

## **THE LANGUAGE OF THE BETUNGKAL CEREMONY: AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The discourse of ritual may be one of the clearest and most fundamental manifestations of language in its ecological setting. It simultaneously manifests and re-creates the three dynamic systems of sociality—communication, culture, and community. In this paper we examine the language in betungkal, a traditional anointing ceremony of West Kalimantan. The language is characterized by complex patterning, showing by both constant repetition and variation, and thus demonstrates the fundamental processes of predictability and creativity by which every form of linguistic communication operates. It is a paradigmatic example of how language is taught and reinforced, from discourse as embedded in the environment, to a community's members of whatever age. At the same time it inevitably teaches and reinforces the community's identity and its cultural values and practices.*

**Key words:** *ecological approach, anointing, ritual art, and betungkal.*

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper we examine the patterning of language within *betungkal*, a traditional anointing ceremony practised among the Malay settlements of the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan. We have two aims in doing so. The first is to put on record a ceremony which, while it is still practised in the region, appears likely, along with many other traditional ceremonies, to disappear from regular use within a generation or so. Our second aim is to examine some aspects of the language of the ceremony within an ecological framework.

The two major indigenous communities of West Kalimantan are Dayak and Malay, which form, respectively, approximately 41%

and 34% of the population (Dalton, 1995; Inside Indonesia 2008). The community within which the *betungkal* ceremony described below was conducted is the Malay community in Ngabang, a small town of about 80,000 people, located 178 kilometres northeast of Pontianak, the provincial capital of West Kalimantan. The language used in the ceremony is one of several Malay dialects used throughout the province, which are very similar to one another and to Bahasa Indonesia, the national language.

The study is conducted within the framework of language ecology as elaborated by Garner (2004; 2005), who built on earlier work by Haugen (1972), Haarmann (1986),

Mühlhäusler (1996), and others. Within this framework, language is viewed as arising from its use in an environment, and is described in terms of its interaction with that environment. The environment—physical, social, and personal—is defined by three systems of human sociality: community, communication, and culture. Language ecology breaks with a long linguistic tradition in that it does not treat language as rule-governed, but as a form of patterned behaviour, the motivating principles of which are identical to those of all other meaningful behaviour. From an ecological perspective, language is primarily and fundamentally learned behaviour: it is a manifestation of sociality (specifically, a means of interaction), rather than an aspect of human cognitive structures. The language ecologist is concerned with what members of a speech community do, rather than what they know.

The end point of an ecologically driven linguistic analysis is therefore not an abstract grammar formulated as a set of rules and structures, but a system of patterns of communication that is dynamic, holistic, interactive, and situated. Such patterns are characterized by a tension between two countervailing and mutually defining tendencies, each of which is essential to maintaining the capacity to construct meanings, namely, predictability and creativity, which are considered in more detail later in the paper.

If language is a (arguably, *the*) form of learned behaviour *par excellence*, then it is clear that what is learned is not simply the patterns of language themselves. Language is never—except in the invented “examples” in language textbooks—encountered on its own. It is always spoken (or, less importantly for our concerns in this paper, written) by someone to someone, in a specific context, for a particular purpose, and so on. A young child, growing up in a social environment (in other words, its community), learns the patterns of interaction of that environment in their totality.

The language is inextricable from the cultural and communal habits, beliefs, assumptions, and values of that environment. This undeniably requires a prodigious amount of learning, which has led some linguists to reject the notion that language could be merely learned, and must be in some sense or another innate in the young child, in some form or another of “language acquisition device” (e.g., Radford 1999: 8; Yule, 1996: 175). There is no space here to argue against this view in detail (see Garner, 2004, chapter 2, for a detailed discussion), but suffice it so say that, on these grounds, it would be necessary also to postulate a considerable number of other innate “devices” for acquiring the other capacities that are manifested in humans interaction. A simpler explanation is that they are all learned together, as complex wholes: that is what learning a language in its communal and cultural context entails.

