

## Conference Paper

# Local Wisdom with Universal Appeal: Dynamics of Indonesian Culture in Asian Context

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the dynamics of Indonesian culture in Asian context, as seen from a linguistic perspective, may occur in the form of cultural reinterpretation and semantic change. At the cultural level, this paper takes a close look at two things: apology and "Indonglish" (Indonesian English). Apology is a universal speech act. However, where, when, how, and why people apologize to one another can be culture-specific. I pick out an Islam-specific greeting which gets modified by taking a Malay-specific apology as an illustrative example. As for Indonglish, it can be viewed either as a mock term or as a serious term. As a mock term, Indonglish is characterized by Indonesian-specific errors; and as a serious sociolinguistic term, it is characterized by apology, Indonesian address terms, and religion-related expressions.

The semantic change pertains to three expressions: *pancasila*, *bhinneka tunggal ika*, and *tut wuri handayani*. The compound word *pancasila* means 'five principles', and the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika* means 'unity in diversity'. Both expressions originate from an old Javanese literary work *Sutasoma*, written during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In *Sutasoma*, both expressions refer respectively to 'five moral principles in Buddhism' and 'a single religious truth proposed to unite Buddhism and Hinduism'. However, in modern Indonesia, they have undergone drastic semantic change. *Pancasila* is a cover politico-philosophical term for the five state foundations; and *bhinneka tunggal ika* is a national motto intended to unite people with different backgrounds into a single Indonesian nation. The last expression *tut wuri handayani*, or 'giving support from behind', was part of the educational motto for Taman Siswa, an educational institution established in the early 1920s. Now, it is taken as a motto for national education, for its great relevance to principles of modern educational psychology. Briefly, cultural dynamics are observable in apology and Indonglish; and the three local expressions originating from Javanese have now become prominent terms of national treasure, whose meanings spark some global appeal.

**Keywords:** cultural reinterpretation, semantic change, apology, Indonglish

## 1. Introduction

This paper argues, first, how, within the dynamics of Asian context, components of Indonesian culture have undergone some change due to culture contact, and secondly, how internal socio-political dynamics have brought up local wisdom to the national scale, producing universal appeal. My background is linguistics; and so I take a close

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look at these issues from a linguistic perspective, while taking into account their socio-cultural significance and implications. The well-known saying “language exists in culture, and cultural values get revealed through language” has been justified by scholars in sociolinguistics [5, 12, 13], ethnolinguistics [3, 8, 9] and cultural anthropology [10].

The above topic may potentially cover dozens of subtopics. But for the sake of economy, I would like to limit the discussion to two major issues: (1) culture contact promoting apology and producing Indonglish (Indonesian English), and (2) socio-political dynamics bringing up local expressions in Javanese to enrich the political culture of the nation. My aims of presenting these subtopics are twofold: first, unraveling to fellow Asian citizens who we are (Indonesians), linguistically and culturally; and secondly, reaching out to readers of, particularly Asian citizens so as to build and strengthen mutual understanding among them. It is through mutual understanding that we may make even impossible dreams come true.

## 2. Culture Contact Promoting Apology and Producing Indonglish

This section describes and explains how culture contact promotes apology and produces Indonglish. As they are combined in one section, how does apology relate to Indonglish? In the first place, Indonglish is characterized, among others, by apology. Secondly, both are “markers” of Indonesian culture—to be explained shortly. Third and finally, apology may also be a marker of Asian culture; and English as used in each Asian country, whether as a second or foreign language, may develop its specific features, reflecting aspects of local and national cultures.

### 2.1. Promoting Apology

*Apology* means I am sorry; and by way of morpholexical joke ‘*anthropology*’ means I am human and I am sorry. Apology is part of our human nature. In this context, I should make it clear that by apology I mean “a word or statement saying sorry for something that has been done wrong or that causes a problem” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8<sup>th</sup> Electronic Edition). More broadly, apology may also be expressed non-verbally, e.g., by sending a small gift to rebuild a good relationship after some hard feelings. Thus, apology is an attempt to repair some crack in social harmony.

This reminds me of another joke. At the beginning of a presentation, Dr. Paul Clark, a scholar at the Institute of Culture and Communication at the East-West Center in Hawaii, said, “Asians begin their talk with an apology. Americans begin their talk with a joke. Now I begin my talk with an apology for not having a joke.” Our first reaction to this verbal humor is naturally laughter. But upon closer examination, the joke presents stereotyping: Asians are apologetic.

