the nature of problem. He wanted to project image that he is a dependable person and yet is logical about writer's capability in handling the problem. Sara's confirmation that nothing happen with her sister indicates that she is just testing about his concern. This might imply that the ‘negotiation’ in match making is complex. This goes in line with Bloomaert (2005) issues on dating which involves and requests intricate narratives.

### Excerpt C

Writer: why keeping silent? ???????? (multiple question marks shows that the writer needs immediate answer)

Sara: -o (emoticon indicating surprise)

Sara: -/ (emoticon indication confused)

Writer: about me and your sister. So that our relationship is clear.

Sara: sleepy..(teasing the writer)

Writer: Ok..gud nite (informal of ‘‘good night’’)

Sara: hahaha when?

Writer: Frankly I don't to keep it longer..

Sara: when?

Writer: so that you will not always doubt me..

Sara: haha

Writer: I'm gonna make it

Sara: mr. There is no case for those who have just known each other will directly believe. Those ‘fallin in luv’ (informal word for fall in love) usually talk as what you are talking.

Sara: always being doubt..yep yep yep...but what we are heading is not just one day but for good. This means that if you seriously want to marry

- my relative it is not only you and...but also FAMILY (emphasising). I think you still do not know further about my family.
- Writer: so the point being?
- Sara: that's the reason why I am always doubting you..
- Writer: delay is better?
- Sara: -( (showing dissatisfaction)
- Writer: Ok if that's what you want
- Sara: what do you mean?
- Writer: means I am postponing my plan if i can get right from your answer
- Sara: Don't postpone it
- Writer: So?
- Sara: I'm just responding your question .. as you said that I am questioning your seriousness
- Writer: so what is to do then? Should I ask her or not?
- Sara: if you are already confident just propose it to her and give her time to think, YES or NO (firm answer), just do it like that, i think it is easy, who knows YOU ARE LUCKY (positive wish)
- Writer: yep I prefer it too, YES or NO.(expecting a firm answer)

The important point exists in the above chat is that marriage in her opinion is not merely about the couples but also the whole family. She also argues that the writer might not know deeply about her and her sister's family. Her arguments indeed denote what, some groups, apply to Javanese society that the concept of marriage also means the *involvement of family* in making the decision, even though sometimes they may reject it (Smith-Hefner, 1988). Yet this fact is in contrast with the finding (Malhotra, 1991; Smith-Hefner, 2005) stating that there has been significant shift to *self-marital choice* among men and women in Indonesia, especially in Javanese culture. This could be understood as the girl is from village where the family still hold old Javanese tradition even though she is educated (a bachelor graduate).

#### **Excerpt D**

- Sara: by the way in Makassar now there is Muktamar NU (one of Islamic schools national event to elect its leaders), in Jogja there is Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah (other religious school) and Indonesia is about to welcome President Barack Obama.

- Writer: yep I know, as I usually read the news about Indonesia on-line.
- Sara: not participate in one of them? As the Indonesian citizen
- Writer: hehe..it is not your real question, isn't it?
- Sara: what? As there is no other topic, always discussing my elder relative, I'm bored with it.
- Writer: hehe (laughing)

The above chat is interesting in that Sara is trying to identify the writer's religious affiliation by elaborating what was happening in Indonesia and which Islamic religious school the writer belongs to. Yet, again the same religious affiliation often plays a significant role in marriage affairs in Javanese culture. This seems underline that faith plays an important role for successful marriage in Indonesia (Nilan, 2008). The writer knew that it is pragmatic question but asking her back whether it is her real question. In respond to this she said that she is bored discussing the same topic (about her sister) most of the time. The writer's act of not answering her about writer's religious affiliation was meant to hide his identity. And yet, the question by matchmaker above might project the identity of Javanese status. Dhofier (1980) said that 'the status of individual Javanese is determined by a set of factors—occupation, wealth, family, place of residence, religion, taste and education' (p.48). However, accordingly, the Javanese stratification system is not simple one, in which one of them is the *degree of participation* in Islam.

### **Excerpt E**

- Sara: why do you love my relative?
- Writer: yeah in marriage is already clear, one of the most important things as you already know is the degree of one's religiosity and her character
- Sara: if only I can let you know..but forget it.
- Writer: if it is important to tell it if not don't do it.

The above excerpt describes her curiosity about the reason why the writer is falling in love with her relative. This might ask about the justifying reason of writer's choice. In his response, it is obvious that the writer is looking for a religious woman and that his answer reflects his concerns on choosing a good wife in Islam and thus it governs his way of life. This may reflect Javanese individual status (Dhofier, 1980).

