

Who is 'Mbak'?

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This paper discusses the significant change in the use of the Javanese honorific address form '*mbak*' over the past few years in terms of its lexical meaning. In addition, this paper also investigates the underpinning reasons why people use this address form to associate with certain types of jobs. The word '*mbak*' is originally used among Javanese to address older sisters, young women, or older women in general as a symbol of respect. As more Javanese young girls move to Jakarta and its neighboring areas to work as maids or baby sitters, the word '*mbak*' has experienced dramatic change in how certain community use and perceive it. Examples taken from real-life experience show how this word, both as the second and third pronoun, is used to replace 'maids' or 'babysitters'. A coworker who employs a maid once said "***Mbak*** di rumah yang masak ikannya." (*Mbak* cooked the fish). She did not mention that it was her maid who cooked the fish; instead, she mentioned the word '*mbak*' to replace 'my maid'. A similar case happened few years back when many middle-aged women worked as maids. The word '*bibi*' which originally means 'aunt' was used to address female servants. This particular address form is no longer widely used compared to '*mbak*' as there are fewer middle-aged women doing this particular job.

The data are collected through perception tests. There are twelve statements containing the word '*mbak*' serving three different grammatical function; second person pronoun, third person pronoun, and attached to 'name'. Each of twelve statements provides respondents with four options of responds corresponding to their perception of the word '*mbak*'. Respondents decide and choose whether '*mbak*' in each statement they read refers to elder sister, elder women, young women, or maids/ baby sitters. These perception tests are given to respondents from two different backgrounds. The first type of respondents are those living in rural areas with most of the population are Javanese while the later are from urban areas such as Jakarta whose population varies significantly. These two distinct backgrounds are believed to have different perceptions and thus will help us find the underpinning rationales why the word '*mbak*' is used in such a way.

The result of this study will contribute to the scholarly discussion on language change particularly that of Javanese. It will help us see to what extent the social trends influence language use.