Is this true? In the Indonesian context, I would say that being apologetic is an important ingredient in our cultural recipe. I have discussed this issue in an earlier paper [15]; and now I would like to pick it up and give it more highlight in a broader context,

with illustrative examples taken from daily social life in the Indonesian setting. When a family gives a small feast or a big party, the person representing and speaking on behalf of the family will, at the end of his/her speech, apologize to the guests for any possible shortcomings. When a group of people have any social gathering, the person in charge will also apologize to those who are present for any inconveniences. When there is a social event, formal or informal, the committee chair will also apologize for any flaws or deficiencies.

What is the driving force behind all these kinds of apology? In a collectivistic culture, social harmony takes prominence in maintaining everyday affairs of social life [16]; and "social apology" as noted in the preceding paragraph is needed to preserve social harmony and strengthen social bonds. To illustrate, in many parts of Indonesia where Islam is the religion of the majority, a religious greeting has undergone some modification, adjusted to the national culture. At the end of observing the fasting month of Ramadan, Muslims in the Arabic-speaking world greet one another, saying

(1) *Eid Mubaarak. Taqabbalallaahu minnaa wa minkum, taqabbal ya kariem.*

'Happy Eid. May Allah accept our devotion; o Gracious Lord, accept us all.'

Interestingly, when this Islamic greeting was carried over into the Indonesian context, it underwent some modification, taking up social apology.

(2) *Selamat Idul Fitri. Mohon maaf lahir dan batin.*

'Happy Idul Fitri. \*Forgive us for our outer wrong-doings and inner sins.'

Note that the \*English translation of the apology is culturally rejected by Muslims in the English-speaking world; for the apologetic expression is Indonesian-specific. More precisely, it is Malay-specific. In Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, the apology is also there, spelled rather differently: *Selamat Aidil Fitri. Mohon maaf zahir dan bathin*, with the spelling of the words *aid* (memorable day), *zahir* (outer) and *bathin* (inner) sounding closer to their Arabic lexical origins.

Out of curiosity, I translated the Malay expression of apology into Arabic, producing the following Arabic greeting:

(3) *Eid Mubaarak. 'Afwan min fadl-likum zhaahiran wa baathinan.*

'Happy Eid. \*Forgive us for our outer wrong-doings and inner sins.'

Then I asked a colleague at the Arabic Department of State University of Malang whether the 'back translation' of the apology is acceptable in Arabic-speaking countries. The answer is: NO! The Arab Muslims would get confused; they never say that in Arabic.

To recapitulate, when the Islamic and hence Arabic greeting *Eid Mubaarak* (Happy *Eid*) was introduced to the Malay-speaking world, it got modified by promoting a Malay-specific apology. In this region of South-East Asia, an advantage has been taken from celebration of the *Eid*. Through mutual forgiveness, the Muslims in particular and the community in general wish to renew their socio-cultural ties and refresh their social harmony.

## 2.2. Peripheral Change of Indonglish

Within the context of “World Englishes” as outlined by Kachru 1988 (in [7]: 60), varieties of English in the so-called “expanding circle” have been considered parts of World Englishes—both in humorous and serious ways. Following the acronyms Singlish (Singaporean English) and Taglish (Tagalog English) which are widely known in sociolinguistics, new terms have been introduced by [2]: xxvii-viii, in a jocular manner, covering alphabetically among others: Arablish (Arabic English), Chinglish (Chinese English), Indonglish (Indonesian English), Konglish (Korean English), Runglish (Russian English), and Thanglish (Thai English). These are mock terms for World Englishes used informally to describe heavily accented or ungrammatical English carrying over features of foreign languages constituting the first half of the acronyms.

With respect to Indonglish, examples of deviation from standard norms made by Indonesian EFL students are numerous. Sentences marked with an asterisk (\*) are ill-formed, followed immediately by their well-formed counterparts in brackets.

- (4) \*I had breakfast with chicken  
(I had rice and chicken for breakfast.)
- (5) Dear Sir, \*if you are not too heavy ...  
(Dear Sir, if you don't mind ...)
- (6) \*I wonder if I can have a date with you, Sir.  
(I wonder if I can have an appointment with you, Sir.)
- (7) I'm sorry to know that you're sick, Sir. \*I hope you can rest in peace.  
(I'm sorry to know that you're sick, Sir. I hope you can take a good rest.)