#### **4. Discussion on Gendered Language (from chatroom)**

From the whole conversation, there are some evidences in the chat that support the previous research on man and woman language done by (Lakoff 1970 cited in Ekerct and Ginet 2003; Crosby and Nyquist, 1977; McMillan 1977). However, most of the time counter those. This might be that the conversation is done through chatroom talk , where due to its bodiless existence, ‘liberate woman from subordinate position’ (Rodino, 1997 cited in Subrahmanyam; Greenfield; and Tynes, 2004, p.662). The facts which support the previous research was that the writer used more interruption during the whole conversation and Sara employs *indirectness* (e.g. excerpt D). Furthermore, she utilized quite frequently the use of emoticons during the chat (e.g. Excerpt C). This is what Thomas (2004) might mean that she ‘uses words and images for digital presence’ (p.358), as well as ‘conversational coherence and communicative register’ (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2003, p. 713).

#### **5. Conclusion**

Overall, it can clearly be seen that as one of example of Javanese culture and Islamic discourses, matchmaking and marriage related activities (in the above chatroom talk) are confined strongly to those two variables. While, the use of gendered language (man and woman language), partially capture the previous studies due to its different chat-medium.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank to Professor Brian Paltridge at Faculty of Education and Social Work, the University of Sydney, who was teaching me a course on *Language and Social Practice*. One of the assignments he gave in the course becomes the article in this Journal. My thank also goes to Dr. Richard Liu (Professor Brian Paltridge’s assistant), who at that time served as a tutor in the course. Without them, this article could not have been published.



## References

- Block, D. (2006a): *Second Language Identities*. London: Continuum
- Block, D. (2006b): Identity in Applied Linguistics, in T. Omoniyi and G. White (eds): *The Sociolinguistics of Identity*. London: Continuum
- Blommaert, J. (2005): *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buttenheim, A. M. & Nobles, J. (2009): Ethnic Diversity, Traditional Norms and Marriage Behaviour in Indonesia. *Population Studies*. 63(3), 277-294.
- Cameron, D (2001): *Working with Spoken Discourse*. London: Sage
- Crosby, F. and Nyquist, L. (1977): The Female Register: Empirical Study of Lakoff's Hypotheses. *Lang. Soc.* 6, 313-322.
- Dhofier, Z. (1980): Kinship and Marriage among the Javanese Kyai. *Indonesia*. 29, 47-58.
- Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1993): *Language and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (2005): *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. London: Routledge
- Greenfield, P. M. & Subrahmanyam, K. (2003): Online Discourse in a Teen Chartroom: New Codes and New Modes of Coherence in a Visual Medium. *Applied Developmental Psychology*. 24, 713-738.
- Hofstede, G. (1998): A Case for Comparing Apples and Oranges: International Differences in Values. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 399(1), 16-32.
- Litosseliti, L. (2006): *Gender & Language: Theory and Practice*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Malhotra, A. (1991): Gender and Changing Generational Relations: Spouse Choice in Indonesia. *Demography*. 28 (4), 549-570.
- McMillan, J. R. et al. (1977): Women's Language: Uncertainty or Interpersonal Sensitivity and Emotionality? *Sex Roles*. 3 (6), 545-558.
- Nilan, P. (2008): Youth Transition to Urban, Middle Class Marriage in Indonesia: Faith, Family and Finances. *Journal of Youth Studies*. 11 (1), 65-82.
- Omoniyi, T. and White, G. (eds) (2006): *The Sociolinguistics of Identity*. London: Continuum
- Paltridge, B. (2006): *Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum
- Tannen, D. (1990): *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. NSW. Random House Australia.
- Tannen, D. (1998): Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Hers, in Coates, J. (ed): *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

- Thomas, A. (2004): Digital Literacies of the Cybergirl. *E-Learning*. 1 (3), 358-382.
- Thornborrow, J. (1999): Language and Identity, in L. Thomas and S. Wareing. (eds): *Language, Society, Power*. London: Routledge
- Smith-Hefner, N.J. (1988): Women and Politeness: The Javanese Example. *Language and Society*. 7 (4), 535-554.
- Smith-Hefner, N. J. (2005): The New Muslim Romance: Changing Patterns of Courtship and Marriage Among Educated Javanese Youth. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 36 (3), 441-459.
- Subrahmanyam, K., P.M. Greenfield and B. Tynes. (2004): Constructing Sexuality and Identity in an Online Teen Chat Room. *Applied Developmental Psychology*. 25, 651-666.
- <http://www.islamweb.net/womane/nindex.php?page=readart&id=149382> Accessed on May 9, 2012.

**The author:**

**Ribut Wahyudi** gained an M.Ed degree in TESOL from The University of Sydney Australia in 2010. He has taught English Language skills, Introduction to Linguistics, and Syntax. He is interested in researching DA, CDA and Intercultural Languages Education, SLA and Curriculum and Pedagogy. His articles have appeared in *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, *LINGUA Journal*, and *State University of Malang Press*. He also has presented papers both in National and International Seminars.