‘Sacred’ speech registers in Malay World: Applying an interdisciplinary approach

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In memoriam of Boris Parnickel

1. Introduction

This paper intends to make explicit some methodological and notional problems that arise during the study of a linguistic phenomenon that constitutes a characteristic feature of many societies (especially pre-Islamic societies) throughout the Malay World[1] – namely the phenomenon of ‘sacred’ registers. After identifying problems, I will propose a solution which makes it necessary to take into account not only linguistic but also anthropological data. Thus, it turns out that approaching such cultures as those of Malay World does not always fit in the European-based “division of labour” between various disciplines and occasionally requires a more broad interdisciplinary approach.

It is a well-known feature of many languages of Malaysia and Indonesia (occasionally referred to below as ‘Nusantara’) that they distinguish several speech registers that are used in complementary distribution according to various parameters. The most widely cited examples are various politeness registers found in languages of Java. Yet the phenomenon is not limited to them. In particular, a number of communities of the area possess linguistic varieties that are contrasted to the everyday speech as sacred. It is these ‘sacred’ registers that constitute the topic of this paper.

‘Sacred’ registers have been by no means overlooked in studies of Nusantara, and many of them got some description already in 19th century. This actually concerns not only the registers mentioned by the grammarians of the corresponding languages (see van der Tuuk 1864/67 for Toba-Batak registers, Hardeland 1858 for *Basa sangiang* in the Ngaju-Dayak tradition, Adriani 1893 for Sangirese *Sasahara* etc.) but also varieties that were only noticed in passing (such as the so-called *Bahasa kapur*, which was used by some tribes – presumably Jakuns – in Malay Peninsula and briefly described by Miklouho-Maclay in 1876). The study of this type of registers was further continued during the next

[1] The Malay World is understood here rather broadly, as a separate Austronesian cultural area including Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia.

century both by linguists and anthropologists (see, e.g., Fox (ed.) 1988; Revunenkova 1992; Grimes & Maryott 1994), so that some of the 'sacred' varieties under discussion even obtained detailed descriptions of their lexicon (see Simatupang 1982; Baier et al. 1987).

Yet as a rule, the context of utterance of 'sacred' registers and their formal characteristics were touched upon independently of each other. The point of this paper is, however, that there do exist important and inherent relations between these two sides of the coin. This paper, then, goes together with the widespread (but diverse) functional stream within linguistics, which claims that most linguistic properties take their source in the use of the language. For 'sacred' registers of Nusantara this may be even truer, since although they are sometimes claimed to come from supernatural beings, it nevertheless seems that they are even better candidates to be the products of societies than natural languages.

2. Stating the problem: the diversity of 'sacred' registers

It was stated above that 'sacred' registers are understood here as those forms of speech that are contrasted (within a community) with the routine profane speech. The opposition between the holy discourse and worldly communication in those communities that have 'sacred' registers seems to be very strong and is usually regulated by rules that are easily identified at surface. As we will see below, these rules vary to a high degree, the more so that there can be several 'sacred' registers in a given language[2]. Yet we take all of these rules to manifest just one general opposition between the Sacred and the Profane, the opposition observed in many (if not in all) cultures throughout the world.

However, as the form is concerned, 'sacred' registers do not form a homogeneous class either. Instead, looking at the whole range of works devoted to 'sacred' registers gives the impression that what is described can be divided into (at least) two types called here substituting registers and formula registers.

