

SOJOURN Symposium

On Other Indonesians: Nationalism in an Unnative Language by J. Joseph Errington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Review essays by Jenny Munro and Tom Hoogervorst, with a reply from J. Joseph Errington.

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Review Essay I: Jenny Munro

The book’s title is provocative—who or what are *Other Indonesians*? And regarding the subtitle, I wondered, what is an “unnative” language? As a cultural anthropologist who has worked primarily with Papuans in eastern Indonesia since 2003, I am familiar with Indonesian citizens who do not necessarily see themselves as *orang Indonesia* (literally, Indonesian people) and who are often regarded by *orang Indonesia* as *orang Papua* (Papuans), but I was not sure whether these are the Other Indonesians mentioned in the title. Not to spoil the surprise, but they are not.

The overarching argument of the book, as I understand it, is that because Indonesian is no-one’s native language, it affords opportunities for diversity, adaptation, belonging and connection by and among its speakers. Javanese may be the dominant majority in Indonesia, but it is not their language(s) that has (have) been proselytized, enforced or institutionalized as the national language to be adopted by all citizens. According to Errington, this situation leads to Indonesian’s un-ethnic and non-territorial character.

The analysis reveals how Indonesian is particularized, an ongoing and dynamic process, and considers what it means for the speakers in these contexts. Errington looks at Other Indonesians in conversations and interviews in Kupang and Pontianak. I am not a linguistic anthropologist, so the methods of data collection and analysis, presented in fourteen tables showing how often people use variations on words or accents during interviews, was quite foreign to me. However, I was interested in the analysis that emerged; namely, a study of how people pronounce words slightly differently, or create slang words, or mix “proper” Indonesian with localized ways of speaking Indonesian, or even with English, and the meaning of all of this. I still do not understand what the schwa in *mana* (where) sounds like versus *mana* with the proper Indonesian accent (p. 53) (an audio companion to the book would not go astray), but the fact that I have seen there is a meaningful difference suggests that I learned something.

I have continued to reflect on the meanings of different ways of speaking in Indonesian, and I consider this a worthwhile project for all scholars of and within Indonesia. In focusing on young, educated people in Kupang and Pontianak, Errington partly picks up on the works of Gerry van Klinken, Ward Berenschot, Cornelius Lay and others on Middle Indonesia—urban locales that are intermediate spaces for the encounters of diverse citizens, where confrontations over class, identity and other struggles converge (p. 2). He shows that Bahasa Kupang, for example, is produced not by mixing words from the indigenous languages of Nusa Tenggara Timur with Indonesian but is a particular way of speaking Indonesian that people from the regions outside the city tend not to understand or may criticize (p. 43). Then, looking at Pontianak, Errington shows that “young, educated residents similarly appropriate unnative Indonesian to local projects of modernity” (p. 72). Specifically looking at accents, “Persons with different backgrounds adopt different ways of speaking a vernacular of urban modernity [as a] means for mediating interaction across multiple lines of social difference” (p. 61).

Other Indonesians thus exist outside the “diglossic regime” of proper Indonesian versus mother tongues (ethnoregional languages)

(p. 7). These observations are part of an answer to the question of what a national language does for nationalism. The point, at least as I understand it, is that Indonesian does not just bring people together but also affords creative forms of localization and connection, or what Goenawan Mohamad called “radicalised diversity” (p. 3) and Errington calls a “joint and conscious subverting of the standard” (p. 72).

I also read the book through my own experience learning to speak standard Indonesian through four years of university study in Canada and Australia, then arriving in Manado (North Sulawesi) for my first research project and not being able to understand anyone’s speech, nor be understood by most people. I had more luck conversing with the Papuan student migrants there, which was excellent since they were my focus anyway. Gradually, over the years of field research, I have “lost” my proper Indonesian and I understand that the way I speak Indonesian is the Wamena style, for the most part, named after the town in the central highlands of Papua where many of my research participants were from and where I conducted fieldwork.

