

# Environment Discourse and the 'Other': Implications from a Study in Indonesian Language Education

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## A B S T R A C T

In a study of student discourse in Indonesian language education the environment emerged as a significant topic of discussion. Analysis using the Postcolonial theory concepts of orientalism and ambivalence shows that environment discourse can function as a means of Othering. It can reflect the ambivalence and complexities of Orientalism and resist simple categorisation as positive or negative.

## Introduction

Environment education research shares some similarities with second language (L2) research. It has been dominated by the positivist paradigm (Robottom & Hart 1995) and is concerned to understand learner attitudes (Connell, Fein, Sykes & Yencken 1998). It has also represented attitudes as unproblematically positive or negative, or more or less favourable/positive/negative prior to and following pedagogical intervention (Clarke 1996, Bradley *et al.* 1999, Mantle-Bromley 1995, Robinson-Stuart & Nocon 1996, Nocon 1995). These findings reflect the parameters of a bivalent conceptual framework of attitude orientations which has been questioned since the 1950s through recognition of attitude ambivalence (Priester & Petty 1996, Cacioppo & Bernston 1994, Katz 1988). But beyond the currency of the cognitive models used to explore attitudes in both fields, a significant limitation upon attitude research may be the configuration of the problem. Rather than understanding negative environment attitudes as the product of individual cognition, they might be better explored as the product of participation in discourse (Fuller 2000, Gill 1999, Barron 1995, Macnaghten 1993). This paper argues through an analysis of learner discourse about Indonesians, that attitudes cannot unproblematically be represented as negative or positive. Postcolonial theory including Said's 'Orientalism' and Bhabha's 'ambivalence' informs this analysis which shows that 'attitudes' are ambivalent and reflect the dynamics of subjectivity.

### *Orientalism and ambivalence*

Orientalism is a 'Western' discourse about the Orient in which language is employed to represent the realities of East and West. It truths however, are not necessarily self-evident but the result of discourse procedures which describe, define, and delimit the emergence of other knowledges (Sherridan 1980, Kress 1985, p. 7). Its fundamental ontological premise is that the world is divided into two unequal halves; East and West (1978, p. 12). This premise is supported through an intertextual network of knowledges; political, scientific, economic and moral directed at the understanding, manipulation, incorporation and sometimes control of the East (Said 1978, p. 12). As a discourse, Orientalism is historic, social and inscribed by interest and power (Said 1978, p. 12, Kress 1993).

Power is inherent in the procedures of discourse and the consequences of the resulting constructing reality, while interest emerges from the motivating desire for mastery and control (Said 1978, p. 12). Like postcolonial theory generally (Ur-Rehman 1998) Orientalism is a concept not without its criticisms, significant among which is the validity of the realities which Orientalist discourse represents (Windschuttle 2000). Yet Said (1978, p. 12) has argued that its representations have less to do with the 'Orient' than the West (Said 1979, p12). In attempting to account for the realities of the East, Orientalism foregrounds and validates the narrative frameworks and ideologies employed to construct reality in the West. It is, therefore, also an exercise in identity through negative difference (Said 1978, p. 54), through which the East as Other becomes a negative portrait of the Self (Richards 1994).

Bhabha's (1994) notion of ambivalence is a response to Said's (1978, p. 206) observation of two separate forms of Orientalism. While Bhabha (1996, p. 47) recognises that the Black for example, could be both savage (cannibal) and yet the bearer of food, the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child, mystical, primitive, and yet manipulator of social forces, Bhabha accounts for the inconsistency through the logic of a modified Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic which is attentive to desire and power in colonial discourse. Although the model provides a psychoanalytic account of difference, it does not prioritise individual cognitive attitudes but offers an account of how discourse responds to contextual informants of desire. Representation is initiated by narcissism as the Self desires an original presence. But to do this it also requires the presence of an other. In this positive stage of representation the other has value through their ability to facilitate Self-identification. Yet the other reveals the existence of difference which problematises the initial desire. The response begins the negative phase of identify formation. Driven by desire, a resolution is sought through an aggressive movement which associates difference with the 'Other' and establishes the Self as the original referent. In colonial discourse, the dominant position of the Self is expressed through metaphor against which the Other is aggressively and metonymically positioned as part to the Self's whole (Bhabha 1994, 1996). But rejecting a positivist closure, the dialectic is not resolved through

