SUNGKAN, A JAVANESE CULTURAL TRAIT AND THE WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK (WTS) AMONG JAVANESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This research was intended to examine if a Javanese cultural trait "*sungkan*" affects students' willingness to speak (WTS) in English. Questionnaires of closed and open-ended questions were distributed to obtain information around *sungkan* and its association with WTS from 12 lecturers (the group of seniors) and 15 college students of English (the group of juniors). The amount of *sungkan* and WTS in English in different speaking events was determined. The results, first, show that unlike the juniors, the seniors still dearly hold *sungkan*. When fronted with events that signified the importance of the practice of *sungkan*, the senior repondents outperformed the juniors in adhering to the cultural trait. Second, for both groups, *sungkan* proves to affect their WTS in L2 (English) especially with the seniors, the well-acquainted speaking partners, and the people of power. The more distant the status is, the more *sungkan* is observed and if less or no personal identification is detected, less *sungkan* is pronounced and the WTS in L2 (English) increases. In conclusion, the rate of *sungkan* correlates with the level of WTS among these Javanese learners of English.

Keywords: *sungkan*, Javanese cultural trait, L2 English, Willingness to Speak (WTS)

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is composed of hundreds of ethnicities, one of which is Javanese. Javanese people are those who speak the Javanese language and adhere to the Javanese way of life as dictated by the Javanese teachings. For instance, as a Javanese, one is taught to practice *isin* (shy), *wedi* (afraid), *tepa selira* (ability to put oneself in others' shoes), *ngajeni* (paying respect), and *sungkan* in life. These values must be reflected in the behavior of a good Javanese. These teachings dictate how a Javanese should behave especially in the way one has to control himself when speaking with others.

Regarding speaking, there has been a stereotype that Javanese are more silent as an impact of their adherence to their cultural values. Javanese values such as *sungkan* can make the adherent more careful when to speak.

A Javanese would apply a complicated code of communication, especially when speaking and this can make him end up in silence. By that value, a Javanese has to literally "watch their lips" when wanting to speak. This is imparted in the Javanese teaching, "*Ajining diri gumantung obahing lathi",* which means "The movement of the lips shows who you are". He must be highly alert that one inappropriate word even when it is unintentionally said may jeopardize the respect as a Javanese.

The cultural value when employed in the process of learning a new language may impede the development of especially the speaking competence. This may prevent one from doing "communication venturing". The learner may bear high speaking apprehension; they can be too conscious of what they are orally producing.

In fact, there are various generic reasons for the WTS in L2. Speaking in L2 requires certain conditions such as low anxiety, better communicative skills, and wider knowledge schemata as stated by Marzec-Stawiarska in Pawlak and Waniek-klimczak (2015:103). Besides, speaking apprehension can also be responsible for the low WTC as reported by Öz, Demirezen, and Pourfeiz (2015), Donovan and Macintyre (2004), and Croucher (2013).

Speaking apprehension may also be attributed to the speaker's cultural traits. This is because cultures can be facilitating when they help increase chances of, especially, face-to-face communication, and they may be debilitating when they prevent the bearers from expanding communication in a wider and freer mode.

Currently, research on culture and language learning commonly explores how cultural values as part of L1 or L2 are incorporated and learned along with the learning of the language skills or functions of the new language. This can be about multiculturalism in language teaching/learning, intercultural issues in language teaching/learning, cross-cultural understanding, teaching in multi-culture classes, how L1 (first language) learners of L2 would integrate themselves in L2 cultures, or about any other issues that deal with the interface between L1 and L2 cultures of the speakers in language teaching/learning. Those topics are not really about L1 culture that may inhibit L2 learning success.