The "language" of Buginese priests *Basa bissu* seems to be a good example of a

[2] Thus, according to Sarumpaet (1982), Toba-Bataks have at least three 'sacred' registers, namely "Ceremonial Language" (*Hata ni na Mandok Hata*), "Language of Lamentation" (*Hata Andung*) and "Medico-Magic Language" (*Hata Hadatuon*); other authors (e.g., Revunenkova 1992) mention even more varieties. Although there is some interaction between these registers, they all seem to be contrasted with the everyday speech. For example, as Sarumpaet notes, "the linguistic rules of lamentation dictate that a lamenter must avoid as far as possible the use of ordinary words taken from the S[tandard] L[anguage]" (p. 34).

substituting register[3]. While using basically the same grammar as Buginese, *Basa bissu* nevertheless employs a different vocabulary where the lexemes of the "profane language" are simply substituted with new lexemes; e.g., this language has its own word for 'airplane' – *marəmpoba*, originally the name of a mythical bird. (Some other 'sacred' registers substitute grammatical elements as well – or occasionally assign a grammatical means a function it had not before; such facts are reported, for instance, for *Li Garan*, a 'sacred' register found in Buru; cf. Grimes & Maryott 1994.) The ways the vocabulary of a 'sacred' register is formed vary and can be related to phonetic changes (e.g., syllable transposing observed in Ngaju-Dayak *Bahasa sangiang*)[4], metaphorical substitution, and new derivations. In addition, the lexicon of many 'sacred' registers includes a number of archaisms. This is not surprising, of course, given that as a part of religious system, 'sacred' registers are more untouchable and less prone to changes than their "profane counterparts"[5].

The principles of organization of ***formula registers***, which are described in detaild for Eastern Indonesia, are different. The texts pronounced in these registers may be represented as sequences of formulas, and essentially it is formulas, i.e. a syntactically complex expressions, that obtain a "shifted meaning" here. An example of formula is:

Ina papa-lohung	Mother who gives things out,
Ana papa-tamang	Father who takes things in.

which in Sumba referes to "the right to dispose of and accept property on behalf of a group" (Mitchell 1988: 71).

Formulas – at least those formulas that attracted most attention of researches – are

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[3] The data on *Basa bissu* are from Sirk 1975; 1996. Unfortunately, while writing this paper I had no access to Hamonic 1987, where various properties of this register are discussed in more details.

[4] In fact, phonological changes are more typical for so-called "secret languages", which – we assume – are not (necessarily) sacred. Some descriptions of "secret languages" are Sarumpaet 1982 (on "intimate language" among Toba-Bataks), Teoh 1993 (Iban "disguised speech") and Gil 2002 (disguised varieties in Malayic languages).

[5] The same entails that the archaic words should not be a distinctive feature of substituting registers, and in fact they are actively used in formula registers described below. Cf. also the following (concerning a *formula* register in Sumba): "the ritual language is supposed to have been transmitted unchanged from one generation to the next, from the time of the original ancestors of Sumbanese people" (Mitchell 1988: 73).

usually at least partly non-compositional, i.e. have meaning that is not composed of their parts. Moreover, it has been argued by James Fox and others (see Fox 1972; Fox (ed.) 1988) that within a formula single words (or phrases) participate in complex dyadic relations substantially supported by the parallelistic structure of formulas. Consequently, a word in a formula can mean far more than it means outside of it; in other words, unlike what is seen in substituting registers, in formula registers it may be not correct just to assign some meaning to another lexeme. In fact, though the content of a formulaic text can vary, the principles of this variation are somewhat different from a natural language[6].

Both formula registers and substituting registers obviously form rich semiotic systems. However, they seem to be so different that it is not at all easy to bring them to the same stripe. Thus, one can conjecture that 'sacred' registers as a linguistic characteristic of Nusantara are nothing but illusion, since the label "sacred register" would refer to phenomena that are seemingly incommensurable. The following sections, however, argue against this.

3. Not so diverse as they seem to be?

In fact, a closer look reveals the fact that the situation is not so dramatic. In particular, the opposition between substituting registers and formula registers is possibly not so well-established as it was presented in the previous section.

Note that which type is described may to some degree depend on who wrote a description. Thus, works on formula registers were written mainly by anthropologists that studied texts, performed or occasionally even fixed (hence the relative fixedness of formulas?). On the other hand, most linguistic works on 'sacred' registers were concerned with the lexicon; hence – probably – the peculiar attention to the lexical substitutes. Thus, representatives of different disciplines studied different topics, and this could result in the situation where anthropologists and linguists looked at different aspects of the same class of phenomena. If so, then the opposition between substituting registers and formula registers simply need not be postulated.