synthesis. Consistent with the dynamics of subjectivity and the formative role of language in this (Weedon 1987, p. 21), colonial discourse continually responds to the play of power, desire and pleasure within the relationship's context (Bhabha 1994).

### Aims and objectives of the study

The study explored learner discourse about Indonesians in Indonesian language education. The results are intended to inform policy and practice in Indonesian language education through the recognition and negotiation of intellectual colonialism, but may have a broader application in humanities subjects. The significance of the study is reinforced by the social effects of contemporary globalisation in which non-isomorphic global flows; images, ideas, people, finance and technology challenge established representations of local and global space provoking ethnonationalist responses (Appadurai 1994).

### Method

#### Population

Data was collected from seven Year 6 (group. 1.) and four Year 9/10 language students (group. 2.) in Queensland.<sup>1</sup> Some in group 2. were in their fifth year of Indonesian. All were middle-class English speaking Anglomorphic-Australians, a demographic resulting from returned consent forms.

#### Procedure

As film can produce intense subject effects in the viewer such that the dominant narrative may be accepted or rejected (Shohat & Stam 1996), data was obtained from group discussion of three films<sup>2</sup> about Malaysia and Indonesia<sup>3</sup>: 1. *Into Darkest Borneo*, 2. *A Day In the Life of a Child In Bali*, and 3. *Mini Dragons: Indonesia*. Individual follow-up discussions were held with group 1. as was a final discussion without stimulus material. It was not intended that the students would reproduce the 'truths' or 'facts' contained in the films, but to draw upon their existing discursive frameworks through which they represented the content.

#### Analysis

The data was analysed using the techniques of critical discourse analysis (De Cillia *et al.* 1999, Van Dijk 1993) focusing upon discourse content and topics, strategies, linguistic forms of realisation and ideology. The analysis shows that a reference to nature enables the students to construct three representation of Indonesians which are broadly coherent yet ambivalent. They include 1. Indonesians as primitive, 2. Indonesians as environmental vandals and 3. Indonesians as excessive.

### Primitiveness and proximity to nature

Indonesian primitiveness is established through problematising their close relationship with nature. A number

of topics, particularly technology and time support the ideology of modernity which is used to establish this.

In the following extract the students discuss the Punan diet. Technology emerges as a means of articulating difference and unacceptability.

#### Technology

##### Extract 1 (Group 2) (Film 2)

Emily That, that's pretty gross.

Joanne I can't even eat Kangaroo.

LT What makes you think like that?

Joanne I don't know. I think its a bit.

Emily Cruel.

Joanne Cruel. Not really cruel, but like.

James How do you think the cows like it when we go out and kill them?

Joanne Yeah, but they breed them cows. We don't go and breed Kangaroos or snakes.

James Some people do.

LT So you think that's cruel to do that?

Emily Yes, cruel to do that to lizards

LT Why do you think that's cruel?

Joanne Well I don't know. Not cruel. I mean like, Kangaroos are like native to Australia right? And like cows, haven't they been imported?

...

Emily Well like did you see them chopping of the legs? That takes for ages.

Joanne Like, just say the cows, for example. They breed cows. They look after them. They make sure there are no diseases. But they just get them from the wild. They could be carrying any disease. Like the bones. The bacteria on the bones.

James That's why they boil it.

LT Going on with that theme of disease. I guess you were talking about the water?

All From the trees.

Joanne Because there's little grubs and that, that live in there. And like, if they walk across, they could actually fall into the water while they are sitting there drinking it, and it could have a coup of bugs in it. Really gross.