The theory of acculturation as reported by Schumann in O'Malley and Chamot (1990), for instance, explains about the cultural affiliation of a learner and language acquisition. The closer the learners feel to the target language community, the better they will acculturate, and the more successful their L2 learning will be. Consequently, the more alienated they are from the community they perceive themselves to be, the less successful they will be. When learners feel less alienated to the L2 community, they should be more willing to communicate using the L2. In this regard, the integration of L2 culture is an important predictor of language learning success. Researching how L1 culture affects the levels of willingness to speak should be advantageous. Teachers can then be sure how this factor may impede or facilitate L2 learning.

Stern (1983:251) noted that culture is a distinct entity in which particular items of behavior are seen as part of a functional whole. One's behavior when in an interactional function may reflect his whole background culture. This is because every community exercises culture specific to their people that can be observed from their behaviors when functioning in their life one of which is when interacting using a language, to be more specific, when speaking.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, language within a social context can create, maintain, or even destroy social distance among the communicants. Socio-culturally, at a time, a language may serve as a means to maintain or to break social distance among the speakers (Wardhaugh, 2006:260). The language can include or exclude one's membership/identity within a certain community. Language and culture are inseparable to provide an impact on the social interaction in a community. It is understandable that a language can serve as a tool to affect social relations. The same should be true with cultural values that may affect the patterns of language use in its social functions.

Sungkan as one of the Javanese cultural values should also color the speakers' behaviors. Among the Javanese, *sungkan* is commonly manifested in that a Javanese shall not be too "forward", too "brash", or too "impatient" when, especially, speaking. A Javanese is told not to talk too loud, not to make a speech that may insult others even when unintentionally done, not to raise too many questions when in public, and to allow the elders to take the first turn in a talk and in other speaking events. In these instances, *sungkan* is commonly practiced.

Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia/KBBI (The Mother Indonesian Dictionary) defines *sungkan* as (1) *merasa tidak enak hati* (something like feeling uneasy or guilty when having to do something); and, (2) *menaruh hormat atau segan* (something like the need of paying respect towards others). No exact and complete English representation of the word *sungkan* is available. A succinct explanation about *sungkan* is provided by Geertz in Wierzbicka (1992). She wrote that *sungkan* "is something peculiarly Javanese". It is one of three Javanese words, *wedi* (something like afraid), *isin* (something like shy), and *sungkan*, which denotes three kinds of feeling felt to be appropriate to different settings that require respectful behavior. In practice, *wedi* and *isin* to some extent also color *sungkan.*

S*ungkan* has in it the blended feeling of *rikuh* (uneasy) as defined in Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Comprehensive Indonesian Dictionary) by the Department of Education of the Republic of Indonesia is the feeling of being awkward, unfitted, and *isin* (shy). This is a kind of feeling that arises in the presence of others when one senses something does not fit or not 100% fit the expected condition. For instance, *Ia agak rikuh menyilakan pak lurah duduk di tikar* (He felt uneasy/shy when he had to let the Village Chief sit on a *pandan* mattress). This sentence carries the message that Pak Lurah (the Village Chief) in fact should not be seated on a *pandan* mattress

but on a chair. This is because Pak Lurah is a respected individual that should be given a special treatment (seated on a chair not on a mattress). *Sungkan* carries all these values which are widely understood as good or positive practices to stick to. *Sungkan* can be the feeling of being uneasy because of one specific situation that calls for further self-restraint and for being more reserved while still watching the event. After all, for a well-put definition, *sungkan* must carry such attributes as:

● Feeling of being uneasy with the presence of others especially the seniors or the people of authorities. Seniors and people of authority must be given privileges when speaking.

● Self-restraint as not to get others offended even when unintentionally

● Carefulness in speaking to maintain one's *urmat* or *aji* (respect).

● Feeling *segan* (something like being bashful or unwilling for a positive intention) to keep harmony and to avoid being impolite

To maintain the principle of respect among the Javanese, Geertz in Wierzbicka (1992) stated that since childhood the Javanese have been given the education to behave *wedi*, *isin* and *sungkan. Wedi* means afraid and fear, both being afraid of physical threats and as a fear of the unfortunate consequences of an action if taken. The attitude of *isin* is close to the meaning of shy or something like shameful or bashful for being so self-conscious. So, *isin* can mean being shameful, shy, and something like guilty if s/he has to carry out an activity in certain conditions. Furthermore, to complement manners, Javanese are taught to exercise the value of *sungkan* that carries meaning like being uneasy, doubtful or hesitant positively meant to stay respectful and respected.