For the young child, both opportunity and motivation to learn and apply these capacities are enormous. At the beginning of life, a young child devotes every waking moment to learning the patterns of communicative behaviour. And this is not undertaken alone: every normal child is surrounded by an army of mentors—parents, siblings, other relations, friends, even strangers—who are hard at work to ensure that the communicative patterns are endlessly repeated and that the child pays attention to them. The motivation for mastering the patterns is as great as the opportunity. The child has no option other than to become part of the community into which it has been born. Learning the language along with all of the other appropriate behaviours is literally a matter of life or death; without fitting into the community the child has no way of surviving, let alone maturing into a full human being.

The community is the means by which culture is passed on from generation to generation. Every child does not have to confront the world equipped only with what nature endowed it with; it does not have to learn every-

thing from direct experience for itself. On the contrary, it has to spend the long years of childhood and adolescence learning the culture of its community. Although it is impossible to quantify, very little (perhaps nothing) that a human being learns through life is learned by direct, unmediated interaction with the environment. It is virtually always guided—and misguided—by some prior knowledge acquired through the culture of the community.

The means by which sociality is taught through the systems of culture, community, and communication may be remarkable, but they are not obscure. They can be observed constantly in every interaction. Certain practices, nonetheless, function more obviously than others to develop sociality, and good examples are seen in the highly patterned and repetitive discourses that are found in all cultures: for example, poetry, song, and traditional stories. Such discourses focus on the patterning of language, and so serve a particular educative function. The ritual or ceremony,<sup>3</sup> also apparently universal, is another such discourse type.

## 2. Ritual and Ritual Language

Ritual is an important part of the processes of sociality, and can be seen to play a significant role in the three general systems mentioned above. Putter (1996, p.5) describes the functions of ritual as five-fold:

1. to establish order: ritual creates a sameness and familiarity, establishing predictability in social orders and experience.
2. to reaffirm the central meaning-structures of the community; especially in respect of fundamental questions relating to life and death, love and evil, the origin and destiny of the human race and universe.
3. to bond community: ritual constitutes shared symbols and shared actions that bond a community through both the appearance and the experience

of acting as one.

4. to provide a safe mode of expression for conflicting emotions by allowing symbolic room for feelings rather than assigning them.
5. to encounter mystery and to beckon the power of the almighty.

Similar functions are described by Endicott (1970), but, remarkably, neither author mentions the inculcation of language. Yet the continuous patterning of ritual serves the simultaneous ends of manifesting and reinforcing all three systems of sociality: culture, community, and—as we shall show—communication (in particular, linguistic communication). Harvey (1990) argues that the general role of ritual is to establish elements of predictability, by articulating social norms and regulating social behaviour. But it also provides a safe release of social tension, a time and place to be deviant, and to reaffirm the *status quo* by providing a temporary and sanctioned alternative. These two processes of predictability and creativity, which are discussed in more detail later, are also fundamental to human language. Ritual is thus also an important teacher of language, embedded (as language must always be) in the ecology of its use. The language of ritual is an excellent paradigm of the ecology of language in practice. It demonstrates a form of discourse that is not the same as those in most everyday usage, but one that is not divorced from them, either. It may, in fact, be one of the clearest and most fundamental manifestations of language in its ecological setting. The same is true of poetry (Garner, 2003), but that is outside the scope of this paper. This is the background to our analysis of the *betungkal* ceremony.

## 3. The *Betungkal* Ceremony

The *betungkal* anointing ceremony described here was performed over one of the authors, Iwan Supardi (referred to as “the subject”), on the occasion of his return after a long

absence overseas to his home community. The *betungkal* is actually one part of two inseparable activities in the full ceremony, *betungkal* and *pentawar*. The two parts are distinguished mainly by the language used for the rites. The former is largely conducted in the Ngabang dialect of Malay, while the latter is recited the Arabic which is used for Islamic rituals. In the *betungkal*, the performer has more freedom to play with language for artistic effect, a skill which is learned through direct, although informal, training and practice. The language used in *pentawar*, by contrast, is rigid in its patterning and closed to manipulation: it is, in other words, predictable but not creative.