Both Emily and Joanne attempt to deligitimise the Punan diet. The diet is problematic because it is directly from nature, unprocessed and laden with risk. There is a possibility of disease and bacteria, the latter requiring modern technology and 'scientific' understanding to identify. The unacceptability of the diet is further articulated through the idea of animal cruelty, although James contests this. The implicit argument is that it is acceptable to eat animals if control or management has been exerted over their natural condition. This invalidates consuming wild animals. Unacceptability is also articulated

through the reference to the speed of the kill which appears to draw upon both animal rights and technology issues.

In the following extract the students discuss Balinese school children's methods for cleaning their school grounds. It raises issues of technology, labor conditions and freedom.

#### Extract 2 (group 1) (Film1)

Louise I was just going to agree with Jane. Because like, they should have cleaners in Indonesia. Because like we don't have to clean our toilets and that. So um, we can volunteer. And I don't know where they go to the toilet, if they have a real toilet. I'm not sure.

David Um, they have to cut the grass with their little blade things every morning, and that doesn't look really good.

LT Why not?

David Because you have to cut the grass. You have a lawn mower.

...

LT OK. So who do you think should do that job then?

David Um, some one else. Not the students. Because they don't get paid.

Peter It creates more jobs. Exactly, it creates more jobs.

The implicit assumption is that if students didn't use knives, an adult could be 'employed' to cut the grass. The students' understanding also appears framed by their location in a modern wage-labour industrial economy concerned with job creation and where 'children' do not 'work'. In 'our' economy, child labour is 'volunteering' which further associates technology with freedom.

#### Time

In the following extract the students discuss Punan life in the jungle. It shows how time is also used to read the relationship with nature.

#### Extract. 3 (Group 1) (Film 2)

David They need to acclimatise to the nineties.

Peter Yeah, their more to the seventies (others agree), not eighties.

David They haven't woken up to reality yet ... They don't have big cities.

Peter Yeah, because they've been living in the jungle. You know, they don't know technology, no nothing.

David Most of the people, like, live in the bushes and still do what they used to do for years and years.

Peter Traditional culture.

The lexicon includes several time words while alliteration 'years and years', reinforces the idea of timelessness. Time is associated with primitiveness for which the jungle is a spatial signifier. It is the past. It is not reality but a place where in contrast to the 'big cities' knowledge is absent. A solution is

offered. 'They' need to occupy 'our' time which is the present and use their environment in accordance with what the present signifies; big cities, technology.

#### Environmental incompetents

In contrast to the above representation in which proximity to nature is problematic, the roles are now reversed. Previously too close to nature, the Punan are now environmental incompetents, although this does not invalidate the ideology of modernity.

#### Managing Nature

The discussion below shows how the Punan use of the jungle is criticised, even where 'technological' initiatives are undertaken.

#### Extract 4 (Group 10) (Film 2)

Louise I didn't like how they were cutting down the trees [for a sleeping platform]. Like the snake could easily twirl around the stick and get on the bed anyway. And then its uncomfortable, and the ground would be better.

David But you'd get bitten by a snake and then you would die. Would you rather chop down the trees or die?

Louise Die. Well I don't know how they can carry all that equipment, and like also rip their nature type stuff.

...

LT What do you mean, ripping down nature?

Louise Like cutting down the trees and everything, so that a little snake doesn't bite you.

LT So do you think that was good or not?

Louise Its not.

This critique is based upon technological efficiency. The sleeping platforms are uncomfortable, unlikely to keep snakes away. The argument then focuses directly on the use of nature which the Punan might destroy. The lexicon suggests their activities are unknowledgable and indiscriminate. According to Louise, sleeping on the ground and death are preferable to using nature. But in contrast to extract (1), nature's danger is now insignificant as evidenced in the description of the snake, despite the sleeping platform's limitations.

A similar response to the Punan emerged in group. 2.

#### Extract 5 (Film 2)

Joanne Well as long as they don't destroy it, that's fine. That's the main concern at the moment.

