Motivations for first and second person subject expression and ellipsis in Javanese conversation

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Abstract

This article examines first and second person subjects in a corpus of Javanese conversational data where ellipsis is common, and shows that ellipsis is best understood as the default mode for subject representation in conversational interaction in Javanese. Thus the relevant question is not why are subjects ellipted, but rather what motivates their overt expression. Discourse functions associated with overt expression include topic and rhetorical structure, contrast, expression of stance and constructed dialogue. Previous discussion in the literature has associated ellipsis in Javanese with politeness, however results of the present study strongly suggest that politeness is a secondary motivating factor for ellipsis. Precisely because ellipsis is so common due to its role as a discourse grammatical device, speakers are also afforded the opportunity to take advantage of ellipsis to mark social relationships through avoidance of explicit pronominal use when this is interactionally expedient.
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1. Introduction[1]

Subject expression and ellipsis in Javanese is a complex issue. On one hand, in the context of planned oral literary forms such as the *wayang kulit* shadow puppet theatre, Becker has noted the preponderance of explicit subjects (Becker, 1984), explained by the lack of a third person inanimate pronoun in Javanese, which then allows for the use of repeated noun phrases creating a poetic sense of cohesion. This contrasts with spoken interactional Javanese, for which the prevalence of subject ellipsis has often been noted (Arps et al., 2000; Ewing, 2001; Keeler, 1984; Robson, 1992). This article examines first and second person subjects in a corpus of Javanese conversational data where ellipsis is common. After first outlining the pronoun system in Javanese, I examine the frequency of first and second person subject ellipsis in a sample data base from a corpus of conversational interaction in the Cirebon variety of Javanese. I argue that ellipsis of first and second person subjects is the default mode for conversational interaction in Javanese. Therefore the relevant question is not why subjects are ellipted, but rather what motivates their overt expression. Discourse functions of overt expression involve topic and rhetorical structure, contrast, expression of stance and constructed dialogue. I then address previous claims that have associated ellipsis with politeness and suggest that politeness is not a primary motivating factor, but rather a secondary function afforded by the prevalence of ellipsis as a discourse-level grammatical device.

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2. Pronouns and ellipsis in Javanese

Javanese is spoken by some 84 million people (Lewis et al., 2013), mostly in the central and eastern areas of the island of Java, but also by migrant communities both within Indonesia and overseas (Ogloblin, 2005; Uhlenbeck, 1983). Varieties of Javanese display wide variation in lexicon, pronunciation, and morphosyntax. The present study examines subject ellipsis in the variety of Javanese spoken in the region of Cirebon, covering the city and *kabupaten* (county) of the same name. There are roughly 2.5 million speakers of the Cirebon variety. Cirebon Javanese exhibits some influences from Sundanese and Malay, some archaisms no longer used in many other varieties of Javanese, as well as its own innovations. These characteristics make it quite distinct from the variety associated with the court cities of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, which are often taken to be the standard form of the language.

Javanese has only singular pronouns. In the standard variety, these are usually reported to be *aku* '1s', *kowe* '2s' and *deweke* '3s'. Plural reference in contexts that would favor use of pronouns is often achieved with phrases like *wong loro* 'two people'. There is, however, great variation in pronominal forms across varieties of Javanese (see Robson, 1991). In Cirebon, common first person pronouns include *isun* and *kita*; common second person pronouns include *sira* and *ente*. *Isun* '1s' and *sira* '2s' are older forms which are also found in archaic Javanese. *Kita* '1s' and *ente* '2s' are more recent loans from Malay and Arabic, respectively. The form *deweke* occurs in Cirebon Javanese, but I have argued elsewhere (Ewing, 2005), based on evidence from frequency in conversational data, that it is not a prototypical pronoun and is better not consider part of a paradigm with the first and second person personal pronouns.

Data for this study are taken from transcripts of recordings of five informal conversations between close friends and family. These were recorded in the 1990s by native-speaker research assistants who were also present during the recordings. Initial transcription was made by the research assistants, who also provided background and helped determine reference and referent tracking through the often highly ellipted discussions. (For more details on the corpus see Ewing, 2005). Segments of one thousand intonation units (IUs, see Chafe, 1994; Du Bois et al., 1993) were selected from each of the conversations, totaling some 5000 IUs or a little less than an hour of conversation. A brief description of Javanese clause structure follows, with examples of overt and elided subjects.

2.1. Overt subjects

In this article the term subject is used to identify that argument within a clause which can serve as a pivot in certain clause combining contexts (see Foley and van Valin, 1984 on the notion of pivot) and which triggers certain verb morphology (see Fox, 1982 and Cumming, 1991 on the notion of trigger in Austronesian languages). The terms S, A, and P form a useful heuristic for discussing the core arguments of clauses, where A is the more agent-like argument of a transitive clause, P the more patient-like argument of a transitive clause, and S the single argument of an intransitive clause (Comrie, 1989). Because S is the only core argument of an intransitive clause, it is the subject. In a transitive clause, either the A or P argument may be the subject. A-subjects trigger a nasal prefix on the verb. P-subjects trigger the use of the prefix *di-* on the verb, or – in the Cirebon variety – optionally *tak-* in the case of first person agents.[2] Choice of A-subject or P-subject clause structure generally revolves around information flow properties of the arguments in the clause, with referential, tracked P arguments tending to occur in P-subject clauses, while generalizing, untracked P arguments tend to occur in A-subject clauses. The distribution of A-subject and P-subject transitive clauses in Cirebon Javanese conversational discourse tends to be around 50–50. (For a more detailed discussion of Cirebon Javanese clause structure and information flow see Ewing, 2005).

Javanese, like its close relative Indonesian and many other languages of Southeast Asia, has an open system of self- and addressee-reference (Flannery, 2010; Thomason and Everett, 2001). This means that, as noted above, it can borrow pronominal forms from other languages more readily than can a language like English with a closed pronominal system. It also means that non-pronominal forms such as proper names and kinship terms are commonly used for self- and addressee-reference. While such non-pronominal forms for first and second person reference can index varying degrees of familiarity or respect, their use is not marked as pragmatically unusual in the way that, for example, use of a proper name to refer to oneself would be in English. The following examples illustrate Javanese clause structure and the use of pronominal and non-pronominal forms for the explicit expression of first and second person subjects. Example (1) is an intransitive clause with a stative verb, while (2) and (3) illustrate transitive clauses.[3] Example (2) is an A-subject clause,

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[2] In the Cirebon variety, verbs of P-subject clauses take either *tak-* or *di-* for a first person A, but only *di-* for second or third person A. This contrasts with standard Javanese P-subject clauses in which generally a first person A takes *tak-*, second person A takes *kok-* and third person A takes *di-*.

[3] Abbreviations used include: 1s, first person singular; 2s, second person singular; CONT, continuous; DEF, definite; DI, *di-* prefix; FUT, future; HES, hesitation particle; N, nasal prefix; NEG, negative; PART, discourse particle; QUOTE, quotative; REDUP, reduplication; REL, relative particle; @, laughing.