Indeed, why cannot lexical substitutes and formulas coexist in one and the same register? Of course, if we accept that formulas are by definition non-compositional then parts of them cannot have their own meanings, so no substitutes can be found within a

[6] Cf. Toba-Batak ceremonial register, which "uses the respect vocabulary of the Standard Language" but in form of "sayings and proverbs"; the latter are of two kinds: "an *umpama* has an unalterable form, while an *umpasa* has parts which can be changed to suit a particular situation" (Sarumpaet 1982: 28).

formula. However, such an assumption is too idealistic. First, formulas obviously develop from more or less compositional expressions. In fact, we have no evidence that they get their non-compositional meaning in a moment, so it can be supposed that at some stages formulas are partly compositional. Second, one can allow the possibility that formulas be reanalyzed as complex expressions, and this would lead just to the appearance of substitutes (of a certain kind). In either case, the borderline between substituting registers and formula registers is not so necessarily clear-cut.

Yet it is unlikely to eliminate the distinction whatsoever[7], since it is unlikely that so many scholars disregarded so important aspects as lexicon or formulas. Rather we can assume that the distinction between the two kinds of registers is a matter of degree, and the two types are different in the prevailing technique of covering sacred sense. But even in such a model nothing exist that could serve as a *tertium comparationis* between the two classes of 'sacred' registers, so it is not obvious how to integrate the typology into a more general theory.

4. Turning to functioning

An interesting fact about formula registers, as they are described in the literature, is that they are usually depicted as "ritual languages". This gives rise to a hypothesis that the distinction between the proposed types of 'sacred' registers may be related to their functioning, so that the usage of a register may serve as a basis for the proposed typology.

In respect of 'sacred' registers, however, the discussion of their usage leads to additional problems. Thus, firstly turning to the linguistic functionalism, can we apply to the material of 'sacred' registers the same method of explanation as is employed in respect of other natural language systems, representing the form and the structure of language as emerging from the tendencies of its use, arguably universal? At the same time, can we employ functions assigned by cultures in some sense "internally", i.e. highly cultural-dependent notions, to justify the existence of linguistic features - hence allowing a strong deviation from the linguistic objectivism?

However controversial and in a sense contradictory these questions are, it seems that they are all deserving of a positive answer if this can lead to the substantiation of interesting generalizations. And it is here where we come to an interdisciplinary approach taking into account the data and explanation peculiar to linguistics and ethnography.

In what follows the use of 'sacred' registers will be looked through the prism of the

[7] As the author did himself in Lander 2002.

status of communicants and just one (although arguably leading) linguistic function, namely that of conveying information or inducements[8]. In this respect 'sacred' registers have their own peculiarities – thus, communication by means of 'sacred' registers is often understood as occurring between humans and the inhabitants of next worlds, ancestral or nature spirits[9].

Indeed, among many peoples of Nusantara pronouncing 'sacred' words is understood as giving publicity to the speech of "supernatural beings" (cf. Fox 1988: 13-14). This holds or held for Mambai, where priests and chanters of sacred texts represent themselves as 'fools and babes' just mouthing 'the received uncomprehended words' (Traube 1980, cited in Forth 1988: 135), for Toba-Bataks, whose priests prophesied with *hata ni begu siar*, i.e. 'the language/words of entered spirits' (Revunenkova 1973: 118-119), for Sawu Dimu, where the recitation of sacred texts pretends to represent the "voice of ancestors" (van Ooy 1994: 10) etc. In addition, it seems natural to suppose that most sacred texts are conceived as originating from supernatural beings even where their sounding is not understood as direct translation of magic speech. However, it is important here to differentiate cases where what is recitated is an already fixed text typically narrating the history of a clan and possibly only originating from ancestors – when the whole performance appears to be a repeating ritual, and cases such as the Batak one

