

Language Propriety in Javanese

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Abstract

This paper presents the principles of language propriety in Javanese. The principles presented here cover the speech components offered by Hymes. It discusses how an individual or P1 should behave as a participant in the social network in general and how one should do when engaging in a conversation with an interlocutor (P1 to P2). The discussion also points out what topic and aim of speech should be expressed and with what means of communication one should express it (S, E and I), how should the genre and the speech act be, how are the sentences to be expressed, and what words are to be used or to be avoided to suit the mood of the speech (G, A, and K). Furthermore, the paper also displays how the speech should be uttered and enunciated and how a person should handle his physical gestures to accompany the speech act (a part of N). Some key terms of language propriety in Javanese presented here are ramah, sabar, tepa slira, hormat, empan papan, nuju prana, and subasita.

Keywords: *propriety, Javanese, speech*

Introduction

This paper is a brief discussion on the principle of politeness in Javanese. This is actually an extension of my paper entitled "Language etiquette in Indonesian" (1978). This is not meant to be a principle of universal language propriety. Though the maxims and principles as proposed by Grice, Leech and Brown and Levinson are paid attention to, and many of the points do agree with the principles presented here, the description in this paper is particularly good for the Javanese people. Different from the situation in Europe and America where the normal individuals are monolinguals, most Javanese people are now bilinguals, speaking Javanese and Indonesian. Besides, the Javanese language makes use of distinct speech levels, which means distinct speech codes, hence reflect a slightly different practice of language propriety from those

adhered to by most of the Europeans and the Americans.

As "The Javanese speech levels" I wrote in *Indonesia* in 1968, it is supposed to be an ideal principle of language propriety, and not a description of actual fact that is happening with everybody nowadays. Some young Javanese who claim themselves to be modern or liberal may wish to observe a different principle of propriety, and disregard the teaching of their parents or teachers.

The points presented here are in the forms of idioms or set phrases which most parents consider them as the principle and actually say when they educate their children. Some are in the forms of positive advice (using positive idioms), and others are in the forms of prohibition, using negative imperative *aja* "don't do this or that".

The Principles

The points covered are following Hymes' points of speech components, SPEAKING (1974), i.e. the speech event (setting, scene, situation), participants, end (topic and goal), act of speech, key or mood, instrument (channel), norm, and genre. It so happens that most of the principles agree with the points proposed by Hymes. However, the order of presentation is a bit different. It starts by how an individual (first participant, P1) should act or behave as a participant in the social network in general. Secondly, how one should do when engaging in a conversation with an interlocutor (P1 to P2). Third, to suit the speech event, what topic and aim of speech should be expressed and with what means of communication one should express it (S, E and I). Fourthly, how should the genre and the speech act be, how are the sentences to be expressed, and what words are to be used or to be avoided to suit the mood of the speech (G, A, and K). fifthly, how should the speech be uttered and enunciated. Finally, as an addition, how should a person handle his physical gestures to accompany the speech act (a part of N).

In summary, the general principles are as follows. First, one must be friendly (*sumanak*) and *tanggap* (responsive). Second, one must be wise in choosing the language or the speech level, because language or speech level may imply the place of the interlocutor in the social stratum. He should be *tepa slira* (considerate) and *andhap asor* (modest, humble). Third, one must be wise in choosing the topic and the goal of the conversation. The topic one chooses should agree with the situation, the setting and the scene, and the speech event. He must pay attention to the principle of *empan papan* (proper for the setting and situation). Fourth, one must *nuju prana* (suit the heart, try to please) the interlocutor. The genre, the speech act, the sentences and the diction one uses must make the interlocutor happy. Further, the speech must be *cekak aos* (brief but clear). In addition, the speech uttered must be distinct (*wijang*) and easily understood (*terwaca*). The followings are some illustration.

The Attitude for an Individual

In a social communication, parents usually advice their child to be friendly. The term actually used is *sumanak* (from the steam *sanak* "family, relative" plus infix *-um-*). One should try to treat his interlocutor as *sanak* "relative, family", so the relation can be close and the communication can be smooth. With this close acceptant of friendship, and acquaintance will feel at ease, and a good social relation will prevail.

