

Variation of First Person Singular Pronouns in Indonesian-speaking Children's Speech

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Abstract – This paper discusses the variation of Indonesian first person singular pronouns which is related to the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. The question to be addressed in this study is: to what extent the pronouns are used by Indonesian-speaking children? This study aims to describe the use of *saya* and *aku* by children in formal and informal situation. The main data of this study is children's speech, obtained from individual interviews in formal and informal situations. Participants in this study are kindergarteners (N=28) and elementary school children (N=29) whose school is situated in South Tangerang. It is found that there are several variations of self-reference in children's utterances, including *saya* and *aku*. It is also found that children in this study are more familiar with *aku* than with *saya*. It is also indicated that the children are still learning to use appropriate pronouns in appropriate situations.

Keywords – first person singular pronouns; Indonesian speaking children; sociolinguistic competence

I. INTRODUCTION

Children acquire and learn to use language(s) through social interactions with others. In verbal communication, they have to learn to engage in conversations as well. Conversation enables children to express their thoughts. While talking with their interlocutor, children are developing their language ability, particularly on vocabulary aspect (Papalia and Martorell, 2015:221). In conversations, a child learns how to refer the object she is talking about, including herself, the interlocutor(s), or one that is not present at the time. In other words, she has to learn how to use pronouns.

There are three types of pronoun, namely, personal-, demonstrative-, and interrogative pronouns (Alwi *et al.*, 2003:249). From pragmatic perspective, pronoun is deictic: the reference can change in accordance with the speaker's context (Purwo, 1984:20). It has three forms: first person-, second person-, and third person pronouns (Purwo, 1984:22). From syntactic perspective, pronouns can fill the subject and object functions (Kridalaksana 1999 and 2014; Alwi *et al.* 2003). Based on the number of person involved, they can be distinguished as singular and plural personal pronouns. The speaker in a conversation referring himself using the first person pronoun; the other interlocutor to whom the speaker addresses is referred in the second person pronoun. The other party who is not present in the conversation and being discussed about is referred as third person. There are several first person singular pronouns in Indonesian: *aku*, *saya*, and *gue* (Purwo, 1984; Sneddon, 2006). *aku* is usually used in informal situation, whereas *saya* is used in the formal one. *gue* occurs in informal situation, involving interlocutors in very casual situations.

In Jakarta and the surroundings, there are at least two varieties that are differentiated according to situation. Bahasa Indonesia (BI), the standard language of Indonesian, is used mainly in the formal situation. Colloquial Jakarta Indonesian (CJI), used mainly in more informal situation (see Sneddon 2006). These are the varieties that many Jakartan children learn. In both varieties, there are also pronouns, including *aku* and *saya*, learned by children to distinguish solidarity and formality (Kushartanti 2009).

Dardjowidjojo (2000/2018) finds that by the time the subject of his research, a Jakartan child, reaches preschool years (about three years old), she has used several personal pronouns. It is found that the child uses of pronouns *aku* and *saya* in her utterances. Observations on interactions between children and their interlocutors also reveal that Indonesian-speaking preschoolers have already used *aku* and *saya* in conversation (see Kushartanti 2009). Sometimes, children also use their own name in order to refer themselves in their speech. The question to be addressed now is: to what extent they use the first person singular pronouns?

This study discusses children's sociolinguistic competence focusing on variation of Indonesian pronouns. In this study, we analyse the use of first person singular pronouns, *aku* and *saya*, by Indonesian-speaking children in both formal and informal situation. The use of the pronouns is compared, based on situation and educational level. We involved kindergarteners (hereinafter KG; N=28) and elementary school children (hereinafter ES; N=29) whose school is situated in South Tangerang, a border area of Jakarta and Banten.

In the next sections, we present a literature review on children's sociolinguistic competence and studies on pronouns. A short description of the method will be presented as well, followed by the result and discussion. A conclusion and suggestion on further study is also presented in this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistic competence is an ability to use appropriate language, including style, in appropriate condition and situation. Chambers (2009:165) stated that children's sociolinguistic competence starts once they acquired their first language or their mother tongue. Generally, children learn language informally at home in casual style. Later they learn the standard language in more formal setting, such as in school. This process reflects the stylistic development (see also Holmes 2013; Kushartanti 2104). According to Hymes (1972), in the process of acquiring language, children not only learning the grammatical rules of the language; they have to learn the social rules as well. Therefore, acquiring sociolinguistic competence is an integral part of language acquisition (Robert 2005). Using pronouns also indicates children's sociolinguistic competence; it is part of learning pragmatic system in a language. Kushartanti (2009) finds that Jakartan children use *aku* and *saya* in different situation, to distinguish expression of politeness and solidarity to different audience.

