Associational Semantics and Polity Type:
What We Can Learn from Javanese

David Gil

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

Much recent work in linguistics has explored the relationship between the grammatical structures of a language and its social and historical circumstances (McWhorter 2005, Trudgill 2011). The Indonesian archipelago offers a fine laboratory for examining these relationships in that it contains languages sharing many common typological features while differing greatly with respect to important social characteristics. In particular, within the archipelago, the island of Java is exceptional in that is has long been the seat of empire, and hence, in comparison with other islands, contains relatively few languages each with a large number of native speakers.

This paper examines the relationship between an important socio-political feature, the nature of the polity with which a language is identified, and a central property of grammatical organization, namely, associational semantics. In all languages, the meaning of a complex expression XY is derived from the meanings of its constituent parts X and Y. Languages differ, however, with respect to the extent to which the meanings of complex expressions are constrained by various additional grammatical rules making reference to features such as linear order and morphological marking. On the one hand, in highly associational languages a complex expression XY may have a broad and very vague meaning encompassing anything having to do in one way or another with X and Y; on the other, in less-highly associational languages the meanings of such expressions are narrowed down by further construction-specific grammatical rules.

This paper reports on some results from an ongoing cross-linguistic experimental study examining the degree of associationality in over 40 languages world-wide. The experiment measures the availability of *apparently associational interpretations* of the following two types:

(1)   (a)   *peripheral participant encoded as core participant (Per → Core)*
         eg: a **clown drinking from a glass while reading a book** described as
               English: The clown is drinking the book
               Javanese: Badut ngombe buku

      (b)   *patient encoded as agent (Pat → Ag)*
         eg. **a man drawing a dog** described as
               English: The dog is drawing
               Javanese: Kirik nglukis

The results of the experiment show that the availability of apparently associational interpretations in a language reflects its grammatical and socio-political profiles. In English such interpretations are generally not available, but in other, more highly associational languages they are. Some of the experimental results from the languages of Java and neighboring islands are presented in the following table:

	Availability of Per → Core Interpretations (%)	Availability of Pat → Ag Interpretations (%)
Mentawai	75	56
Minangkabau	74	57
Sundanese	76	49
Javanese	54	32
Standard Indonesian	29	11

Table 1: Some Experimental Results from the Association Experiment

The languages in Table 1 exhibit broadly similar grammatical profiles but distinct socio-political ones. The results in Table 1 suggest that local or regional languages tend to be more highly associational than national languages; this is evident in the contrast between Standard Indonesian, with a low degree of associationality, and the remaining four languages, exhibiting significantly higher degrees of associationality. However, of the remaining four languages, Javanese is of lesser associationality than the other three. This contrast, it is argued, is due to the fact that, unlike the other three languages, Javanese *was* a national language, or, more precisely, a language of empire, at various stages in its past history.

Thus, the Javanese experimental results show that the degree of associationality of a language is governed by its socio-political circumstances in both present and past times. Experimental results from other parts of the world provide independent evidence for the importance of the historical dimension, showing that local or regional languages of similar contemporary socio-political status are of generally higher associationality if, in the recent past, they did not belong to a highly-structured nation-state or empire.

While underscoring the relevance of social and historical factors to grammatical structure, the results of the association experiment reveal a pattern that runs counter to that observed by McWhorter and Trudgill. Whereas McWhorter and Trudgill propose a negative correlation between complexity in the grammatical and socio-historical domains, with increased socio-historical complexity resulting in language contact and subsequent simplification, the results of the association experiment point towards an opposite positive correlation, with grammatical complexity going hand in hand with greater complexity in the social and historical realms.

McWhorter, John (2005) *Defining Creole*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.
Trudgill, Peter (2011) *Sociolinguistic Typology: Social Determinants of Linguistic Complexity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.