On the other hand, when one becomes an addressee being addressed by somebody else, one should be *nggategake* 'paying attention to what the speaker says'. One must not *nyepelekake* 'neglect, be little, look down' the speaker. It is good to be *tanggap* 'ready to respond', and *tanggap ing sasmita* 'respond to the finest sign expressed by the speaker. In Javanese there is a saying *Dupak kuli, esem mantra, semu bupati*. It means if you were a coolie, you understand only when you are kicked. If you were a *mantra* 'government official', somebody educated, you should be sensitive enough to understand the meaning of the smile of the speaker, especially when the speaker is your superior. And if you are talking to a *bupati* 'king, governor', you should even become more attentive. You should be able to understand the meaning of the slightest change in the look of the face.

Further, one must be honest, true, and never tells a lie. One must be *jujur* 'honest'. In addition, it is advisable to be *sumeh*, showing a cheerful face while engaging in a conversation. It is not good to be *mrengut* or *mbesengut* 'frowning or showing a sour face'. *Sabar* 'patient' and *sareh* 'calm and easy' are attributes that are good to be observed in many occasions. During a conversation, one must not *gampang nesu* 'get easily angry', *gampang muntab* 'get impulsive and hot temper', and *mutungan* 'easily feeling broken, being fed up, unwilling to continue the relation'.

Parents often say *aja ladak* 'don't be quarrelsome', *aja nyenyengit* 'don't be

hateful', *aja galak* 'don't be vicious', and *aja kumaki* 'don't be cocky, don't be a brag'.

The Attitude of a Speaker (P1) when Talking to an Addressee (P2)

When a person is talking to an addressee, there are three idioms usually used: *tepa selira*, *andhap asor* or *lembah manah*, and *ngajeni*. When the interlocutor is someone of the lower status than his own, he should act *tepa selira*. This means 'to position oneself at the place of the addressee'. To be brief, it can be translated into 'considerate'. In other words, 'show a feeling of sympathy or solidarity'. Basically, it concerns with the choice of the language or the speech level to be used to talk to P2. If the interlocutor does not speak the respectful level of speech or high *karma* well, join him using the *madya* (middle, moderate) level. If the interlocutor does not know how to express the idioms of gratefulness and complementation in a nice way, just accept it. One has to be *momot*, which means 'accommodative'.

It is considered polite to use Indonesian or else to use low *ngoko* level when the interlocutor is right. Indonesian is usually used to someone from another ethnic group, or to an educated Javanese to whom one is not intimate yet. Indonesian can also be used when one is not sure about the social status of the interlocutor.

Ngoko level can be used when P1 considers the interlocutor is close to him or when the social status of the interlocutor is lower than P1. For example, when the interlocutor is one's own younger brother or one's own servant, *ngoko* level can be used.

In general it is good for P1 to be *andhap asor*, to the position oneself in the low and humble position. It is good to be *lembah manah*, humble and patient. This actually means P1 regards and treats P2 with the high respect. P1 treats P2 with high respect. P1 *ngajeni* ('respect') P2. Therefore, P1 may speak to P2 in a respectful code, using high polite *karma* (the polite speech level) when P1 wants to show to the interlocutor distant

relation, but using *ngoko* (ordinary level) with honorific vocabulary or *karma inggil* words when P1 wants to be intimate with P2. In Javanese it is possible to be intimate to an interlocutor but at the same time still respectful'. There are two types of respectful vocabulary.

Anyway, apart from the degree of intimacy and the social status of the interlocutor, the choice of the language and the speech level is actually also determined by the wish of the interlocutor. One must not use the *ngoko* level when an interlocutor insists to use the polite *krama* level to him. One should use Indonesian if the interlocutor insists to use Indonesian. One should speak with the *krama* level if the interlocutor insists to use the *krama* level.

The choice of language or speech level is closely related with the choice of the right term of address and the vocative. In Javanese there is a long list that one can choose to show respect when addressing a respected person. Among others one can use kin terms, royal titles, professional titles, and religious titles. The following are several examples. (1) The kin terms are e.g. *Bapak* 'Mister', literally 'father' and *Ibu* 'Mrs', literally 'mother'. (2) The royal titles are e.g. *Den*, *Raden*, *Den Mas*, *Den Ayu*, (3) The professional titles are e.g. *Doc* for doctor and *Prof* for professor, (4) The religious titles are e.g. *Haji* or *Kyai Haji* for a Muslim religious leader, *Romo* for a Catholic priest.