There are language acquisition studies focusing on pronouns. Some recent studies investigate pronouns in children with language impairment, for example Faquih (2014) Chondrogianni et al. (2015), and Girbau (2018). Some studies investigate monolingual children, for example Jalilevand and Ebrahimipour (2013) investigates the use of pronouns by Persian speaking children, Muşlu (2015) on 3 to 5-year-old Turkish children, Mykhaylyk and Sopata (2016) on Polish and Ukrainian children, Foyn et al. (2018) on Norwegian children (and adult).

Studies on language variation that focuses on Indonesian pronouns use have been conducted by Djenar (2006 and 2007). Djenar (2006) studied the variation of second person pronouns – *kamu* and *elu* (*lu*, *elo*, and *lo*) – in Indonesian, using novel as the research subject. Djenar (2007) examined the use of *aku*, *saya*, *gue*, and proper name in Indonesian celebrities' utterances.

Research on language variation acquisition with Indonesian data, especially on pronouns, are still rarely conducted. The present study concerns with variation of Indonesian pronouns in Indonesian-speaking children' utterances. This study will contribute to the research on language acquisition, especially in the acquisition of language variation.

III. METHODS

A. Design in This Study and the Instruments

Design in this study is used to examine children's stylistic competence. The main data in this study is children's utterances, obtained from interviews in formal and informal situations. Qualitative approach was used to identify and classify the forms of children's self-referring. Meanwhile, quantitative approach was used to observe the occurrence of pronouns in children utterances, in order to examine children's tendencies when they refer themselves in conversations. As mentioned previously, participants in this study are kindergarteners (KG) and elementary school (ES) children whose school (and the foundation) is situated in South Tangerang.

To obtain children's utterances, we prepared a list of questions for two sessions of interview. In each interview, we prepared different topic (see the next section). The list of questions is used as the main instrument. To obtain information about children's personal and demographic data, we utilized questionnaires, distributed to the parents. Questions concerning personal information includes the child's name, place and date of birth, the order of birth in the family, the child's first language, other language(s) used at home, language(s) used by the child to the others, parents' demographic information (year of birth, occupation, ethnicity, first language, other language used, time spent with the child), and information about other caregiver (if any). Including in the questionnaire is parental consent. All children involved in this study are those whose parents had given their consent and permission..

B. Procedure

Before we collected the data, we approached and selected the children. Once the school management granted their permission, we observed children's activities at school, both in and outside class. Observation was intensively carried out by the interviewers

in KG, in order to be accepted by children. Observation and approach to the children were performed for about two weeks before we conducted the interviews. The selection of participants was based on the observation. We selected children who: 1) can actively engage in conversations; 2) use Indonesian in daily activities; and 3) are not having special needs; However, we also considered suggestion from the teachers. During the observation, the parental questionnaires were distributed to the parents. We also showed our the equipment (the voice recorder) the children, in order to make them familiar with it when they were interviewed.

In total, we have 57 selected children. From KG, there are 28 KG children involved, whereas from ES there 29 children. The age range of participants in KG group is 4;4–5;11 (M=4;10) whereas the ES group is 8;4–9;10 (M=8;9).

The selected children were interviewed individually. Each child had two sessions of interview, each conducted by a different interviewer. The interviews were constituted by formality, in which situations (formal and informal) and the styles of the interviewers (formal and casual) were distinguished. In formal situation, the interviewer used standard Bahasa Indonesia, whereas in the counterpart situation the other interviewer using Colloquial Jakarta Indonesian. In formal situation, the child was asked to tell their personal experience when they came to school for the first time. In the counterpart situation, s/he was asked to tell their experiences when they were sick. From both formal and informal interviews with 57 children, we have 114 conversations.