Errington argues that Other Indonesians in middle towns, particularly among educated youth, foster connection and cultural intimacy: “a plurality of other than standard Indonesians can engender [a] sense of national belonging among those who speak them” (p. 73). I agree that Other Indonesian can, of course, foster such sentiments, based on the evidence presented, but when and where it does or does not is worthy of further investigation. In Manado, I found out that Papuan students speak “better” standard Indonesian than Manadonese. By this I mean that their Indonesian, while informal and friendly, was closer to the official Indonesian. Many of the students I met from the Papuan highlands were taught their mother tongue as toddlers, then learnt Indonesian in school, and had even taught their parents how to speak Indonesian. They used “saya” for “I”, and not “kita” as the Manadonese did. The Manadonese also used words like “ngana” (you/kamu), “pe” (possessive/punya), and add-ons like “jo” and “dang”. Papuan students found it necessary to learn Bahasa Manado quickly, not just to understand people in the community but to communicate with some of their university

professors, who assumed everyone spoke like them and thought it was appropriate that newcomers should conform.

Thus, although the analysis in the book emphasizes mostly connections, belonging and mutuality, I wondered to what extent there were hierarchies based around Other Indonesians (like the case of professors expecting students to understand their lectures in Manado). Papuan students took pride in learning the Other Indonesian spoken in Manado and surrounds. They explained that encountering Manadonese people and culture was part of broadening their horizons; adjustment and competence in the local ways were a sign of talent and skill. But it was rarely a two-way street. There was not much “adequation” (p. 54), or mutual adjustment of accents and styles, as far as I can recall. I would not say learning Bahasa Manado had an equalizing effect for the relations between Papuans and local people either, who often expressed or upheld racist and stigmatizing perspectives towards Papuans. Papuan students had an awareness that they were the ones speaking proper Indonesian, yet they were accused of being backward and unintelligent and coming from a place with poor quality education (Munro 2018, p. 112).

Some of Errington’s interviewees in Kupang mentioned that they were criticized for speaking Bahasa Kupang back home by their families in rural areas. The impression I had was that those who were skilled in Bahasa Kupang or Bahasa Pontianak felt somewhat superior to new arrivals and those back in rural areas who did not understand or use these languages. This sense of superiority complicates the emphasis on mutuality and leads me to reflect on hierarchies, violence and tension. If we see mutual adequation and shared subversion of the standard, then we also might overemphasize the freedoms and possibilities of Middle Indonesian towns as places of diversity where educated youth mix and mingle. These relatively minor examples of potential hierarchies and distinctions raise follow-up questions about when migrants do and do not retain their urban Other Indonesians, and the symbolism of these practices.

An anecdote from my recent research illustrates this point. I was recently reviewing some interview recordings from a Muslim village

in Papua. Elders said that their village had been Muslim since the time of their ancestors, but young people today are learning a new Islam. It was very clear from their accents which young Papuan men had been studying at a madrasa on Java. The returned migrants had some new, though not uncontested, standing and prestige in the village for their education in more official, national, Javanese Islam; and unlike the youth from Kupang featured in the book, they did not change their accent upon returning home. This contrasted with my previous experiences with other Papuan return migrants, who seemed to change their accents immediately and frequently, adopting different styles of Indonesian with their parents, government workers, shopkeepers, etc., reflecting the diversity and stratification of migrants in the Papuan highlands. Does an analysis of nationalism need more attention to these sorts of contestations, hierarchies and forms of symbolic violence?

To conclude, the book certainly got me thinking about Other Indonesians, those particularized ways of speaking Indonesian throughout the country, but perhaps especially in cities and towns and what they mean. I would be interested to know more about cases when Other Indonesians are not so mutual, and what people do with their urban accents and styles when they leave the city. While the idea of a shared national project of subverting the standard is certainly enticing, I could not help but wonder about the dark side of nationalism and what inequalities are maintained or generated through these forms of linguistic resistance.