The word *betungkal* is derived from the root *tungkal*, meaning “anoint”. The ceremony consists in anointing particular parts of the subject’s body with the mixtures of the materials described below, to the accompaniment of charms. It is performed mainly before wedding and circumcision ceremonies, or after the third or the seventh day of a funeral. It may, however, also be performed for unusual events: a successful escape from some danger; graduation; promotion at work (these last two functions demonstrate the creative capacity of the community in adapting the ceremony to its modern ecology); or, as in the case examined here, the return of a family member after a long absence.

The host invites those persons who are considered ceremonial experts (usually old women having a close relationship with the family) to conduct the ceremony in his house. The experts prepare the materials to be used. Certain items: bowls for the mixtures; a bunch of string; a bound bundle of iron and wood; and a small flat basket, generally belong to the performer. Other materials are made on the spot: a mixture of rice and turmeric; a solution of spices in rice-flour water; and rolled leaves to use as anointing tools.

When the performer is ready, the subject sits on the floor, and the performer begins by

wetting the three anointing tools (the bunch of string, the bundle of iron and wood, and the rolled leaves) with flour water. While intoning charms, the she then anoints particular parts of the subject’s body in sequence. First is the head (forehead, cheek, and chin), then the chest, pit of the stomach, the stomach, back, back and chest (simultaneously), right arm, left arm, palms of hands, backs of hands, knees, and insteps.

The performer now uses all prepared items such the bunch of strings, a tied-up bunch of iron and wood, a flat basket, and yellow rice. The bunch of string is wiped up and down repeatedly around the person’s insteps. After that is finished, the performer changes to a tied-up bunch of iron and wood. She then has the person bite this bunch softly and immediately swings it down to the insteps. A flat basket is waved repeatedly over the subject’s body. Finally, calling on his soul, the yellow rice is spattered on the head and on the body. All of these symbolic movements are accompanied by chanting.

The ceremony does not seem to be conceived of as a form of magic, but is rather a specific ritual art, intended to cause related properties to function naturally, with the capabilities of the performer to manipulate her language patterns to seek the common hopes of the community for the subject. These hopes are concerned with the balance of life—in nature and in human beings, through economic and political relationships. They are expressed through the intoning of the discourse during the anointing of parts of the body described above, which instructs simultaneously the subject and the natural environment, as they are manifested in the subject’s personal life, through spiritual, social, political, and economic relations.

#### **4. The Language of the *Betungkal***

All rituals are characterized by distinctive linguistic features, such as phonological and syntactic patterning and the use of figurative

language. In the present example, Ngabang Malay lexical items (mostly everyday terms) are repeated within a few syntactic patterns, and the whole is chanted in a high, rapid monotone. The discourse comprises a catalogue of wishes for the anointed person to be safe and sound, healthy and wealthy; for the blessing of offspring and protection from danger, calamity, annoyance, worry, grief, and many other sorrows from God. They are accompanied by the various symbolic acts described: anointing parts of the body in strict sequence; softly biting and repeatedly swinging down to the in-steps the bundle of iron and wood; spattering the yellow rice. The ultimate goal of the entire ceremony is to seek the balance of life between human beings, animals, and the supernatural cosmic order.

The *betungkal* is not a long ceremony; in the present case, it lasted for about 15 minutes. It can be divided into five parts, partly sequential and partly overlapping, according to the macro-functions of the discourse:

1. invocation
2. blessing
3. counting
4. exhorting
5. closing

The *invocation* summons the presence of God and the wandering soul. The *blessing* parts are predominant, and will be considered in more detail below. The *counting* occurs at various places through the ceremony; it comprises the numbers 1 to 7, with the vowels of the last greatly lengthened—probably with the intent of capturing the wandering spirit. The *exhortation* takes the form of encouragement to the subject and the spirits to adopt particular courses of action. The *closing* repeats many elements of the invocation and signals the completion of the ceremony by returning to where it began.