In connection with the above principles, P1 must never act conceited (*umuk*), and implicitly demand the interlocutor to speak in *krama* to him. He must not brag or indulge in showing oneself off. He must not indulge in the habit of *nggunggung diri* 'boasting his high prestige'. For example, one must not get into the habit of talking about his high achievements and superiority, whether in his physical look, social status, economic welfare, educational attainment, political advancement and bureaucratic position. He must not be *degsura*, boasting oneself and self-centred, not listening to others and always talk about himself. *Degsura* is from the word *deg* 'to stand up' and *sura* 'bold,

courageous, brave', which means boasting of his own standing and belittling other people.

One must not allow oneself to cause embarrassment (*gawe isin*) on P2, or worst of all afflict shame feeling toward P2. He must not *gawe wiring*, meaning literally 'cause shame'. One is prohibited to cause ill feeling or *gawe serik* to P2. He should not point at the weakness of P2 in terms of his physical look, or the failure of P2 in terms of social, educational; and economical necessity, and all the more in terms of his ethical and moral conduct. Criticism should not be expressed when there is another person present during the conversation.

The Proper Attitude in Relation with the Speech Event

When P1 wants to initiate a conversation, P1 must see to it that his topic and objective agree with the principle of *empan papan*. This literally means 'agree with the setting and the speech event'. The topic and the goal chosen must suit the situation and agree with the mood of P2. One should not discuss a serious personal matter in public. For example, one should not try to collect the debt from the addressee while attending a wedding party, or during a funeral ceremony. One should not talk about a terrible disease during dinner. One should not complain about his personal problem, for example his rivalry with somebody else when the interlocutor just woke up in the morning. P1 should not blame P2 for having been lazy at the time when P2 just found out that he failed his exam and was very upset. When P1 is talking about something that is not considered proper in relation to the speech event, he may be said to be *benyanyak-benyunyuk* 'intrusive, repulsive'. When he asks for something when the speech event is not right, he is *mangkelke* 'annoying'. When he always talks about himself at any time, he is *njelehi* 'boring' or *mbocahi* 'like a small child'.

As an interlocutor, it would be better if one just continues to respond about the topic that has just been talked about. This way the topic is relevant. People will say that

P1 is *nyambung* 'relates to or connects with' the topic being discussed.

Another thing to care is the means to express the topic of the discourse. At present there is a choice to convey messages, i.e. whether to use a telephone, hand phone, letter or saying it orally. For many of the conservative people, the most polite way is to convey a message via oral presentation and face to face. If one cannot see the interlocutor personally, one can send a letter by mail or via a messenger. The letter must be properly enveloped. For example, an invitation letter can be sent by male. If the message is not very formal, and the relation between P1 and P2 is fairly close, P1 can contact the interlocutor through the telephone or hand phone.

The Attitude of a Speaker when Delivering a Speech Act

Another principle one should observe is that one should convey the message in a pleasing way. One should try to *nuju prana*, which literally means 'pleasing the heart' of the addressee. This especially concerns with the choice of the genre, the choice of the speech act, the choice of the sentences, the choice of the diction that suit the mood accompanying the speech, the length of the speech and the utterance of the speech.

First is about the genre. The speaker can just continue using the same genre as expressed by the interlocutor. If the interlocutor uses informal style of speech, P1 can use the same informal speech. If the interlocutor uses a literary speech, P1 can use the same literary speech. For example, if in a speech event the interlocutor uses *pantun* 'fun humorous poem', the interlocutor can respond in the same way. If, otherwise, P1 should initiate the conversation, he can use the normal polite conversational style.

Secondly, it concerns with the length of the speech act. About the length of the speech act, the principle is that P1 should convey it in *cekak aos* way. The message should be conveyed in brief but clear way.

Cekak means 'brief', and *aos* means 'full of content, compact, comprehensive'. Everything that is needed should be in the discourse, but only those that are needed are mentioned. If illustrations are needed, one should try to supply the illustrations in shortest possible way. When P1 talks in a lengthy way, it may annoy the interlocutor. One should not talk in *nggladrah* 'long meandering' way, mentioning things that are not relevant.