Sungkan for the Javanese is intended for positive relational practice. It can be the respect paid for an unknown boss, neighbors, and village leaders, as the subtle self-restraint of his own personality for the sake of respect for the presence of another person. The attitude of *sungkan* is always guarded by the Javanese to maintain respect and harmony. By keeping the principle of respect and harmony, a Javanese can be regarded as a person with a mature or highly graded Javanese personality.

All the Javanese terms above, in fact, begin with the concept of respect that can also be traced back to the meaning of *urmat* and *aji* among the Javanese.. These concepts are also hard to be translated (as also mentioned by Geertz) but sufficient enough to be described as "paying respect to someone because of the status of the person (*urmat*)" and "extending respect to the person because he is invaluable (*aji*)". "*Aji*" reflects not only material values in, for instance, gold; but also immaterial values in, for example, "Kris" (Javanese weapon) that is believed to carry spiritual power. Some Krises are believed to have supernatural power to heal diseases, for

instance. For this reason, Kris is also called *tosan aji* or metal (*tosan*) that carries power (*aji*). So, a Javanese is expected to carry with him this abstract supernatural aspect of *aji*.

As for *aji* in a spoken communication context, as already mentioned above, there is a pearl of very popular wisdom among the Javanese, "Your value or respect depends on the movement of your lips". Failing to comply with this value may result in a situation where nobody will *urmat/aji* (paying respect to) him. Embracing this cultural value is highly suggested for the Javanese people. S*ungkan* to maintain *aji* or respect may prevent ones from extensively interacting in especially verbal communication, for they must be highly alert not to "cross the line" for being too brash or too forward.

Language teaching and learning has emphasized the significance of cultivating communicative competence in second language (L2) learners as stated by Canale and Swain (1980). In addition, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach has been increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks Brown (2001:42) and these require some kind of "communication venturing" to make acquisition more successful. It signifies the postulation that learners' willingness "to talk in order to learn" (Skehan & Dornyei, 1989:602) is crucial to their language acquisition success. WTC in L2, one of which is WTS in the L2 must serve as a good predictor for learning success beside such areas as communicative competence, language anxiety, risk-taking, learners' beliefs, classroom climate, group cohesiveness, teacher support, classroom organization, and others.

Previous research findings have indicated that somehow cultures correlate with WTC levels. Commonly, the impact of culture on WTC would operate more as a cultural trait than a situation. Since it is more deeply rooted, a certain culture that does not support the need of ample communication practice may impede learning success. Weihua and Minghong (2004) found that university students from Guangzhou, China, are more willing to communicate than those from Hong Kong. The two possible different cultures should have carried an impact on WTC. MacIntyre (2003) stated that apart from the (1) learning context, learners' WTC using L2 is also attributable to such factors as (2) individual and (3) cultural. According to him, the three together are all important determinants of L2 use.

As for the individual trait factor, Croucher (2013) indicated that communication apprehension (CA) was a strong predictor of one's WTC. McCroskey (1977) wrote that CA is defined as an individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. A tendency to be anxious when communicating may be specific to only a few settings (e.g., public speaking) or may exist in most everyday communication situations, or may even be part of a general anxiety trait that arises in many facets of an individual's life. While talking is central to interpersonal communication, people differ in the

amount of talk in which they will choose to engage, of course, for different reasons or motives and this can be cultural.

A study by Croucher (2013) in France about the correlations between religious identity and individualism/collectivism communicative trait in France indicated that Moslems showed a higher level of CA and Catholics have a higher level of self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC). Additionally, high levels of collectivism were related to higher levels of communication apprehension (CA) and lover levels of SPCC and WTC.