There is space here to examine only a few portions of the discourse patterns of the

*betungkal*, but they may be taken as typical of the whole in terms of what they reveal about its ecological functions. The blessings have one basic semantic form, which can be simply summarized in the formula

**p + o**

Here, **p** represents the names of parts of the body being blessed, such as *kening* ‘forehead’, *jagó* ‘chin’, or the whole person, for example *aku* ‘I’. The **o** represents the intended outcomes associated with that part of the body—either by including good things to be sought, such as *untóng* ‘fortune’ and *sabar* ‘patience’, or excluding bad things, for example *sial* ‘bad luck’ and *badi* ‘the evil eye’. For example:

*tangan kanan kau tó mangkó uang*  
 arm right you this take into lap money  
*this right arm of yours take into your lap money*

*mangkó Réal*  
*Réal (Arabic currency)*

*mangkó nyaman*  
*pleasure*

*mangkó senang*  
*happiness*

*mangkó sehat*  
*soundness in body*

*mangkó afiat*  
*soundness in mind*

*mangkó bijak*  
*wisdom*

*mangkó kaya*  
*riches*

*mangkó rayé*  
*fertility*



*mangkó*      *rimbun*  
 ‘dense foliage’ a symbol of plenty]

*mangkó*      *beruntóng*  
 ‘fortune’

*tangan kiré kau tó ngibaskan sial*  
 arm left you this sweep away bad luck  
 (May) this left arm of yours sweep away  
 bad luck

*celaka*  
 blows of misfortune

*keserik*  
 demon possession

*nang sial*  
 that [which is] bad luck

*celaka*  
 blows of misfortune

*nang sakit*  
 that which is hurt

*nang mentak*  
 that which is sharp pain

*nang idap*  
 that which is chronic suffering

*nang badi*  
 that which is the evil eye

*nang rawá*  
 that which is a bad omen

*nang ntungkal*  
 that which is supernatural blows

What is happening demonstrates the simultaneous interaction of the linguistic patterns with all three of the systems of sociality. The

community is being reinforced with each repetition. Performer, candidate, and onlookers are united in mutual concern through a social order realized in various culturally defined categories: those who are entitled to bless, those for whom it is appropriate to receive blessing, and those who endorse the blessings by their presence. The subject is not simply an individual who undergoes a particular sensory experience—as happens, for example, where traditional rituals are performed for the benefit of tourists. In a living ritual, the individual exists through the community, which defines what the significant stages in his or her life are, and gives them appropriate recognition and sanction.

At the same time, and inseparable from it, cultural values are inculcated and rehearsed. The right hand is positive, and is expected to receive good things into the subject, whilst the left, the negative hand, sweeps bad things away. Whilst there is obvious symbolism here, there is something more immediate, as well. The natural and spiritual worlds are inextricably bound up with the human body. The actions of the spirits and Allah, who were invoked at the opening of the ceremony, will be manifested in the body, and by anointing each part of the body the performer is both charging it with a responsibility in the subject’s destiny and sanctifying it for participating in the supernatural processes of communal life.

Whereas in Western religions, most obviously in Christianity, the soul is viewed as clearly defined and distinct from the body, in many others the soul and body are not regarded as separate one from the other. The *semangat* (which, with this proviso, we have translated as “soul”) is generally recognized in Malay communities, particularly in sacramental practices, and it is also an important principle in Eastern and primitive thought more generally (Endicott 1970: 28ff). In Malay belief, the *semangat* is both spiritual and corporeal—what might be described as “soul-substance”.

