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**Becoming the Puppeteer: Reflections on Global  
Language and Culture by Puppetry Students in  
Yogyakarta, Indonesia**

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## Abstract

Puppet theater on the island of Java is an ancient art which has maintained some of its characteristics considered traditional, but has also been transforming innovations such as the wayang with hip-hop music among other popular expressions. The art of puppetry has also been institutionalized and is itself a degree program at the National Institute of Arts of Indonesia.

In this paper, I show the outcomes of my research among students and shadow puppet art teachers in Java, Indonesia. There are two special characteristics in training puppeteers: The main use of Javanese language and the development of communities of practice as ways of working in the teaching and learning process. As such, these contexts motivate students to be constantly reflecting on the Javanese language and culture. I note the process and the reflections of the participants on the Javanese language shift, and the uses of language in puppet performances which consider the reception of young Javanese. To analyze the data, I draw from fieldwork and interviews, I use the theoretical concepts of discursive genres and dialogism proposed by Bakhtin and I propose that the art of puppetry is a social field that encourages vitality and linguistic diversity on the island of Java.

*Keywords:* Dialogism, discursive genres, language ideologies, community of practice, Wayang puppetry

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## Background

The art of puppetry is one of the oldest expressions of humanity. This art has been related to ritual and popular educational activities. In many cases globally, puppet performances have been controversial. This paper is the result of my anthropological approach to the world of Wayang in the region of Yogyakarta on the island of Java, Indonesia. During 2012 and 2013, I engaged in a year doing ethnographic fieldwork among the Javanese dhalang (professional puppeteer) students at the Institute of Arts in Yogyakarta. The methodology consists mainly of daily coexistence with the students. Here, I also resorted to participant observation during classes and in the arrangements of the Wayang performances, both inside and outside of the Institute. I also conducted ethnographic interviews and collect audiovisual and written records. My analysis culminated in a correlation between narratives and the other collected data.

Prior to that time, I had focused on how linguistic diversity in Mexico has shifted through the use of Spanish, the national language, with special focus on language vitality. From a perspective of the relationships between different languages in a globalization framework, I discovered opposite poles in vitality and shifting. Among the many questions that I frequently had, was the following: How would local languages in Indonesia and particularly the Javanese language, used in Wayang performances, shift through the national language Bahasa Indonesia? That year of fieldwork led me to rethink the relations of coexistence, including

complementarity and complexity that exist in linguistically diverse contexts which are not exempt from social, political and ideological tensions, more so during the social use of multiple languages within a single context.

## The Wayang

The word wayang literally translates to shadow puppet, a performance with characters that is replete with infinite symbolisms. For example, colors of puppet faces, the features of the eyes, the noses and mouths indicate the moods of the characters. The body postures describe social manners and behavior, the attire presents social economical status, and the size of characters signifies identity, that is, whether they are warriors, gods, if they belong to royalty, deities, demons, or this world. The actual performance is called wayangan, as the event itself that includes the audience as well as the performers.

From the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wayangan performances adopted an artistic discipline promoted by Indonesian government institutions. This institutionalization led to the wayang art itself becoming a degree program at the National Institute of Arts of Indonesia. Moreso, from 2003, UNESCO declared the art of puppetry in Indonesia an Oral and Intangible Heritage, and in 2008, an Intangible Cultural Heritage. When this fieldwork was conducted, the academic community of the Institute of Arts sought to recall and maintain these statements and to promote wayangan during their extracurricular time. The performances are prepared and carried out by teachers and students in the Institute's 'pendopo,' a square open-air but roofed stage. The audience is placed around the pendopo.

## Institutional and Spontaneous for the Dhalang

Dhalangs trained in the Institute are considered academic dhalangs, differing from dhalangs who are empirically trained and who are considered heirs and holders of a special 'Wayang' gift. Students at the Institute of Arts have a theoretical background in history, including anthropology, semiotics and symbolism related to the art of Wayang. However, Wayang performance is much more than theory: The representation involves rhythmic movements and speech according to mood and social characteristics of each character and moment of the story. As such, the puppeteer requires knowledge and skills of traditional dance, karawitan and gamelan (traditional Javanese orchestra music), different types of wayang manufacturing techniques, knowledges of rhetoric and voice modulation, constituting an indispensable framework with which to give coherence to dialogues. Here, the speech of each character corresponds with a personality, with the story and with the body language that the character conveys and represents.

In addition to scholarly activities, I observed the activities that students become involved in in their extra curricular time. Much of the time, young apprentices practice together, regardless of their level or the semester that they are taking. Outside of class, students convene to play instruments, practice the Wayang movements and prepare the pendopo for performances. In addition, they get together to talk, eat, go on excursions, during which, they act the Wayang, and sing in different social voices and voice modulations. These seemingly non-formative activities are significant in the process of becoming a dhalang and are developed through collective action where everyone participates and practices so as to learn in spontaneously and ludic created social spaces. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), this type of learning organization constitutes a Wayang community of practice. To be a participant in the Wayangan implies that one must do things in coordination with others, through significant and perlocutionary speech acts (c.f. work by Austin and Searle).