Another work by Sim and Roger (2016) about culture, beliefs, and anxiety observe the effects of beliefs on learning among the Japanese who learn English. This study found out the thing that affects their anxiety is fear of making mistakes. Weihua & Minghong (2004) reported that university students from different places with different cultural backgrounds proved to carry different levels of WTC. It is indicative that their cultural traits were raising or impeding the learners' speaking inhibition. Research on WTC and Indonesian ethnical cultures has not been reported. Since WTC in L2 is believed to predict learning success of L2, WTS among the Javanese learners of English may also serve as a success/failure predictor that in turn it may promote or inhibit language learning results.

As a Javanese and a teacher of English, the researcher observed that when in class students with the Javanese background on average would not be as active as those coming from other regions of Indonesia. Cultural issues may be responsible for this phenomenon.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was then intended to find out if *sungkan*, a Javanese cultural trait, shows traces in the L2 learning especially in the willingness to speak (WTS) in L2 (English) among the Javanese students. It was to know if *sungkan* was still adhered and if it gave an impact on the WTS in the L2 of English.

RESEARCH METHOD

As many as 12 lecturers holding master degrees in language teaching and linguistics (Group 1) replied to the questionnaires. These lecturers were above 30 years old and all identified themselves as Javanese. As for the students, 24 respondents replied to the questionnaires and 15 of them identified themselves as Javanese (Group 2). These students were all about 20 years old.

The lecturers are Javanese and teach different languages: Javanese, Indonesian, French, and English. They all have got a long experience in English learning. As for the student respondents, they were college students of English in one English department of a university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Note that Yogyakarta is one of the centers of Javanese cultures.

Questionnaires with closed and open questions were used to tap their demographic information namely age, educational background, and cultural affiliation (ethnicities). Second, the respondents were fronted with questions about the amount of *sungkan* they experienced in various speaking events. The questions were about *sungkan* that they experienced in different speaking events/situations such as different ages (seniority), social status, modes of communication (direct vs. indirect), levels of familiarity with the speaking partner, and degrees of formality of speaking events. The data were analyzed to find out if certain communication setting (situation) carried impact on the amount of *sungkan* and levels of WTS both in their L1 and then in the L2 that they are learning.

Following are some sample questions in the questionnaires originally written in the Indonesian language.

Domain 1: Demographic questions:

● How old are you?

● What is your ethnicity?

Domain 2: Questions about their cultural identification, for instance: (on a scale of 1-10, score 1 for strongly disagree; 10 for strongly agree).

● Do you identify yourself to still hold *sungkan* culture dearly?

● (To crosscheck) In a banquet with a large family (grandparents, uncles, father / mother, children, grandchildren) who you are certainly familiar with each other, who should take the food first?

Domain 3: Questions about *sungkan* framed various communication settings, for instance: (on a scale of 1-10, score 1 for strongly disagree; 10 for strongly agree).

● With my students or classmates, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

● With my colleagues/friends, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

● With my professor, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

● With foreign people, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

● With the seniors, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

● With the juniors, I am comfortable speaking/foreign language practices (e.g. English).

To analyze, the data was then tabulated. First, it was grouped by ages. The analysis was carried out by comparing data from the age groups to find out if the two groups of juniors and

seniors carry different *sungkan* trends. Next, the data were compared to know the *sungkan* contexts that were more pronounced between the two groups. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires was confronted with that from the open questions. This was to know the data conformity or to determine the consistency of all answers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Analysis of Data from Group 1

All of the 12 lecturer respondents (100%) claimed that their cultural affiliation was Javanese. And when tested against a situation that required the application of *sungkan,* data shows that they are all still exercising this cultural trait in their daily life. All in short, they have fully learned the values and practiced them in their daily life to maintain themselves as good Javanese people. For instance, when they were fronted with a situation that called for *sungkan* in a less formal situation, "In a family gathering of grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, brothers/sisters, etc., who is supposed to pick up food/drinks first?" they all unanimously chose "the oldest". When they are faced with a more formal situation, "when in a meeting at the village hall, there are two persons, old and young, raising their hands to ask a question at the same time, who is supposed to be given the first chance?" They again unanimously said "the older". The data also show that the Javanese values seniority when speaking. In various settings, when asked who should speak first, they would first let the seniors talk, raise questions, and open dialogs.