In addition, the sentences must be **runtut**, arranged in a structural manner. They must be cohesive and coherent. They are well ordered. This way, the speech will be easily understood. The sentences must not overlap with each other. They must not *tumpang suh* 'overlap, confuse'.

When P1 wants to present an assertive speech act, i.e. informing something to the interlocutor, he can be polite by starting his speech with **pambuka** 'opening', for example, the word *nuwun* 'excuse me', or *nuwun sewu* 'thousand pardon'. When P1 wants to interrupt, he can start by saying *nuwun sewu, kepareng sumela atur* 'excuse me, may I interrupt'.

When P1 wants to make a commitment, e.g. make a promise, it is advisable to insert an opening idiom such as *insya Allah* 'God willing' or *muga-muga* 'hopefully', or *yen tanpa alangan* 'if there is no ill accident'. In a wedding invitation, a similar opening is often expressed. Set phrases such as *Menawi Gusti Allah merengaken* 'If God permits' or *Menawi Gusti Allah Ngijabahi* 'If God gives his blessing' often opens an invitation letter to a wedding reception or circumcision party. This way he is considered religious or humble.

When one wants to present an opinion about the interlocutor or about something else, it is respectful when he uses praises or complements. He can also try to be less bombastic by using idioms or hedges.

It is not polite to use interjections in one's sentences. Interjections such as *lho*, (expressing a slight surprise), *lha kok*

(expressing a mild protest), *nha* (to agree with the interlocutor's opinion) are considered not polite when conversing with somebody respectable. The use of an interjection suggests that P1 is in a higher position than the interlocutor. Nor is it possible to end one's sentence with a tag particle such as *jare* or *je* 'you know', *dhing* 'sorry', *rak iya* 'isn't it', don't you agree'. Tag questions and sentence particles suggest that the speaker is not careful and regards the interlocutor as not an important person.

P1 must make an effort to present the content of the speech as pleasing as he can. He should try his best to *ngiyani* or giving agreement to the opinion of P2. It is considered acceptable to conform to the interlocutor. If necessary, his speech must contain *bombongan* 'praises', *pangalembana* 'complements'. The content should not be *kasar*, *saru*, *sengol*, *sengak*, *nylekit*, *nglarani ai*, *nyangklak*, *nranyak*, *nyepeleke*, and *nyalahke*. *Kasar* means rude and vulgar. *Saru* means pornographic or improper. *Sengol* means containing reprimand. *Sengak* means offensive. *Nylekit* means containing a painful flavour. *Nglarani ati* means hurting feeling. *Nyangklak* means afflicting disrespect. *Nranyak* means damaging one's honor. *Nyepelake* means regarding someone as unimportant. *Nyalahake* means to downgrade.

Finally, to make the interlocutor happy, the speech must be delivered with good enunciation, pleasing intonation and nice tempo. With the good pronunciation, the interlocutor can understand the message easily. With the good intonation the flow of the information can be perceived without any annoyance. Good normal tempo of utterance is pleasant to hear. The speech that is delivered with distinct enunciation, pleasant intonation, and *sareh* 'easy' mood present a message that is *cetha* 'clear, distinct' or *terwaca* 'clearly understood, comprehensible', and pleasant to perceive.

The Use of Proper Gestures

Apart from the linguistic requirement, there is another principle that must be

observed. Accompanying the utterance of the language, proper physical gesture is required. This especially concerns with the position of the head, the direction of the eyesight, the movement of the mouth, the way to sit, the way to stand, and the movement of the hands. There is a principle of *subasita* or *trapsila*, meaning 'proper behaviour' or 'proper physical gesture'. The following are a few examples.

First, in general the head and its parts, e.g. the eye, mouth, nose, and ears are considered sacred and therefore very important in terms of respect. One must not touch the head of a respectable person without any good reason. One must not refer to any of them without any good reason, and if one has to refer to any of them without any good reason, and if one has to refer to them, one has to use very polite or *krama inggil* words. Otherwise you will be deemed *nranyak* 'very rude or impolite'. One must not even sit or stand in a place higher than that the respectable interlocutor sits or stands. One must bow down when he has to walk passing the place where the respectable person is sitting down.