Review Essay II: Tom Hoogervorst

As a longtime habitué of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), I was unaware that the project “In Search of Middle Indonesia” contained such a rich linguistic component. *Other Indonesians* insightfully contrasts the norms of standard Indonesian with the ways people—in particular, students and urban middle classes—actually speak. Through recordings of natural speech and interviews conducted in Kupang and Pontianak,

it provides unique insights into “other-than-standard Indonesians” (p. 9) and their relations to the standard language. At the core is the observation, characterized by Goenawan Mohamad as a “very valuable paradox” (p. 3), that the Indonesian language is at once a catalyst for unity and for diversity. A second paradox underpinning the book is that Indonesian students and other highly educated individuals routinely flout the regimes of the standard.

Geographically, Kupang and Pontianak are on Indonesia’s margins, not too far from East Timor and Malaysia, respectively. In addition to standard Indonesian and several regional languages, both cities have a homegrown Malay variety. Kupang Malay is spoken natively by the town’s residents and is acquired by newcomers through social interaction. In the latter case, they gradually learn to reduce the transfer effects of their native languages. Even among Kupang residents, vernacular Malay is not linked to any particular ethnicity, making it “unethnic”. It has gradually established itself in formal settings and in the provincial hinterland. Pontianak exhibits a “greater salience of ethnic conditions” (p. 68) symbolized by the coexistence of three macro-communities: the Chinese, Malays and Dayaks. The linguistic outcome of this three-way divide is a greater variability within Bahasa Pontianak, characterized as “not quite Indonesian, not exactly Malay” (p. 84), which, unlike Kupang Malay, is limited to the city. Although the multi-ethnic speakers of Bahasa Pontianak have the resources to sound less ethnoregional, accentual variability remains widespread. In both cities, and in urban Indonesia in general, speakers habitually slip between standard and local Indonesian—or, as they would probably call it, *baku* and *varian lain*—yielding what the author sees as “biaccentual” forms and syncretic talk. Such speech habits exist by virtue of the linguistic proximity of the Malay varieties involved. Interlocutors are aware that their locally valued ways of speaking constitute “bad Indonesian” and continue to use them nonetheless.

The book engages with the latest developments in linguistic anthropology and a diverse range of Indonesian scholarship. Its analysis of other-than-standard registers and “mixed salad

languages” (*bahasa gado-gado*) provides theoretical inspiration to re-examine a wide range of linguistic practices in urban Indonesia. Errington’s reflections on the sociolinguistic importance of “circuits of intraprovincial mobility” (p. 79) afford a deeper understanding of Kupang, Pontianak and many other regional centres as vital hubs connecting the province to the nation and the interior to the wider world. His observation that young persons from more rural backgrounds acquire the national language “with a stronger sense of the diglossic regime” (p. 60) and, often simultaneously, as a tool for self-empowerment speaks volumes about the sociolinguistic complexities faced by new urbanites across Indonesia. However, in the spirit of further discussion, I will here limit my comments to three specific issues: historical continuities, the hegemony (or otherwise) of standard Indonesian, and the conceptual status of other-than-standard Indonesians.

The author convincingly deconstructs assumptions about nativeness in relation to language competence. To Errington, Indonesian is distinctly “unnative” in that no single group can lay exclusive claims on the language. Its success, portability and neutrality were at least partly the result of an absence of “native exemplars” (pp. 6, 18). Throughout its existence, the language has been broadly available and served as a vector of modernity. Unlike any of the country’s regional languages, Indonesian has activated a sense of belonging among its diverse speakers. At the same time, its unnativeness continues to provide room for the “biaccentual” linguistic expressions found in Kupang, Pontianak and elsewhere.

I wonder, however, if these arguments do not also apply to Malay in general. With the introduction of print capitalism in late-colonial times, vernacular Malay—in different regional varieties—developed into a harbinger of modernity, a means of literacy and a source of entertainment. It did so largely despite, rather than by virtue of, centralized language policies. In fact, one might argue that colonial authorities and post-independent governments both took a piggy-back ride on its pre-existing success. The Pontianak-based newspaper *Oetoesan Borneo* contains a 1927 example of

what appear to be a Malay, a Chinese and an Arab interlocutor all retaining their ethnoregional markers (Hoogervorst 2021, pp. 135–36), thus foreshadowing by almost a century the asymmetric speech of the Pontianak students Bambang and Alan (pp. 52–53). Could the linguistic behaviour of early journalists, novelists and other print entrepreneurs not be compared with that of today’s students? Was late-colonial Malay as “plural in its role as a mediator” (p. 77) as contemporary Indonesian? Were its historical users, at least in urban middle-class contexts, involved in similar processes of flouting the regimes of the standard and “adequating” manners of speech with each other?