And, when fronted with talking with different figures, the interlocutor's social distance or status determines the amount of *sungkan. Sungkan* is more pronounced with (1) professors, (2) parents, (3) people of authority, and (4) new neighbors. *Sungkan* is less detected when interacting with (1) friends and (2) siblings when to speak in their L1. However, when speaking English factored in, a different pattern is evident. They are *sungkan* to speak English with their professors, parents, and colleagues. They are not *sungkan* to speak English with their students and foreign people. When to have to choose with whom they find it more willing to speak English, with colleague teachers and foreign tourists, 66.7% of them would prefer to speak with foreign tourists.

And, when asked if they would feel shy (*isin,* one attribute of *sungkan*) when to practice speaking English with people of different ages (younger or older), they identified that they felt *isin* when to speak with the seniors. When to choose practicing English with "their students" or "their colleague teachers", most of them preferred "students". *Sungkan* is more pronounced when speaking with colleague lecturers but not with students. When to choose professors or their colleague lecturers, most of them would opt for colleagues to serve as their English speaking partners. They carry high *sungkan* when to speak with the seniors and with people of authority.

The Analysis of Data from Group 2

Respondents in Group 2 were mostly high school graduates (86.7%) and some were undergraduate degree holders. All these respondents identified themselves as Javanese. However, unlike those in the Group 1 (lecturers), only 73.3% (vs. 100%) reported that they surely still held the Javanese culture with 20% of them convincingly said that they no longer held the culture with 26.7% of them did not even know *rikuh* and *pakewuh.* However, they were still familiar with the word *sungkan* (86.7%) and 80% of them still practiced it.

Interestingly, similar with the data from the seniors, when asked if they would give the very first chance to the seniors to talk, to ask questions, and to give speech, most of them confirmed; they still practice the-senior-first honorific system. They would wait the seniors to speak first when in their communal meetings, for instance.

Similar with the findings from Group 1, the data also shows that the students also prefer talking to foreign people than to their friends (classmates) when to practice speaking English (54% vs.46%). They feel more comfortable when speaking with foreign people and they would avoid practicing speaking English with their teachers. They would enjoy speaking with their classmates than with their teachers. But data shows that their teachers feel more secure when to speak English with their students. They interestingly avoid speaking English with each other. This finding extends to when they have to choose speaking English with "lecturers" or "foreign people". This data shows a similar pattern as that found in Group 1. All respondents avoid **practicing English** with people they have known too well and foreign tourists are still more preferred. When these respondents were fronted with choices of "friends" or "foreign people", they would still choose "foreign people" (60%). This may be because they felt more secure when communicating with foreign people, those that would not criticize mistakes that these students might make and it would not jeopardize their values as a Javanese.

The open-ended questions provide information that confirms that *sungkan* is still widely exercised and it extended to speaking English. When asked "in what situation they are reluctant to practice speaking English" they wrote, among others are as follows:

1. *Ketika menjawab dan penanya merendahkan bahasa Inggris saya.-* When I answer and the person who asked the question underestimates my English.

2. *Dalam seminar/acara formal* – in a seminar/formal events.

3. *Di kantin, karena ramai dan banyak senior, kalau pakai bahasa inggris langsung di lihat* – In the canteen, when it is crowded with the seniors, that is when I use English they can directly observe me.

4. *Berada di dalam forum dan pasangan berbicara (atau lawan bicara) lebih memilih berbahasa lokal daripada asing* – In a forum, when the other speaker chooses local language than foreign language.