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), these are called errors. They can be specified as follows: a transfer syntactic error (in 4), transfer lexical errors (in 5 and 6), and a developmental lexical error (in 7).

At the national level, embarrassing errors also occur. Many years ago, when Indonesia was under the Soeharto regime and the Indonesian word *pembangunan* (development) was the leading political jargon, a huge banner welcoming participants of an international conference at the Denpasar airport read as follows:

- (8) \*Let us succeed the development.  
(Let us make the development a [great] success.)

This is another example of a double transfer error, lexical and syntactic. Recently, a TV station in Indonesia plays around with English spelling:

- (9) The opportunity is no where The opportunity is now here.
- (10) Impossible \*I'm possible.  
(It is possible for me ...)

The orthographic play in (9) works out well; but in (10) it is a total failure. Since this TV station has many newscasters who are exceptionally fluent in English, their bold attitude of using *I'M POSSIBLE* as a wrong caption for their Sunday evening broadcast may well be dubbed as Indonglish audacity. The Indonesian scholar [11] uses the joke

term “Engdonesian” (English Indonesian) to describe “Indonesian discourse mixed up with English” showing a snob attitude of urban pop culture in the post-New Order era.

However, Indonglish may also be seen from a positive perspective—following the term “English as an International Language” (EIL) as proposed by [17]. In this respect, Indonglish is to be redefined as a variety of English used in Indonesia taking along some of its cultural conventions: (a) apology, (b) terms of address, and (c) religion-related expressions, as shown by the following naturally occurring examples:

(11) Good morning, Sir. I’m really sorry to trouble you. I’d like to ask if today we start the class at 12.20 as you informed us yesterday.

(12) Dear *Ibu/Bapak*,

You can now access TESOL Quarterly and TESOL Journal (2010-2014 editions) by following these steps: ...

(13) Student: *Assalamu alaikum*, Sir. I wonder if I can see you tomorrow for consultation.

Instructor: Yes, please see me in the office at about 10.30 tomorrow morning.

Student: Thank you, Sir. I will be there then, *insha Allah*.

Notice that in (11) the greeting is followed by an apology—which probably sounds awkward in English as a native language, but sounds normal in Indonglish. The apology here suggests modesty on the part of the student and respect toward the instructor. In (12), the English Department Chair addresses his colleague using the address term *Ibu/Bapak* instead of their English counterpart *Madams/Sirs*. This suggests profound implications: he maintains his professionalism by writing in eloquent English, but at the same time he keeps Indonesian social bonds and cultural intimacy. In (13), the student greets the instructor using *Assalamu alaikum* (Peace be upon you), and adds *insha Allah* (if God wills) in his reply. Both are common religious expressions in Islam.

Briefly, English used as a foreign language in Indonesia, or dubbed Indonglish, may sound embarrassingly funny owing to structural or cultural transfer. However, as used among fluent Indonesian speakers, it has undergone some peripheral change. While fully observing linguistic rules of standard English, Indonglish allows its users to remain intimate with the national culture.

### 3. Local Expressions Promoted to National Scale with Global Appeal

Language, whether viewed as an individual *competence* ([6]: 3-4) or as a psychosocial fact or *langue* ([19]: 7-14), is given a primary position as a component of culture (*Electronic Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*), along with other intangible components (ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, and codes) and tangible components (institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols). Similarly, words or verbal expressions in general, as noted in “Dialogic Imagination” by [1], carry along with them their own ‘history’.

Along this line of reasoning, I would like to point out three expressions originating from Javanese: (a) *Pancasila*, (b) *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, and (b) *Tut Wuri Handayani*. The

first two are from old Javanese, and the last one is from modern classical Javanese. The following discussion will explain what these three expressions mean locally and nationally, and what implications they have on the global sphere.

### 3.1. Pancasila

*Pancasila* is a key concept in the life of the Indonesian nation; *panca* means five, and *sila* means principle. These five principles by way of summary are *divinity*, *humanity*, *nationalism*, *democracy*, and *social welfare*. As for their national significance, they are stated in the last paragraph of the preamble of the 1945 Constitution, which has served as the state foundation since Indonesia proclaimed her freedom on August 17, 1945.

