

On the Phonetics, Phonology, and Phonotactics of *Basa Walikan Malang*

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Abstract: *Basa Walikan Malang* (BWM), the ‘Malang backwards language’, has been the subject of much recent linguistic research interested in this particular form of youth language spoken in Malang, East Java (Hoogervorst 2013; Prayogi 2013; Espree Conaway 2012; 2013). Initially functioning as a secret code to conceal messages during the Indonesian war of independence in the 1940s (Widodo 2006), the register combines words originated from Malang dialect of Javanese, Indonesian, and English words. These words are then permuted in certain ways and the process results in distinct form of words that cannot easily be deciphered by those coming from outside Malang. Javanese [klambi] ‘clothes’ is reversed into [imblaʔ], and Indonesian [siʔapa] is reversed into [apais]. As the above examples point out, the reversal only takes place on the lexical level. It does not take place on the syntactical level (see example 1a-c).

From a psycholinguistic point of view, the choice of reversing only on the lexical level is understandable, as spoken speech needs to be produced spontaneously and processed quickly. Reversing both words and sentence structure at the same time can create such an overwhelming process in the mind of the interlocutors. Ideally, they would create a way in which inversion can be done without exhausting their mental energy. Hence, there has never been any “backwards languages in which there is syntactic reversal as the major rule within the clause or phrase” (Dreyfuss 1983: 56). Reversal strategies to deform lexicons in BWM are varied, sometimes all phonemes are reversed entirely ([lumajan] → [najamul]), but there are also some cases of syllable metathesis ([mlaku] → [uklam]), and consonant cluster reduction ([lɔndɔ] → [nɔlɔ]) (see Hoogervorst 2013).

Since this game of reversal mainly deals with sounds or speech; we are intrigued to try to analyze this phenomena through lenses of phonetics, phonology, and phonotactics. This study will focus on certain examples extracted from BWM list of words: among others are [kubam]; [kacep]; [nɛŋɔs kɔmbɛt]; [hɛlum]; and [ŋalup]. [kubam] and [kacep] exhibit harmony between articulatory phonetics and auditory phonetics, in which beautiful speech production is in line with acceptable sounds in the language. [kubam] and [kacep] are reversed by obliging Javanese phonological and phonotactic rules (see example 2).

Javanese phonotactic rules are also apparent in the reversal process of words with homorganic consonants. Ogloblin (1980) notes that homorganic consonants are salient features in Javanese. The phonemes in example (3) are not fully inverted; instead, the homorganic consonants’ positions are maintained. Reversing homorganic consonants will break Javanese phonotactic constraints. [nɛŋɔs kɔmbɛt] is both difficult to pronounce and unpleasant to hear for Javanese native speakers. The aforementioned examples support BWM’s tendency to refer to Javanese phonology, phonetics, and phonotactics. However, there are also some instances that violate Javanese phonotactic rules; take [hɛlum] for example (see example 4a-b). Careful examination requires us to also consider Malangese dialect phonology and phonetics, instead of only that of the Standard Javanese. Our analysis at this point might only be sufficient to explain a limited

number of examples; nevertheless, it can serve as an essential approach to fully understand the reversal rules in BWM.

Keywords: *youth language, East Javanese dialect, phonetics, phonology, phonotactics*

Examples:

- 1) a. *Aku tuku səgɔ pəcəl* (Ngoko Javanese)
1SG buy rice pecel
“I bought a plate of pecel rice”
b. *Uka ukut ogəs ləcəp* (BWM)
1SG buy rice pecel
“I bought a plate of pecel rice”
c. **Ləcəp ogəs ukut uka*

2) Final Devoicing in Javanese:

[+voice] → [-voice]/ __#

/k/ → [ʔ]/ __#

/b/ → [p]/ __#

[mabʊʔ] → [kubam] ‘drunk’

[bɛcaʔ] → [kacɛp] ‘pedicab’

3) [sɛndɛn tɛmbʊʔ] → [nɛndɛs kɔmbɛt] ‘resting on the wall’
* [nɛdɛs kɔbmɛt]

- 4) a. [mulɪh] → [hilʊm] ‘to go home’ (expected form)
Standard Javanese vowel laxing: /u/ → [ʊ]/ __C#
/i/ → [ɪ]/ __C#
b. [molɪh] → [hɛlum] ‘to go home’ (BWM)

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