5. *Ketika berada dirumah* – When at home.

These respondents do not feel quite secure in the presence of the seniors, both in a formal event and at home. Especially when at home, they would not be willing (*sungkan*) to practice speaking English in the presence of the seniors (parents) and siblings. Similar with the data from the closed items, when asked about their ideal (secure) speaking partner, most of them wrote "foreign people" and among others are as follows.

1. *Berbicara dengan turis asing* –speaking with foreign tourists

2. *Seperti ketika melihat turis asing yang sedang kebinggungan dan ingin meminta tolong tapi turis tersebut binggung untuk menjelaskan apakah orang tersebut bisa berbicara bahasa inggris apa tidak, teman bicara yaa turis asing sih?*– Just like when finding a foreign tourist who got lost and asked for help but not sure if this tourist was not really able to speak English or not. I like foreign tourists to be a speaking partner.

3. *Saat bersama dengan orang dari luar negri* – when staying together with foreign people.

4. *Teman luar negeri via apa saja.* – Foreign friend, with all kinds of media.

These respondents feel secure with foreign people when to practice speaking English as opposed to doing it in front of people that they already know too well. In this regard, the degree of formality and anonymousness correlates with their WTS in L2. The less formal the setting and the higher anonymousness dictate the level of WTS in L2. The respondents would not speak English with those who are too well-acquainted with especially when in a formal communication event.

In terms of directness, a big number of the respondents of the two groups would avoid making direct communication with people of authority (e.g. Pak Camat/District Chief) and with their teachers or professors. The feeling of *segan* and *isin* occupies when having to speak with the people of authority. Data shows that the respondents would prefer to use indirect communication means to build communication. They would use indirect communication means such as texting to open communication with the authority than directly talking to him. This is indicative that these respondents exercise *segan* or *isin.* They may be *segan* if being misbehaved and consequently they exercise self-restraint to save their *urmat* and *aji.* They would practice *sungkan* or *pakewuh* by giving high privileges to the seniors and people of authority.

The next finding reveals that these Javanese respondents would prefer speaking English with people that they perceived to have a similar level of English proficiency. They might feel insecure when their lecturers and their professors notice mistakes that they may make when speaking English. *Isin* in making mistakes when speaking must be dearly held because violating

isin might jeopardize their level of *urmat* and *aji.* This is confirmed by the data that even their classmates are not their ideal speaking partners. They would opt for foreign people as their speaking partners of English.

CONCLUSION

The research reveals several new understandings. First, the social distance dictates the level of *sungkan. Sungkan* is highly observed when they have to speak with especially people of authority and people of higher social status (e.g. Pak Camat, teachers, and professors). Social distance dictates the level of *sungkan. Sungkan* is more pronounced when they feel that action of speaking (English) may jeopardize their dignity as a Javanese. They would exercise *isin* and *segan/ewuh-pakewuh* so as not to risk their *urmat* and *aji* (dignity).

Second, there are typical communication venues that *sungkan* is more pronounced among these Javanese respondents, both among the senior group members and the junior group members. The respondents would practice speaking English with 2 conditions: anonymousness and levels of formality.

Third, even though not significantly different, data shows that some juniors are beginning not to exercise the Javanese cultural traits anymore. While the seniors unanimously reported that they still exercise various Javanese cultural traits, the juniors get less concerned with the value. This can be because the number of Javanese speakers is getting smaller lately. They prefer using bahasa Indonesia and the teaching or the practice of the values may also be getting less concerned.

Fourth, data shows that most of the student respondents bring with them and exercise *sungkan* when doing English as well. Generally, they are less willing to talk to people of a higher social status, the seniors, those who are too familiar, and those in a formal events. They also refrain from talking too much in the public. However, the respondents who reported to no longer embrace the trait indicate to venture more in practicing speaking English regardless of their speaking partners. It suffices to note that the level of *sungkan* proves to affect the levels of WTS in L2 (English).

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