When one talks to respected person, and the person is explaining something to him, he should look at the person in the face, showing that he is paying good attention to what the interlocutor is saying. If the interlocutor is giving an instruction, one can also look down to the direction of the legs of the interlocutor. One must not show bulging eyes, because bulging eyes is a sign of anger.

One should talk in a natural way, moving the mouth, the tongue and the lips in an ordinary way. One should not give the impression that he (or she) is being coquettish or acting funny in a childish way.

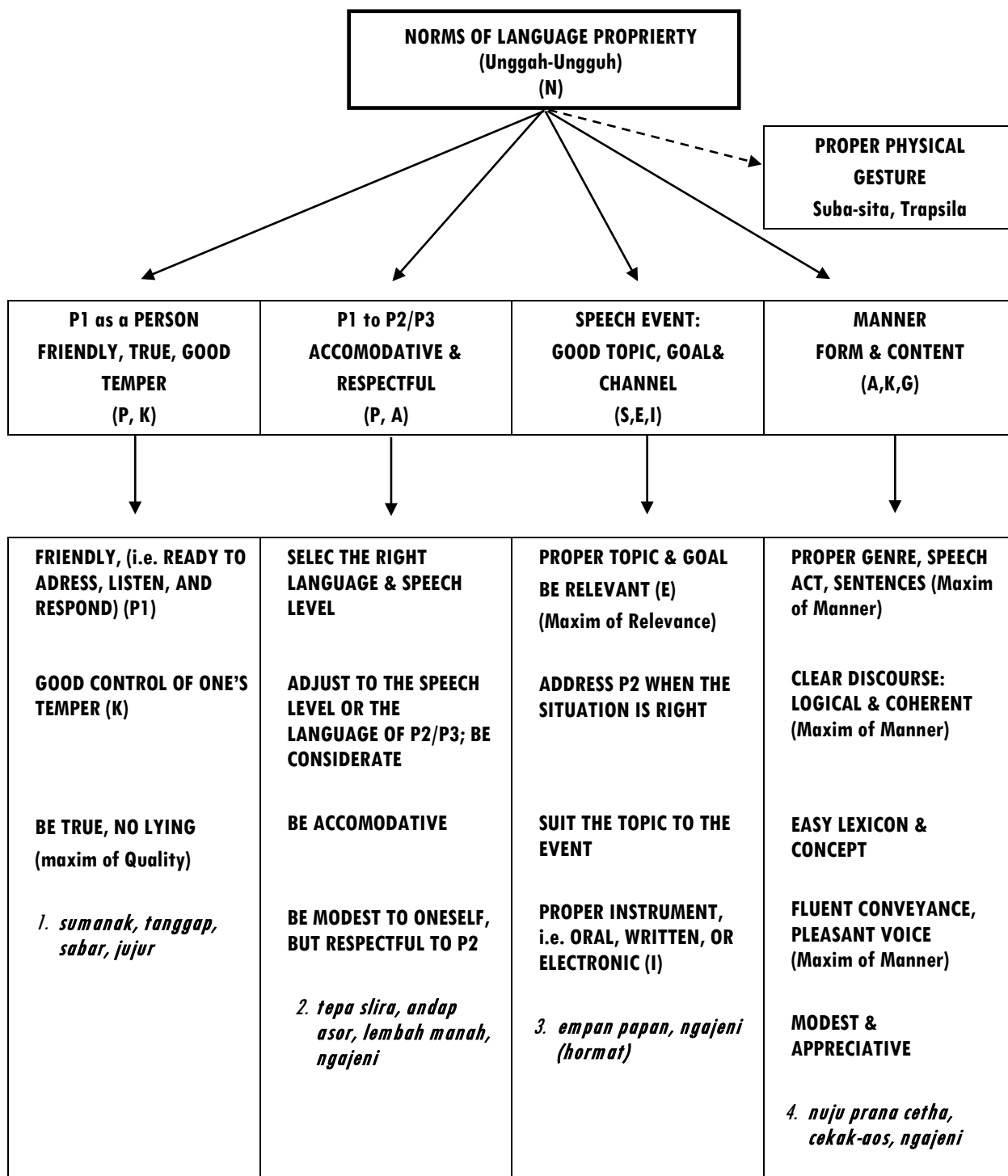
When P1 is sitting on a mat, he should *sila*, folding the two legs and lay the legs flat in front. When he is sitting on a chair or a bench, he should sit erect and folding the two legs parallel in front. One should not *jegang*, putting one leg on top of the other. When the respected interlocutor is sitting on a mat, one should not sit on a bench or a

chair, which is higher than the seat of the interlocutor. Sitting in higher place is said to be *methengkreng*, which is very impolite.