[8] Many functions of 'sacred' registers that could be considered important in the context of the present paper here are left outside of the scope of this paper. For example, the social function which allows speakers of an idiom feel themselves a single whole as opposed to speakers of other idioms is not considered below – even though it can affect the lexicon (as in Rotinese 'sacred' register, which contains words from different dialects of the language; cf. Fox 1974: 80). Another function that is disregarded below but can be expected to be relevant is the "poetic function" oriented mainly on the form of an expression. However, it seems that usually the sacred speech is not understood as a means of forming poetic texts. Although the latter also can employ formulas, these are usually other formulas than those found in the sacred speech; the same applies to substitutes. Thus, Mitchell (1988: 67) reports that in Wanukaka the metaphors found in 'sacred' register are different from those observed in songs and stories about Umbu Deilu and Rambu Kahi, Sirk (1975: 233-234) notes that most words of Buginese *Basa bissu* do not have widespread use in the Buginese epic literature (unlike "Old Buginese" words), according to Usop (1982: 319) Ngaju-Dayak *Basa sangyang* is not met in the late poetic forms *karungut* etc.

[9] The purely linguistic aspect of this problem was recognized already by Dell Hymes (1962), who stated that occasionally the Sender may not coincide with the Addresser and the Receiver may not coincide with the Addresser. As we will see immediately below, it is the Addresser and the Addressee that are especially relevant in the context of the description of 'sacred' registers.

mentioned above, where spirits convey information by somebody's lips or give it in the form of magic texts (often of practical character).

Of course, a 'sacred' register can also be used in the opposite direction, when humans address their speech to spirits. This is in fact the case of prayers, "confessions" and similar acts, although it is worth noting that such communication does not necessarily appears in the form of monologue. Thus, among Weyewas the "communication" with the spirits *marapu* occurs in a form of dialogue, where the spirits answer with the symbols obtained during the divination (Renard-Glamagirand 1988). Nevertheless, the sacred speech of this kind is still incorporated in a ritual, where it functions only as one of several codes.

This feature naturally relates the latter type of use to another one. Some 'sacred' registers in fact can be used (and often required) in situations that seemingly are not sacred. Thus, Fox (1974: 67) notes that in Roti "bridewealth negotiations require *bini* [the Rotinese ritual register – YL]; if these overtures are successful, details in the negotiation can be worked out in *dedeäk* [informal speech – YL]". Similar facts are reported for other communities such as those in the islands of Sumba (Mitchell 1988) and Sawu Dimu (van Ooy 1994). Apparently, negotiations may need to be heard by spirits (cf. Mitchell 1988: 66), and this apparently correlates with the fact that they are organized as rituals.

Finally, there is another situation where humans communicate with humans, but without any resemblance to ceremony. Consider, for example, *Li Garan*, a register spoken by people that have to pass Garan, a small uninhabited region of Buru, instead of the everyday language prohibited in this territory. Grimes & Maryott (1994) describe the beliefs that even making a mistake in *Li Garan* may entail punishment on the side of spirits, but the penalty can be escaped if a person asks ancestors for a permission to go through Garan. Given this, we can hypothesize that *Li Garan* is conceived actually the language of ancestors and that using the "profane" language people can reveal themselves in this region. Arguably, the same beliefs govern the use of professional languages such as the Sangirese *Sasahara* or the above-mentioned *Bahasa kapur*[10]. At the same time, speaking in a "language of spirits" by humans is possible in other situations as well, where

[10] However, secret registers (be they non-sacred) are also used in such cases. Thus, Teoh (1993: 230) reports that the Iban "secret language" – *Jako kelaung* – was earlier used by hunters "in the belief that such communication would render it incomprehensible to the animals they were hunting thus enhancing their success at hunting (that is assuming animals understand language in the first place!)". Yet Teoh adds that such an explanation of the use of *Jako kelaung* was rejected by his consultants.

the information conveyed in an utterance or even the communicants themselves already have a sacred status. In this case, however, a ‘sacred’ register comes to play a disguising role.