Like its Malay progenitor, Indonesian has struggled throughout its existence with the correct amount of prescriptivism. While its internal variability may reflect the absence of native reference points, there is certainly a hierarchy of competence. Proficiency more than anything emboldened the Gorontalo linguist J.S. Badudu to publicly and repeatedly criticize the speech of Indonesia’s former president Soeharto and many others from Java, whose geographical origins lay much closer to the centre of power. Today, as in the past, Indonesian newsreaders and language instructors may be from any imaginable ancestry, as long as differences in accents are not discernible. Impeccable standard Indonesian is carefully cultivated and, as it turns out, in short supply. The arduous job of translating foreign texts into accessible Indonesian suffers from a dearth of adequately trained (and paid) people. Meanwhile, the de facto working language in academia has become a *gado-gado* of Indonesian and English, especially since the latter elevates local activities to “international events”, with the associated accreditation and remuneration.

This invites us to reconsider the hegemony of standard Indonesian. Although the national language agency (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa) presides over correct language usage, a general pattern of disregard for its prescriptions is hard to miss. Many Indonesian speakers happily continue to use *praktek*, *kretek*, *sprei*, *nekad*, *mushola*, *Kaabah*, *kokoh*, *balsem* and *walikota* rather than the “correct” forms *praktik*, *keretek*, *seprai*, *nekat*, *musala*, *Kakbah*, *kukuh*,

balsam and *wali kota*. Neologisms that only thrive in the minds of language engineers, in dictionaries and on Wikipedia are habitually ignored in real life. On top of that, government communiqués are often poorly understood by Indonesia's ordinary citizens (in the Hobsbawmian sense). During the initial stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the use of loanwords like *diseminasi*, *komorbid* and *mitigasi* alienated people across the nation, raising doubts whether standard Indonesian was at all the best medium to disseminate health-related information on a regional level. In a sudden and impressive turn of events, different government agencies and grassroots communities started co-producing innumerable health protocols in local languages (including local Malay vernaculars), some of which are rarely used in writing (Lauder et al. 2021). It prompted a considerable boost in “print-literate parity with other ethnoregional languages”, as Errington calls it (p. 51).

These observations would suggest that notions of language ownership, in this case of “unethnic” Indonesian, have become less rigid and potentially more democratic. In an era where national language agencies are losing their clout and written language is no longer exclusively produced in the published realm, the centrality of print languages discussed in a colonial context by Ben Anderson (1991) might no longer capture today's realities. Indonesian, in all its diversity, is increasingly produced online, in audiovisual culture, and even by companies. While semi-neologisms like *sangkal* “efficient”, *gawai* “gadget” and *daring* “online” have been promoted by language engineers, tech companies deserve at least some credit for disseminating them. Several airlines connecting Indonesia to Malaysia employ a type of Malay that is understandable to speakers from both countries, seemingly without the intervention of language agencies from either. Streaming services such as Netflix and Disney+ provide a domain where the tensions between standardizing regimes and actual speech are played out in creative ways. On top of their task to pursue Indonesian equivalents of English idioms, professional subtitlers now find themselves having to translate other-than-standard Indonesians into the national language. These standardized subtitles

often differ significantly from the spoken text, providing new insights into what is currently considered “bad” Indonesian.

