

“Top-down” or “bottom-up”? The linguistic production of verticality and the reconfigurations of bureaucratic Indonesian in the *Era Reformasi*

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During the New Order authoritarian regime, bureaucratic Indonesian embodied the “formal authoritative idiom of the Indonesian nation-state” (Errington 1998a: 31) and constituted a crucial site for the elaboration of Indonesian State imaginary. With the collapse, in the late 1990s, of over three decades of authoritarian rule, Indonesia experienced a profound transition from state-led development to a decentralized system managed through neoliberal policies. Although we have a number of linguistic anthropological analyses of bureaucratic Indonesian (e.g., Errington 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Goebel 2013a and 2013), we still lack a solid understanding and a thorough account of how this register has been reconfigured by the institutional transformations that have occurred in Indonesia since the beginning of the new millennium.

This paper aims at furthering the research on the co-articulation of linguistic and political transformations by offering a linguistic anthropological investigation of Indonesia’s State register as used by Toraja bureaucrats and local officials in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. How has the new ideology of neoliberal democracy affected a discursive register that for decades had been indexical of the status quo and of the New Order apparatus?

Used primarily during state sponsored-meetings (*rapat*), bureaucratic Indonesian is characterized by a distinctive prosody (such as a certain intonation pattern and a flat tone of voice), a specific lexical register (made of acronyms, words, and syntagms referring to the bureaucratic domain), a series of morphological and syntactical aspects (i.e. predominance of hypotaxis over parataxis, frequent deployment of “yang-construction” and noun phrases, expanded use of prefixes and suffixes in verbal and nominal morphology), as well as stylistic features (such as formulaic ways of asking permission to speak and specific honorific opening structures). The transcribed excerpt of one of such honorific openings exemplifies some of these characteristics:

1. Bapak Anggota Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah yang saya hormati	1. Mr. Member of the Regency legislative council, whom I respect
2. Bapak Camat Mengkendek yang saya hormati, bersama aparatnya,	2. Mr. District Head, whom I respect, together with his apparatus
3. Eh saudara Asisten Hukum	3. Eh fellow Legal Assistant
4. Saudara kepala Infokom	4. Fellow Head of the Infokom [acronym for Information and Communication Agency]
5. Bapak-bapak eh ...kalangan dan tokoh adat yang kami banggakan	5. Gentlemen of the group of traditional leaders of whom we are proud
6. Bapak-bapak, ibu-ibu partai politik,	6. Ladies and gentlemen of the political parties
7. Para tokoh wanita,	7. To the women representatives
8. Tokoh pemuda	8. The youth representatives
9. Eh tokoh profesi	9. Eh the representatives of the professional groups

As this example shows, bureaucratic Indonesian is integral to the discursive construction of a centralist political imaginary through which the State is spatialized via an iconic representation of progressively decreasing levels of authority and territorial scales. In the New Order’s markedly autocratic framework, the State had been represented as hierarchically encompassing “its localities” through its being situated practically and metaphorically *above* society (Gupta and Ferguson 2002: 981). From an ideological point of view, the Reform Era has aimed at replacing a “top-down” form of governance with “bottom up” political practices, thus suggesting a fracture with respect to the New Order’s centralist mode of representing the State as a

spatial entity marked by “verticality” and “encompassment”. How has this ideological shift affected the linguistic (i.e. lexical, prosodic, morpho-syntactical, and pragmatic) characteristics of bureaucratic Indonesian?

Drawing on a corpus of audiovisual data recorded during political rallies and debates that took place in Toraja in the aftermath of the demise of Suharto’s authoritarian rule, this paper explores the contemporary reconfiguration of bureaucratic Indonesia in the early years of the Reform Era (2001-2006) and reflects on the encounter between New Order-informed bureaucratic register and the new rhetoric of popular aspiration (*aspirasi*), transparency (*transparansi*), and commitment (*komitmen*). A preliminary analysis of this encounter shows two interesting patterns: On the one hand, a new popularity of lexical items and formulas markedly associated with the nationalistic anticolonial rhetoric of the 1940s and 1950s; on the other hand, the data show an interesting incorporation of Reformasi’s personalistic rhetoric of “vision” (*visi*), “mission” (*misi*), and “commitment” (*komitmen*) within the morpho-syntactic and prosodic patterns of the New Order bureaucratic script.

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