In the *betungkal*, materials such as rice, water, money, etc., used or named in the *betungkal*, represent the three realms of nature: animal, vegetable, and mineral, together with the four natural elements: earth, water, fire, and air. The active use or invocation of these ingredients, which associates them with parts of the body through an imaginative (or perhaps sacramental) creative act, ensures the harmony of soul and body and thus emphasizes and reinforces their oneness. Nonetheless, *semangat* is seen as a multiple unity—variously seven in one or three in one—as reflected in the counting sequences that occur at various points within the ceremony:

*Sá, duá, tigé, empat, limá, enam, tuuuuuuuujóh*  
One, two, three, four, five, six, se-e-e-ven

The discourse functions resemble two key functions within Indonesian Malay mantric poetry, in which, according to Junus (1983), there are twin processes of *rayuan* ‘persuasion’ and *perintah* ‘command’. The supernatural, Junus says, should be persuaded first, then ordered to fulfil human requests. In the *betungkal* this takes the form of recalling the wandering soul. The *semangat* may leave the body voluntarily and attach itself to objects and should be called upon—both persuaded and commanded—to re-establish an equilibrium that has been upset. This objective is in evidence from the outset of the *betungkal*. Directly after the Islamic dedication to Allah, the forehead is anointed and the soul is summoned to return to the body:

*Buuuuuuuurá*  
Co-o-o-o-ome!

Later in the ceremony, the anointing sequence, which is brought to an end using the bunch of string, ends with a similar invocation:

*Kuuuuuuuur semangaté*  
Co-o-o-ome (your) soul!

Once the soul has been reunited with the body, a blessed future can then be perceived, as in the initial section, in which the forehead—the locus of perceptions—is anointed:

*Kening tinjau*  
‘Forehead, foresee’ (or: The forehead foresees)

*Nian tinjau*  
‘Forehead, foresee(s)’

*Ninjau untóng*  
‘Foresee(s) fortune’

*Ninjau tuah*  
‘Foresee(s) good luck’ ... etc.

Although the spiritual entity, the soul, is the immediate addressee in this section (and, arguably, throughout), the rôle of other parties is also central. The *betungkal* is performed upon the subject, in the presence of selected others. The subject (as the locus of the spiritual-bodily processes that are taking place), and the onlookers (as representatives of the entire community) are also being addressed. The three dynamic processes that make up the ecology of the language are thus clearly in evidence. The ritual—an important element of the culture—is an act of communication binding together the community in the form of the candidate, other members, and the denizens of the spirit world. The candidate is thereby informed of the community’s aspirations for him; how they should be appropriately expressed; and, in the act of expression, also brought about. The ecology of the communication, and thus its effect, would be quite different if the onlookers were outsiders, such as visitors from another village, tourists, or anthropologists.

## 5. Predictability and Creativity

An important ecological principle is the interplay between two fundamental processes by which patterns are created: predictability and creativity (Garner, 2004: chs. 4 & 5). This interplay is a feature of all communicative behaviour, but is most obviously exemplified in spoken discourse, which is our focus here. The basic linguistic element within any discourse is the clause, and the totality of the language comprises a vast number of basic clause patterns that continually recur, thus ensuring predictability. In order to identify with and communicate with one another, members of a speech community have to rely upon a shared (though largely subliminally recognized) repertoire of patterns that form their common hermeneutic “world” (Palmer 1969; Gadamer, 1979). If it were not for the overwhelmingly predictable nature of language patterning, the rôles of speaker and hearer would be, to all practical purposes, impossible (Garner 2004: 136-140).

The other fundamental process in language behaviour is creativity—the ability of a speaker to vary the established patterns at any time and according to the particular situation, in order to express new and significant meanings. The fact that any language pattern can be altered means that, with the exception of a few special types of discourse, language is never totally predictable. This gives it the potential to be meaningful. Even when a predicted pattern is used, the fact that the speaker could have modified it, but has chosen not to do so, makes it meaningful. Furthermore, even the variations on the pattern are limited: one cannot communicate effectively by simply saying anything at random.

