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Polar questions in Colloquial Indonesian: A pilot study

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ABSTRACT

Polar questions are formed in a variety of ways across the world's languages. In Indonesian, polar questions in spoken language are realised in two primary ways: unmarked polar questions and marked polar questions. Unmarked polar questions do not involve any morphosyntactic or lexical resources to indicate questionhood. In contrast, marked polar questions are formed using final particles. This study explores polar questions in everyday conversation in Colloquial Indonesian, focusing on unmarked questions, and questions marked with *ya* and *kan*. It uses principles and practices derived from conversation analysis to explore interactions in Colloquial Indonesian. 12 Indonesian speakers were recruited to participate, yielding a corpus of 2 h and 7 min of video recordings for analysis. Analysis focuses on the epistemic characteristics of unmarked and marked polar questions. Unmarked polar questions realise the strongest epistemic asymmetry, casting the question recipient as the knowledgeable party. Polar questions marked with the particle *ya* also realise an epistemic asymmetry, but they index a more knowing epistemic stance on the part of the speaker. Polar questions marked with *kan* index a more symmetrical distribution of knowledge between the speaker and the recipient. The findings of this study contribute to knowledge on the functions of final particles in Colloquial Indonesian, and Standard Indonesian more generally. Future studies should explore other question particles in Colloquial Indonesian, and compare other functions of *ya* and *kan*.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores conversation in Indonesian using conversation analysis (CA). It examines the features of polar questions in Colloquial Indonesian (CI), and describes the function of question particles, focusing on their epistemic characteristics. Over the last two decades, conversation-analytic methods have been increasingly employed for interactional linguistics, and cross-linguistic investigation (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001). This growing body of research has shown how language and conversational structure are intertwined, and emphasised that language is a significant resource for conducting everyday life. There are few investigations of Indonesian from a conversation-analytic perspective. This study provides a small step towards better understanding how Indonesian is used in the course of everyday life by examining a fundamental social action: asking a polar question.

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1.1. Epistemics and questions in interaction

There are various sorts of ‘common ground’ (see Clark, 1996) that affect how people conduct interaction together. Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014, p. 186) argue that interactants achieve this common ground through “momentary relationships” between one another. This is mediated through three social orders: epistemic, emotional, and deontic. The epistemic order refers to interactants “rights and responsibilities” (Heritage and Raymond, 2005, p. 16) to knowledge, the deontic order refers to the rights and responsibilities to determine future actions, while the emotional order refers to the emotions that interactants are “allowed or expected” to display (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014, p. 186). The epistemic order is divided into two categories: epistemic status and epistemic stance (Heritage, 2012b; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014). Epistemic status pertains to the stable “territories of information” that interactants possess (Heritage, 2012a, p. 4). That is, epistemic status involves an individual’s identities and attributes, and matters that should be correctly known by themselves and others in “a certain domain of knowledge” (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014, p. 189). In contrast, epistemic stance is how speakers position themselves as more or less knowledgeable than others through their utterances (Heritage, 2012a, p. 6). This positioning forms an ‘epistemic gradient’ (see Heritage, 2013a, 2013b; Heritage and Raymond, 2005, 2012; Raymond and Heritage, 2006), and may encode a speaker’s degree of commitment to a proposition (Enfield et al., 2012).

Epistemics has been demonstrated as vital for designing and understanding actions in interaction (Antaki, 2012; Enfield et al., 2012; Heritage and Raymond, 2005, 2012; Raymond and Heritage, 2006; Stivers and Rossano, 2010). Heritage (2013a), for instance, demonstrates that the epistemic configuration of an interaction can be used as a resource to determine whether an utterance is requesting or providing information. Heritage (2012a) also argues that the distribution of knowledge between interactants is a primary driver of sequence expansion and closure.

Questions are a common and important action in interaction. They carry out a variety of tasks like requesting information, initiating repair, assessing, inviting (e.g., Schegloff, 2006; Stivers and Enfield, 2010), and they implement important parts of institutional tasks (Heritage and Roth, 1995). However, when thinking cross-linguistically, the notion of questionhood is not necessarily straightforward. Levinson (2012) points out that, unlike English, most languages do not mark questions with specific syntactic alterations. Instead, questions may be marked morphologically, lexically, or not explicitly marked at all. This raises the question of how to define questions.

Levinson (2012) argues for a function-based model of questions, contrasting them with assertions. He suggests that canonical questions have a number of distinctive characteristics. For example, they imply that: 1) the speaker doesn’t know the information addressed, and that the recipient does; 2) the speaker wants to know the information; and 3) that the answer will introduce new information (i.e., facilitate progressivity). In addition, he argues that questions are strongly response demanding. The reward of this is high informational gain, but the risk is that the speaker might impinge on the recipient. These features can also be correlated with CA concepts and systems. Questions are first pair parts, which create high pressures on recipients to respond (Schegloff, 2007; Stivers and Rossano, 2010). As well, canonical questions strongly encode epistemic asymmetry, with the unknowledgeable speaker requesting new information from the knowledgeable recipient. In addition, as this epistemic asymmetry is lessened, and tilted towards the speaker, the action progressively shades from a question into an assertion (Levinson, 2012; Heritage, 2013a).

In recent years, polar questions have been subjected to a good deal of cross-linguistic study from a CA perspective (see Stivers, 2010; Stivers and Enfield, 2010; Yoon, 2010; Enfield, 2010; Englert, 2010; Brown, 2010; Levinson, 2010; Enfield et al., 2012; Biezma and Rawlins, 2012; Lee, 2015; Bolden, 2016). This work has highlighted that, for many languages, sentence final particles are important for marking utterances as questions, and that they can index important epistemic information. For example, Enfield et al. (2012) explore sentence-final particles of polar questions in Dutch, Lao, and Tzeltal Mayan. They found that sentence-final particles were centrally involved in lowering or raising the speaker’s commitments to the proposition encoded in the question, indexing common ground and intimacy, certainty and sources of evidence for the proposition, or an expectation that the recipient would agree based on their knowledge. So, sentence-final particles can be an important resource for indicating that an utterance is a question, and provide knowledge states of the parties to the interaction.

2. Indonesian

2.1. The characteristics of Indonesian

Indonesian is the national language of the Republic of Indonesia, an archipelago of 17,504 islands that has a total population of 236 million people (*Badan Pusat Statistik* (Statistics Indonesia), 2010, p. 7). The Malay language is the primary resource of Indonesian lexically and grammatically because it had been used as lingua franca throughout Indonesia for centuries. In 2010, around 19.9% of Indonesians used Indonesian as their only everyday language, while 80% of Indonesians also spoke one or more of 300 regional languages (e.g., Javanese 31%, Sundanese 15%) (*Badan Pusat Statistik*, 2010, p. 7). This distribution emerged as a result of the disparity between the promotion of Standard Indonesian (SI) in education and the protection of regional languages (Ewing, 2005). In addition, SI becomes a prestigious language that can only be acquired in education (Arka, 2013; Arka and Yannuar, 2016). Colloquial Indonesian, on the other hand, becomes a social style among Indonesian speakers (Ewing, 2005) and has been characterised as a less prestigious language than Standard Indonesian (Arka and Yannuar, 2016).

The canonical syntax of Standard Indonesian is SVO (Arka and Yannuar, 2016). However, a wide variety of word orders are possible as shown in the syntactical pattern of OVS in Colloquial Indonesian (Wouk, 2005). Indonesian uses a large variety of

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