The interviews were recorded using SONY ICD-UX543F recorder upon the child's knowledge. The duration of the individual interview was between 3 to 5 minutes, including the practices of voice recordings. A token of appreciation was given to the child at the end of each session.

C. Stages in Data Analysis

Of the 57 questionnaires distributed to the selected children's parents, we received 52 files. The parents (of 5 children) who could not manage to return the questionnaires gave their permission personally, and information about children's demographic data were obtained through the teachers. Data from the questionnaires are put into data matrices, coded, and analyzed quantitatively.

For the data of children's utterances, we performed several stages of analysis. The recorded conversations were transcribed orthographically and formatted into txt files. The txt files, or the data corpora, are analysed in *AntConc* software, in order to examine the occurrences of personal pronouns *aku* and *saya*. In this stage, we also examine other forms related to self-references. From *AntConc* software we can also investigate the contexts through concordance analysis. Further we put the data into matrix using SPSS software, to examine two factors, namely age group (KG and ES) and situation. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed to examine how children use first-person pronouns in different situations. We compare the use between KG and ES, and between two situations, by analyzing the range of occurrence, and standard deviation.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is found that children use various forms to refer themselves when they are telling their own experiences. There are *aku*, *saya*, and proper names occur. Orvig and Morgenstern (2015:161) proposed that children begin to refer themselves by their specific social identity. In other word, children may use their names to refer themselves before producing first-person pronouns. The use of the proper name in children utterances may be influenced those around the children (Caët, 2013). Parents often address their children as the child's name to prevent the child call the interlocutor mistakenly. Children in this study can refer themselves with "other name". In this study, only four children used their names to refer themselves—of the four children, a child from KG group consistently uses her name to refer herself. The other three interchangeably used their name and pronouns to refer themselves in conversations.

We also find that some children do not mention anything to refer themselves in their utterances. The whole context shows that the absence of a proper name or personal pronoun also refers to the speaker, as in (1) below.

- (1) Interviewer : *Apa yang kamu lakukan di sekolah?* 'what are you doing at school?'
 Child : *Kenalan. Ø juga main bola.* 'getting to know each other. (I) also played ball'

Another finding is the use of clitic *-nya* as self-reference, attaching the verbs or adjectives resulting in "nominal-like" word. The word may follow *aku* or *saya* as well. See the following examples.

- (2) [...] *sebenarnya saya ragu-ragu. Takutnya nanti ada yang ngejek...* 'actually I was hesitant. I was afraid there would someone who make fun with it...'
 (3) *Aku sukanya gambar.* 'I like drawing.'

Sneddon (2006:34-36) finds that the use of *-nya* as pronouns is common in Colloquial Jakarta Indonesian. This is also the Indonesian variety that the children use daily.

This study investigates the use of pronouns. Therefore the occurrence of *aku* and *saya* becomes our main focus. In this section, we present the comparison between the use of *aku* and *saya* in formal and informal situation. We also make a comparison between KG's and ES's use of these pronouns.

Comparison between the use of *aku* and *saya* in overall observations (N=114) is presented in Table 1. The table presents the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) and the range of use (minimum and maximum).

TABLE I. COMPARISON BETWEEN AKU AND SAYA (M, SD, AND RANGE)

| <i>Saya</i> | | <i>Aku</i> | |
|-------------|------|------------|------|
| M | SD | M | SD |
| 0.10 | 0.46 | 4.06 | 5.40 |
| Min | Max | Min | Max |
| 0 | 4 | 0 | 28 |

Table I shows that on average children used *aku* (M=4.06, SD=5.40) more frequently than *saya* (M=0.10, SD=0.50). The Standard Deviation (SD) in both observed variables are higher than the mean, indicating that not all children use these pronouns. SD and range scores of the use are also matching, in terms that there are some children who do not use the pronouns at all, and others who use them in various numbers. The distribution is not equal either. The range use of *saya* is between 0 and 4, indicating that there are children who do not use this pronoun at all, and some who already use it. The range use of *aku* is even larger, between 0 and 28. It is similar to the indication that found in *saya*, in that there are children who do not use *aku* at all, and some who already use it. We find that there is a child who used *saya* for four times and another child who used *aku* for 28 times in their utterances.

Further, we examine the use of *saya* and *aku* in a formal and informal situation. In Table 2, we present the number of users of the pronouns, split up by situation.