## Linguistic Diversity, Discursive Genres and Dialogism in Javanese Shadow Puppet Art

Wayang shows are mainly performed in the Javanese language. This language has four social levels: 1) Krama inggil, the speech with the highest level of formality and respect, as the language used by the kings and gods; 2) Krama, the formal and polite speech, but at a lesser level, used by respectable people; 3) Ngoko, the colloquial speech that is used in informal situations with friends and family; and 4) Kasar, consisting of the most informal and disrespectful speech, considered obscene and vulgar. In the Wayang performances, kasar is never used. The other three levels are used predicated on situated context and character. The stories are developed in the Wayang plays, generally built on the Ramayana, but are mixed with local stories.

In the central region of Java all performances must include at least one playful moment called goro-goro and limbukan. Here, there is a turn in the main story, and local stories called lakon carangan are inserted. In the goro-goro, mythical characters of Java appear: Petruk, Gareng and Bagog. These stories emanate from the main structure of the performance. However, in addition to offering a space for comedy, these become messages given by the government or local community authorities. At this moment, the characters interact with the singers and the persons in the audience. At this point, in addition to Javanese, the national language Bahasa Indonesia is used, which has two levels of formality.



Author: Susana Ayala. Goro-Goro performance. ISI, Java, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
Student of dhalang Wahono Simba, 2012.

For example, Petruk can speak with the singers in Ngoko or in the less formal level of Indonesian, to ask them to dance or sing with a certain style. The same occurs if the characters are introduced to the audience, where it is common for the men among the audience talk to the characters, to make jokes, suggestions or other comical comments. The messages from the government or civil authorities are made in Bahasa Indonesia and, if a speaker from another language is among the audience, it is possible that the dhalang uses phrases in that language, I observed dhalangs saying words or phrases in English, Japanese, and, at times, Spanish, as the dhalang students were familiar with the fact that it was my language. In addition to spoken dialogues, sung genres such as the suluk have diverse expressions both in Yogyakarta and Surakarta performances.

In the Institute of Arts, the scripts for training dhalang students can be written by the teachers based on the stories of the Ramayana, however, those written stories are only a general structure of the play that each student will represent on stage and is called lakon. At the time of acting, each apprentice of dhalang must transform the

script to make a different story that makes full sense, they must have a proper use of the different sociolinguistic levels in Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia and, if is possible to them, must using resources from different languages. They must to know how link the lakon with the lakon carangan and goro-goro or limbukan.

Within the process of becoming dhalang, several school activities are held in Bahasa Indonesia, although the courses are conducted mainly in Javanese. Not all students have Javanese as their native language, where many speak Sundanese or other languages of the archipelago, such as Kalimantanese, Sulawesi or Sumatran, yet they must learn Javanese.

All this diversity is significant as, regardless of modern international declarations, in Java, the wayangan puppet performance art is an ancient art related to ritual. The wayangan is a common recreational and playful practice, popular in the central region of Java, particularly in the rural areas of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, but also on other islands with significant Javanese immigrant populations. The Wayang can animate a wedding, the birth of a child or even certain agricultural cycle celebrations. Government agencies hire dhalang artists to entertain local or national celebrations, such as Independence Day. Students of the pedalangan are hired at these events, including apprentices in their first semester. At that time, pedalangan students perform wayangan almost every weekend as part of their instruction process.

The data suggests that students learn to use different discursive genres that, according to Bakhtin, are defined as statements that occur in each sphere of social life, and that are characterized by their particular composition, theme and style. Every genre have social characteristics according to a context, and those who use them (Bakhtin 1979/2009: 248). The training of dhalangs and the wayang performances are dialogical spaces in the sense proposed by Bakhtin:

## Javanese Language Ideologies among Dhalang Students

In the interviews that I conducted with the students, I expressed my concern about the shifting of languages. All students expressed that Bahasa Krama and Bahasa Ngoko will not disappear, owing to the continuation of Wayang performances, which assist to sustain the ethics, values, philosophy and Javanese logic, only possible through the language. The dhalangs make a communicative connection with the public in less formal levels of Javanese language, but also in Bahasa Indonesia, more so as among Indonesians there exists a strong sense of nationalism. Consequently, for younger generations the Wayang performances can be boring or difficult to understand. The data shows that among Wayang students, there is an ideology or an image about the Javanese language as prestige, having social power to transmit knowledge about the processes and cycles of life through a Javanese cultural worldview.

## Final notes

This study was conducted almost seven years ago. Almost all the students I interviewed are working in the world of Wayang, in the performing arts or in an art academy. They have a strong use of the Javanese language, not only in the wayangan, but also in social media. Javanese appears to be strong and alive in this changing and globalized century. Javanese wayang performances can be considered to be a dialogic discursive space characterized by heteroglossic relations.

The ludic and spontaneous activities that apprentices of dhalang create a community of practices within which to learn and improve Wayang skills.

The ideologies about the Javanese language among the academic dhalangs is positive and has prestige, however, this is only a group located mainly in the middle of Java island, The educational linguistic policies and ideologies that privilege English in schools, publicity and ordinary life are also too strong.

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