The author suggests at several junctures that Indonesia’s plural condition may contain lessons on linguistic diversity elsewhere in the world (pp. 78, 93). If so, now might be a good time to reflect on the way such contemporary language varieties are theorized. What is the conceptual status of locally inflected Indonesians? Can we speak of “colloquial Kupang Indonesian” or “colloquial Pontianak Indonesian” in the same way that James Sneddon (2006) has popularized the term “colloquial Jakartan Indonesian”? Or will the very act of labelling these varieties attract the same stigmas that once plagued “Riau Indonesian” (Gil 2010)? Is it still adequate to call the Indonesian of Kupang (but not that of Pontianak) a creole, especially in view of its far-ranging syncretism with the standard language? Or are the Malay basilects of Kupang and other places slowly losing their status as distinct signifying systems, making way for other-than-standard Indonesians?

The reason these questions are worth asking is that increasing numbers of localized Indonesians are likely to become “native” in the near future. It would not be unrealistic to expect first-language speakers of “Lombok Indonesian”, “Sumba Indonesian”, “Gorontalo Indonesian” and many other Indonesians to soon enter the stage.

Another scenario worth considering is the increase of horizontal connections between different other-than-standard Indonesians. Students from Sumatra are often credited for popularizing the second-person pronoun *kau* among Java’s university campuses. The inverted slang from Malang has spread to parts of Jakarta in relatively recent times, also through the agency of students. At the same time, Javanese speakers now commonly combine local affixes with Jakartan ones, yielding such hybrid Indonesian constructions as *takcariin* “I’ll look for it”. For the past two decades, this habit of playfully shifting between vernacular Indonesians has enjoyed consistent representation in popular culture. To mention only a few examples, the novel *Jomblo* (2003), a humorous love story by Adhitya Mulya, features four protagonists whose speech reflects

their Jakartan, Javanese, Sundanese and Acehnese backgrounds, respectively. Timo Tjahjanto's action comedy *The Big 4* (2022) displays a similar variability of Indonesian: besides the usual Jakartan characters, it features a Hokkien gangster, a person who tries to hide his Surabayan origins by adopting a South American persona, and several speakers of what might be called generic eastern Indonesian (resembling what is spoken in Indonesia's many dormitories where students from the eastern provinces are lodged together).

At the end of a review, one traditionally comes up with some critical notes. Since schwas and other markers of pronunciation are such an important part of the book, especially in its discussion of Pontianak as a "biaccentual" locale, it is a pity that they have all turned out to be so unsightly. And while the awkward shape of phonetic symbols will perhaps remain the sad fate of scholars attempting to infuse their publications with a modicum of linguistic depth, the book could have generally benefited from better editing on the part of Oxford University Press. My biggest disappointment with *Other Indonesians*, however, is that it came out in 2022. Had it appeared earlier, I would have certainly used this wonderful resource in my own work on Indonesian language history.

Author's Response: Joseph Errington

Thanks to *SOJOURN* for the opportunity to comment on issues and questions raised by these insightful reviews, and which deserved more attention in this small book.

Jenny Munro rightly emphasizes Indonesian's role as the language of a state that for decades has made Papuans targets for physical and what Pierre Bourdieu (2013) calls symbolic violence. I thematized this linkage more broadly by introducing Indonesian as subject to what Liu (2015) calls a state's "regime of the standard". Munro rightly draws attention to specifics of that regime's projects of violence, in Papua, as elsewhere.

Worth noting in this context is a common image of educated Papuans as Indonesians who, unlike many others, speak a distinctly

standard variety of the national language. Similarly exceptional are Indonesians of Chinese descent in the town of Pontianak, discussed in chapter 3. It might seem, then, that competences in standard Indonesian among members of both groups align in unusually clear ways with institutions of the same state that has marginalized them in the nation at large. Both situations suggest a darker side of what I discuss as the “valuable paradox” in chapter 1: Indonesians most directly oppressed by the state are among those who conform most closely to its linguistic norms.

This paradox can be reframed by extending discussion in my book of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006). In chapter 1, I cite his core argument that national communities rest on awareness of intergenerational sharedness, predicated in turn on senses of “fatedness” to a common language. But I do not mention his further argument, in chapter 6 of his book, that human capacities to acquire languages natively in childhood make memberships of national communities open to historical change. Persons may be non-native and marginal to such communities but can nonetheless invest themselves in a nation through their descendants, whose native acquisition of its language enables “full” membership.