5. Final chord: functions meet forms

We are now in a position where it is possible to provide a functional basis for the formal typology of ‘sacred’ registers given in the beginning of the paper. Consider the following scheme reflecting the different uses of ‘sacred’ registers discussed in the previous section (the left part of the scheme represents communicants):

Spirits to humans	Prophesy Concealment and disguising (professional and secret languages)
Humans to humans	Recitation of sacred texts Negotiations
Humans to spirits	Prayers and confessions

The scheme shows that the possibilities of membership of the communicants are not distinguished precisely. Thus, while prophesy on the one hand and prayers and confessions on the other hand seem to unambiguously set the direction of communication, other uses of ‘sacred’ registers are less obvious. As was argued above, concealment and disguising are likening to spirits and therefore are closer to the ‘speech of spirits’ than other functions. Recitation of sacred text comes originally from supernatural beings, yet it appears as a ritual lead by humans, so it turns out to be closer to the axis of ‘Humans to humans’. Negotiations are apparently of this type, but they should be “heard” by spirits, and consequently are placed closer to prayers.

Although the scheme is designed just for ordering of various functions of ‘sacred’ registers, it seems to have more force. Thus, for example, the scheme may partly “explain” the degree of secretness of a register used – the higher is a function, the more “secret”, or to be more precise, not commonly intelligible a register is. In addition, one can find that the place of a function correlates with its regulation – the higher is a function, the less regulated it is, i.e. the higher is a function, the more likely it is incorporated in a ritual.

Finally, and most importantly for the present paper, substituting registers gravitate towards the upper functions, while formula registers have a propensity to the lower part of the scheme.

Of course, this correlation is based on a rather small sample (but note that the phenomenon under discussion is not in the centre of attention of scholars either), but if it is true, it does offer a very simple explanation to the variation observed above.

First, note that there is nothing surprising in the fact that the opposition between the Sacred and the Profane may show itself in various manifestations, the more so that these manifestations conform to a very simple typology based on the types of communicants. Given that typology, however, the form of a register can be easily explained just by its function. The difference between the two kinds of 'sacred' registers essentially correlates with the degrees of freedom allowed within the communication. On the one hand, there are formulas, which although do presuppose some possibility of variation, nevertheless somehow delimit the freedom. Naturally, formulas are part of a ritual, a regulated act of maintenance of order, the communication with spirits being exactly directed from humans. On the other hand, the substituting registers reflect the "language of ancestors", which need not be regulated and should allow much freedom.

As a result, the typology of forms of 'sacred' registers is motivated by the typology of their functions, and since the latter obviously does have an established basis for comparison, we may conclude that the former has it as well.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, this paper has argued that the most natural typology of 'sacred' registers should be based on their functions rather than on their form. Crucially, the functional typology may provide clues for formal problems, while the opposite is not the case. Explaining the formal features of 'sacred' registers requires the appeal to ethnographic data, and it is here where an interdisciplinary approach arises.

In fact, this prejudices the universal strength of linguistic explanation, since in this case such an explanation turns out to be somewhat dependent on the conceptions of speakers. To this two objections can be proposed. First, when the conceptions of speakers are manifested in their behavior they turn into concrete actions that formally speaking need not be considered culture-dependent sources of other phenomena, and it is just a shortcoming (or a merit?) of linguistics that it has to study the phenomena whose sources are not always reduced to human thought. Second, 'sacred' registers themselves is a rather peculiar phenomenon and it can hardly be discussed without appeal to the culture.

Yet, we have to accept that the existence of 'sacred' registers indeed goes against the canonical European notions of how the Sacred can come into the speech (since there it comes either as a different language or as an idiom that still cannot be considered a separate register).

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