Historically, two and a half months prior to the Indonesian independence, i.e., on June 1, 1945, [20] (1906-1977)—one of the founding fathers of the nation and then appointed the first president of the country—gave an official speech before the National Committee for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence, outlining the philosophical foundations for the upcoming new state. It was on this very occasion that he coined the term “*pancasila*”, in which the five principles were originally presented in a different order: *nationalism*, *humanity*, *democracy*, *social welfare*, and *divinity* ([20]: 494). Soekarno himself stated that these five philosophical principles had been rooted out from the Indonesian society, i.e., the modern society which had been in contact with the international community since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Soekarno said that he coined *pancasila*, and not *pancadharma*, following advice from a friend who had good knowledge of languages ([20]: 496). In fact, going back to old Javanese literature, the term *pancasila* is found in *Sutasoma* (145: 2), a literary work written by the court poet Mpu Tantular in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the kingdom of Majapahit in East Java enjoyed its golden age, under the reign of King Hayam Wuruk. In this excellent literary work, *pancasila* simply means ‘five moral principles’ as outlined by Buddhism of that historical era.

In sum, the term *pancasila* originates from an old Javanese literary work of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, meaning five religious principles in Buddhism. Then it was coined by Soekarno in 1945 as a cover politico-philosophical term for the five foundations for the new independent nation. Since then, *pancasila*, or more rightfully *Pancasila*, has remained and will always remain well established with the second semantics. As projected to the global scale, the five basic principles no doubt have universal appeal, except *divinity*. It is a controversial issue for secular nations, and is totally rejected by communist countries.

### 3.2. Bhinneka Tunggal Ika

In modern Indonesia, after the proclamation of the independence, there were wars against the Dutch who intended to take back the country and put it under their colony. When Indonesia eventually managed to defend her freedom, in 1950 there was an urgent need for a national emblem. A design by Sultan Hamid II, then a State Minister of *Zonder Porto Folio* of the new republic, was accepted by the parliament ([DOI 10.18502/kss.v1i3.720](https://id.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)





Figure 1: Garuda Pancasila.

wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:National\_emblem\_of\_Indonesia\_Garuda\_Pancasila.svg, [https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambang\\_Negara\\_Indonesia](https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lambang_Negara_Indonesia)). In 1951 it was officially stated that the emblem was called *Garuda Pancasila* ([21]: xii), as shown in Figure 1.

*Garuda*, literally meaning 'eagle', is a mythological bird; and *Pancasila*, as discussed earlier, means Five Principles. Thus *Garuda Pancasila* is the 'Eagle Bearing *Pancasila*'. As shown on the shield hanging on the neck of the eagle, each principle is represented by a symbolic figure: *divinity* (the star), *humanity* (the chain), *nationalism* (the banyan tree), *democracy* (the bull head), and *social welfare* (the cotton & paddy). I will not go into further detail here. The focus of interest in the present discussion is the **national motto** written on the white scroll gripped by the legs of the eagle: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*.

The phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika*, just like the compound word *pancasila*, is also taken from the old Javanese literary work [21] (139: 5). A linguistic analysis of this phrase gives the following glossing:

(14) *bhinna ika tunggal ika*  
separated that one that  
'Unity in diversity.'

The complete sentence in the fourth/last line of the stanza containing this phrase reads as follows:

(15) *Bhinneka tunggal ika; tan hana dharma mangrwa.*  
Unity in diversity; no truth gets divided into two.

In *Sutasoma*, the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika* implies that Buddhism and Hinduism are two different religions; however, the poet suggests that the essential truth of both religions should be only one.

As the phrase was picked out from the literary work and put on the white scroll as part of the national emblem *Garuda Pancasila*, it takes up a new interpretation. Indonesian people dwelling throughout the archipelago—with their different ethnic, racial, sub-cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds—are now to be united into a single nation: the Indonesian nation. This is fully in accord with the true meaning of the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika*, that is, it may mean 'unity in diversity' or 'diversity

in unity' (Sudaryanto, a notable Indonesian linguist, personal communication, March 2016).

As projected onto the global scale, the motto "unity in diversity" may obtain a much broader interpretation: diverse nations, races, and political ideologies of peoples the world over are united together by a single tie: the universal value of humanity. The fact that many nations are still divided by conflicts of interest or torn apart by wars owing to different political ideologies reveals that the *reality* often stands against the *ideal*. In the world of scholarship, such as the international conference on LSCAC, the pursuit of the ideal keeps moving on the right track.