For Anderson, the historical character of nationalism distinguishes it from racist ideologies centred on images of unchanging human essence. These he identifies as products and enablers of colonial projects, like those which have led to circumstances now confronting Chinese and Papuan Indonesians (among others).

It may then be that members of these groups can associate standard Indonesian—a language native to no one—less with state hierarchies than with egalitarian ideals of the nation. Competence in Indonesian, the language which symbolizes and best expresses those ideals, has special salience; it licenses claims to rights accruing to all Indonesians, before the law. But no level of fluency in a language without native speakers can have the legitimizing or “naturalizing” force for a nativist national ideology.

In Papua, as elsewhere, unnative Indonesian has enabled the political mobilization of marginal groups whose members speak

different native languages. Paradigmatic here are members of the heteroglot subaltern elite that called Indonesia into existence in 1928; the same observation fits regional dynamics among Dayaks in West Kalimantan sketched in chapter 3. So too Indonesian may serve a similar role in Papua now as it did in East Timor from 1975 to 1998.

This book's focus on interactional spheres of life does not provide much purchase on questions about Indonesian as an instrument of political and economic power. But it can bring to light some more intimate ways those hierarchies play into local conflicts and lives. Most striking are punishments meted out to junior high school students in Nusa Tenggara Timur for speaking a language other than Indonesian, noted in chapter 2. Less striking but more significant might be expressions of resistance by young people when their non-standard, urban ways of speaking are targeted for criticism by elders in rural locales. So too long-term conditions of interethnic conflict can be read as background for interactional episodes, like that described in chapter 3, when an ethnic Chinese addressed standard Indonesian to an ethnic Malay, who replied in his native language. Various violations of the regime of the standard are shown in chapters 2 and 3 to enable senses of what Michael Herzfeld (1997) calls cultural intimacy between persons who jointly flout official norms without denying their legitimacy.

Tom Hoogervorst draws attention to the importance of what can be called the "prehistory" of spoken and written Indonesian and deep continuities between Indonesian's "internal diversity" and its Malay antecedents "in general", as he puts it. These certainly deserve more than the passing attention I give them in the book. They could be better thematized, for instance, with discussion of the way Valentijn (1724–26) described Malay with no reference to its "native" speakers. I could have likewise emphasized more strongly the broad similarity between two "non-canonic" accounts of Indonesian's development: one by Pramoedya, the anti-imperialist; and the other by Goenawan Mohamad, the New Order critic. Their insistence on the vitalizing presence of what they call "working languages" and "low" Malays, respectively, provided an important starting point for highly focused

sketches of Indonesian as a language never categorically distinct from Malay. Hoogervorst rightly emphasizes this pre-national diversity as enabling and not just being shaped by Indonesian's "miraculous" development.

I framed this broad condition in specific terms and contexts, and with a focus on a few Indonesia forms. Thumbnail sketches of a few episodes of talk serve as parts of interpretive accounts of social dynamics in diverse urban locales, and their residents' subjective senses of commonality. These sketches illustrate what I could have shown more clearly as the paradox of their "biaccentual" talk, presupposing an ideological difference between Indonesian and Malay that in practice is routinely manipulated or ignored.

Hoogervorst also properly draws attention to Indonesian's literate antecedents, and so its changing roles in public and official discourse. He notes, as I did not, that standard written Indonesian's Malay antecedents circulated (along with other languages) in the heteroglot print media of a colonial society. These differed greatly from literacy-based standard Indonesian, which, under New Order censorship, was effectively divorced from interactional spheres of life. This may indirectly have enabled what is now, for most Indonesians, a loose sense of fit between norms and talk.

Now other-than-standard Indonesians are integral to Indonesia's burgeoning mass and digital media, raising a range of sociolinguistic issues largely passed over in this book. But Indonesian's integral role in those asynchronous modes of communication, I think, is best understood in relation to ways it is spoken. Attention to talk, beyond the regime of the standard, can help identify the full range of the diverse, shifting ways that Indonesian figures in everyday lives and senses of national community.

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