These two processes of predictability and creativity are essential: without either of them, genuine interpersonal communication would be ultimately impossible. Both the sets of patterns and their variations have to be learned, of course. The young child learns this as he or

she learns the mother tongue through interacting with the speech community. (The same is true, although the processes are very different, of the older learner of a foreign language.) One significant way in which the child is helped to learn the patterns, their variations, and their relationship to the context is through the language of ritual and ceremony, which is why they are found in all societies. The *betungkal* ceremony thus fulfils a vital ecological function.

Seen from one point of view, the *betungkal* is a means of connecting the community to the spiritual world. From another point of view, it reinforces communal identity: those who share the patterns of the language share the life of the community. From yet another point of view, it is an expression of the culture, as well as a means of inculcating the young into that culture. In fact, of course, it serves all of these functions simultaneously. One simply cannot occur without the other. That is the central tenet of language ecology.

The cultural aspects of ritual, particularly in communities that are largely or entirely oral, have been extensively studied in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and religion. Less attention, however, has been paid to its purpose of teaching the young how to communicate in language, through exemplifying and reinforcing the patterns and variations. The *betungkal* ceremony illustrates this very clearly. Its highly patterned, almost hypnotic, language draws these systems of communication, culture, and community together. Each variation by the performer—as our earlier discussion of the **p + o** formula shows—demonstrates the underlying patterns of the Ngabang Malay language. It also shows, however, that in even in a highly predictable ceremony this variation is limited. For example, the possible forms of **p** are restricted to those parts of the body that are regarded in the culture as vital (forehead, cheek, chin, chest, and so on). The forms of **o** are restricted to a few dozen words



or phrases relating (both positively and negatively) to fortune, luck, wisdom, fertility, health, and the like. To an extent, then, even the variations are subject to patterning over the discourse as a whole. But this higher-level patterning is not rigid. Even though the various forms of **o** can be predicted in a general sense, they do not occur in every stage of the anointing, nor do they necessarily occur in the same order from one stage of anointing to the next. The performer of the ceremony has the freedom to select those she wants, and to use them in the sequence she desires.

One result of creativity is that the language of a ceremony—and, indeed, of all forms of discourse in the community—change over time. In cases where some form of record is available, the changes can be described. The most definitive are written or, more recently, audio or film records, but often elements within the language patterns themselves can provide at least a small glimpse of changes that have taken place. Some examples are evident in the *betungkal*. Even though it is manifestly a product of an ecology characterized by an animistic culture, the *betungkal* has incorporated elements of Islam, which would entered the ecology some five to seven centuries ago. Several of the stages are introduced with the Islamic dedication *bismillahhirrahmannirrahim* (“In the name of Allah, full of grace and mercy”). Some of the **o** elements are also of Islamic origin, occasionally used alongside the corresponding indigenous element:

*Nantai uang*

‘Cup for money’

*Nantai Réal*

‘Cup for Réal’ Arabic currency

*Ati ngáji*

‘Heart of Q’ranic recitation’

*Ati sembayang*

‘Heart of prayer’

*Ati kitab*

‘Heart of the book’

*Ati Koráán*

‘Heart of the Q’ran’

## 6. Conclusion

We hope to have demonstrated, through this brief description of the *betungkal*, the vital rôle of ritual and ceremony in the ecology of language. The discourse simultaneously manifests and (re-)creates the three dynamic systems of sociality—communication, culture, and community. The language, which is characterized by complex and total patterning throughout, is both distinctively ritualistic and typical of language usage in all discourse forms. It is distinctive, for example, in phonology (it is spoken in a rapid, high monotone) and lexico-syntax (a limited range of lexical items are substituted for one another within a few clause frames). It is typical inasmuch as it demonstrates, although more clearly than in everyday interactions, the fundamental processes of predictability and creativity by which every form of linguistic communication operates—indeed, which make communication possible at all. It also provides a paradigmatic example of how language is taught and reinforced, through discourse in embedded in the environment, to a community’s members of whatever age. At the same time it inevitably teaches and reinforces the community’s identity and its cultural values and practices. The language used can never be understood separately from the ecology of its use.

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