TABLE II. COMPARISON USERS OF SAYA AND AKU SPLIT UP BY SITUATIONS

| | <i>saya</i> | | <i>aku</i> | |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | Formal (N=57) | Informal (N=57) | Formal (N=57) | Informal (N=57) |
| User | 4 | 3 | 34 | 37 |
| Zero-user | 53 | 54 | 23 | 20 |

Table II shows that the users of *saya* are slightly higher in formal situation, whereas *aku* is higher in the counterpart situation. However, it is also suggested that, for these children, formality is not a distinguishing factor for the user of the pronouns, as the scores in both situations are not extremely different. The table confirms that there are children who do not use the pronouns in both situations (see the zero-user). From the table we see that only a few children used *saya*, while *aku* has already used by many of them, even though, and surprisingly, there are still children who are not using the pronoun at all.

The previous finding suggests that *saya* is a “new” pronoun learned by these children. In other words, it is expected that the older the children are, the more familiar they are with *saya*. A further investigation is conducted to see the difference based on educational level

TABLE III. THE USE OF SAYA AND AKU SPLIT UP BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

| | <i>saya</i> | | <i>aku</i> | |
|----|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | KG (N=28) | ES (N=29) | KG (N=28) | ES (N=29) |
| M | 0.14 | 0.05 | 3.86 | 4.26 |
| SD | 0.59 | 0.29 | 6.19 | 4.55 |

KG=kindergarteners; ES=elementary school children

Table III shows that the mean score of *saya* is higher in KG than in ES, not as we expected before. However, the standard deviation is higher, indicating that there are high individual variations. Analysis of the users of this pronoun also confirms the finding. Meanwhile, the mean score of *aku* is higher in ES; the standard deviation is slightly higher, but it is indicated that the individual variations are not high. It is suggested that children in ES are already familiar with *aku*. The analysis of the number of users finds that there are children who do not use *aku* in our study.

In the Table 4, we present the mean scores and standard deviations of *saya* and *aku* based on the situation.

TABLE IV. THE USE OF SAYA AND AKU SPLIT UP BY SITUATIONS

| | <i>saya</i> | | <i>aku</i> | |
|----|-------------|----------|------------|----------|
| | Formal | Informal | Formal | Informal |
| M | 0.09 | 0.11 | 3.07 | 5.05 |
| SD | 0.34 | 0.56 | 4.46 | 6.08 |

It was expected that the use of *saya* increase in the formal situation. However, on the contrary, it is shown that the mean score of *saya* is higher in the counterpart situation. The finding suggests that *saya* is still learned by children in social situation. Meanwhile, as we expected, the use of *aku* is higher in the informal situation. The finding suggests that *aku* is already familiar in children's language, in terms of social use. Nevertheless, as the finding also indicates that not all children are not using *aku* and that some even used the pronouns in the formal situation, it is suggested that the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is still ongoing. In a bigger picture, it is indicated that children are still learning to establish their sociolinguistic competence, i.e. using Bahasa Indonesia and Colloquial Jakarta Indonesian in appropriate situation.

V. CONCLUSION

This is a study of children's sociolinguistic competence which examines children's ability to self-reference using Indonesian pronouns. This study aims to describe the use of *saya* and *aku* by kindergarteners (KG) and elementary school (ES) children in formal and informal situations. From the interviews, it is found that children can use various forms of self-reference, namely their name, *aku*, *saya*, and clitic *-nya*. As our focus is on the use of *aku* and *saya*, discussions are basically only on the two pronouns.

It is found that many children in this study are capable to use appropriate pronouns in the informal situation, namely *aku*. This is also the pronoun which is used frequently by these children. Meanwhile, children are still learning to use *saya*, given that the occurrence is very limited. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is still ongoing. Another finding that there were no marker when children were telling about themselves, indicating that these children are still developing their competence in using Indonesian—both Bahasa Indonesia and Colloquial Jakarta Indonesian in an appropriate situation.

This study may illustrate an overview of Indonesian children's ability to using first-person singular pronouns to refer themselves when they are telling about their personal experience. However, data in this study is very limited, and findings suggest an advanced investigations. A further study with more data and with the focus include other forms of self-reference, second- and third-person reference is recommended to have an overall picture of Indonesian-speaking children's acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.

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