To conclude, the phrase *bhinneka tunggal ika*, just like the word *pancasila*, has gone through socio-political dynamics in the Indonesian context, resulting in a new interpretation of 'unity in diversity'; and as brought up further to the international sphere, it obtains greater significance: humanity is ideally a universal bond of the human race.

### 3.3. Tut Wuri Handayani

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw rising awareness among leading figures of the emerging 'Indonesian nation'. As mentioned briefly, Soekarno was aware of the political rights of the nation; and Ki Hajar Dewantara (1889-1959) - a self-adopted name of Raden Mas Soewardi Soerjaningrat, who stripped off his Javanese aristocracy in favor of democracy and egalitarianism—was aware of the importance of modern education. He believed that it was education which would help open up the minds of young generations, and make them aware of how to develop their potential to the fullest. So in the early 1920s he established an educational institution and called it *Taman Siswa* (<http://www.biografipedia.com/2015/08/biografi-ki-hajar-dewantara.html>), 'Garden of Students'.

Whereas he was a Dutch-educated intellectual and fluent in Malay (later called Indonesian), he created an educational motto for *Taman Siswa* in Javanese, in three verb phrases:

(16) *Ing ngarsa sung tuladha*

'Providing exemplary deeds up front'

*Ing madya mangun karsa*

'Working out ideals in the middle'

*Tut wuri handayani*

'Giving support from behind'

As seen from educational philosophy, these three phrases have profound meanings; as seen from modern educational psychology, they convey the right and appropriate roles of the teacher; and as seen from a poetic perspective, they sound elegant stylistically.

Note that "poetry by definition is untranslatable" ([14]: 151). Therefore, when in 1977 the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a decree on the logo of national education (see Figure 2) and decided to cite the last phrase of *Taman Siswa's* motto, it was (and is) kept as it originally was: TUT WURI HANDAYANI 'giving support from behind'. As





Figure 2: Logo of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

a partial motto of *Taman Siswa*, the phrase was then promoted to the national scale (and has been kept so) as the motto of national education (<http://mmalikibrohim.blogspot.co.id/2013/12/logo-dan-makna-lambang-pendidikan.html>).

A brief description of the logo is necessary. The framing pentagon represents *Pancasila*. Under the motto is a *blencong* (i.e., a traditional lamp made of brass used to give light to the screen of a Javanese shadow play performance) with a burning light. And beneath the *blencong* is an open book. Overall, the logo means as follows: Indonesian education is based on the five philosophical principles of the nation; the teachers give their students freedom to develop themselves while providing support from behind; and education means providing cultural and spiritual light as well as enhancing intellectual growth.

In retrospect, the phrase *tut wuri handayani* came into being in the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; then it traveled through time to the eighth decade and became part of the national logo. Since then it has remained there as the motto of Indonesian education. While *pancasila* and *bhinneka tunggal ika* have obtained new reinterpretations in modern Indonesia, *tut wuri handayani* has remained semantically as it was, for its philosophical depth, educational relevance, and poetic quality.

#### 4. Closing Remarks

This piece of writing has examined dynamics of Indonesian culture in the Asian context from two different viewpoints: culture contact and semantic change. The Malay-specific *Eid* greeting and Indonglish resulting from culture contact may be common and widely used throughout the country. However, the three examples of verbal expressions which have undergone semantic change are all of Javanese origin. In other words, the limitation of this paper should be made explicit: it has been written from a Javanese-Islamic perspective.

In effect, what has been presented in this writing is a fractional portrait of Indonesian cultural dynamics as seen from a very narrow vantage point. A bigger picture of the nation is therefore needed—probably seen from other different angles: from a Balinese-Hinduistic perspective, from a Borneo-Confucian perspective, from a Papuan-Christian perspective, and so forth. Like a rainbow, Indonesian culture is said to be

amalgamated pinnacles of local cultures throughout the country. So, no single writer is able to present a complete picture of the nation.

As promised in the Introduction, no matter how partial the current portrait of Indonesia may be, this is (partly) who we are and what we are, linguistically, culturally, and historically. Colleagues and friends from other Asian countries may in return present pictures of their own countries. We Indonesians are curious to take a look at the picture of—alphabetically—India as presented by Indians, Malaysia as presented by Malaysians, Singapore as presented by Singaporeans, Thailand as presented by Thais, and Vietnam as presented by Vietnamese. It would be great and appealing to have a new socio-cultural map of Asian countries drawn together by their respective national ‘painters’.

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