When both P1 and P2 are standing, P1 should stand erect and stay still, and put the two hands together in front. It is very polite if one can *ngapurancang*, putting the two hands straight down together, one on top of the other. While talking, the hands should stay still. If the hands move up and down, the movement will distract the speech, hence it is considered not polite. *Methentheng* 'to stand akimbo' is very impolite, as if one is challenging the interlocutor to fight. When one has to point at something, he can use the right hand with the thumb pointing to the thing.

In summary, in the following chart the principles are presented. In the first column it is presented the principle of a good speaker as a person. In the second column the choice of a language or speech level is noted. In the third column the proper topic and speech channel are considered, especially to agree with the speech event. In the fourth column the manner for presenting the speech is mentioned. Hymes' signs (SPEAKING) as a way to memorize the speech components are put individually between brackets behind certain relevant principles. So are the conversational principles of Grice. At the end of each column the principles in Javanese idioms are supplied. The principle for the physical gestures is presented in a separate place, the fifth column.

The following is a chart that represents the above principles.



Implications

There are five maxims noted in the above Javanese politeness principles. The first maxim concerns with the general attitude of the speaker during the conversation. The second concerns with the

respect of the speaker toward the hearer's status. The third concerns with the topic, the objective and the means of expression during the speech event. The fourth concerns with the pleasant expression the speaker should convey to the hearer. The

fifth concerns with the body language during the conversation.

With the above descriptions, there are at least two things we can learn. First, in general the principle of language propriety in Javanese is very similar with that of English. Secondly, the way people teach their younger generation using idioms seems to be common both in Javanese and in English.

Leech's principle and maxim of politeness (1983) in English are in general agree with the above principle of politeness in Javanese. The way the maxims are classified in English may not exactly agree with those of the Javanese, but in general the content is very similar. For example, the principles of choosing expressions which minimally belittle the hearer's status and the maxim of giving more praise to the hearer seem to agree with the principle of Javanese *andhap asor* and *ngajeni*. Both point at the principle of respecting the status of the hearer, and not belittling him. The principle of *andhap asor* and *tepa slira* seems to also agree with the sympathy feeling of leech. They concern with the positive feeling the speaker should extend to the hearer. The tact maxim (i.e. minimize cost to the hearer and maximize benefit to the hearer), the generosity maxim (minimize benefit to self and maximize cost to self), the maxim of agreement (i.e. minimize disagreement and maximize agreement), and the consideration maxim (i.e. to maximize the hearer's pleasure) seem to agree with the Javanese maxim of *nuju prana*. They put emphasis of making the hearer to feel comfortable and pleasant.

Meanwhile, Brown and Levinson's principle of Face Threatening Act (FTA) is in agreement with the Javanese principle, except that the Javanese add with the Javanese speech levels for the correct personal relation between the speaker and the addressee.

The following can be used as a principle of speech norm.

1. What does P1 have to do?
Ready to engage in conversation (*ramah*).

Control your emotion, exhibit good temper (*sabar*).

2. P1 to P2. What language to choose? (*tepa slira*)
Respect the language ability of the addressee (P2).
Accommodate P2's speech ability, and try to adapt it.
Choose the right language acceptable by P2.
3. P1 to P2. Respect the social status or social position of P2 (*hormat*)
Use the right speech level.
4. Respect the mood of P2 (*empan papan*)
Choose the right speech objective and the right topic.
Also choose the right instrument: oral, written, telephone, phone cell.
5. Present a pleasant speech act (*nuju prana*)
Pleasant enunciation.
Pleasant speech act: assertion, directives, commissives, expressive, etc.
Apply the right conversational maxim (Grice): be brief, relevant, true, and pleasant manner).
Show appreciation and complementation at the right time.
6. Apply good physical gestures (*suba sita*)

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