LT Would you say that came up in the movie?

Joanne Well yeah. Its just that its all right for them to live in it, but as long as they, you know how they were cutting down the trees and the stuff like that. You know how they revegetate or whatever it is. If they can revegetate? ... As long as they revegetate their trees.



the cosmology of modernity is premised upon a belief in a universally valid temporal framework. (Laclau 1996) that can be used to read all cultures according to an anthropologically informed teleology of progress (McGrane 1989). The human-nature relationship of this ideology has been largely premised upon the relations of capitalist industrial production and consumption, and the application of epistemic science and technology to nature (Escobar 1999, Milton 1996, p. 192). These references emerged in the students discussion enabling them to construct a representation of the Indonesian world according to the logic of their own position for which modernity constitutes the dominate metaphor. Against this, Indonesians are positioned metonymically as part to the whole. The students first strategic response establishes the significance of this temporal framework's universal reading of space. Reiterating colonial arguments, the students emphasise the role of technology as the measure of 'man', progress and difference (Adas 1989). Science and industrial technology in particular are associated with a number of modernity's positive outcomes such as freedom from the risks of nature and laborious tasks (Kavita 1998, p. 320, Bauman 1993, p. 7).

#### *Modernity and environmental incompetents*

The response to the Punan although it appears to contradict the criteria for their representation as primitive emerges from within this ideology. It is premised upon an understanding in which nature and humanity are considered largely separate (Escobar 1999, p. 6, Sachs 1992, p. 34, Milton 1996, p. 192). This is suggested by Emily and Louise whose uncritical Deep

the 'scientific' knowledge of nature and modern methods of land management upon which 'unproductive' indigenous practices were criticised and the appropriation of their land justified (Kavita 1998). This orientation is evident even in the isolated argument by James which attempted to validate the Punan life-world. Despite his positive intentions (Fuller 2000), his failure to appreciate the Punan relationship with nature on its own terms repeats the group's failure to consider that the Punan might like other indigenous peoples regard the idea of managing nature absurd, or that the categories of 'human' and 'nature' may be irrelevant much less the possibility of human control (Escobar 1999, p. 9, Luke 1995). James cannot escape his group's discursive regime of truth. He implicitly reproduces the assumption that it is the West's right to manage all spaces for the benefit of humanity on the basis of a superior consciousness of nature which is denied to the Other despite their proximity (Luke 1995, Cowell 1999). For James the Punan are different. Not because they aren't, but because he has overlaid an interpretive framework upon their reality which elides the possibility.

#### **Accounting for ambivalence and the problem of modern Indonesia**

In the first response Indonesians are easily represented through the process of negative difference. Through the productivity of temporal splitting (Bhabha 1994, p. 83) the Punan are located in the past, in particular 'ours'. As opposed to the present which is modernity, the past is a time of constraints. Moreover, constrained by tradition the past is represented as

Indonesians will destroy it. This argument is unusual particularly as the Punan are icons in the fight to protect the jungle against 'progress' (Brosius 1999). It also reveals a reading of the film by both groups contrary to the dominant narrative and shows the influence which desire has upon the reception of 'facts'. In terms of the dialectic, the identification of Indonesians as incompetent environment managers validates the managerial world view of the students. As such, the metaphor framework of modernity continues to function unproblematically.

Establishing the Other in response to *Mini Dragons* is, however, more problematic. The students' dominant metaphor position is challenged by Indonesia's 'development' which returns the gaze, disturbing established relations of power. Indonesians cannot be easily disavowed as primitive which unsettles the students' claim to modernity. As Indonesia has the products of techno-industrial production, old frameworks for constructing the Other are no longer valid. This challenge to the students' narration of global time-space is synonymous with mimicry (Bhabha 1984, p. 238) and releases subordinated universal humanist reading modernity; all humans are the same, modernity is for all. It results, however, in an overtly aggressive response which is not unexpected when identity horizons are breached (Wood 1997). The response constructs a representation of Indonesians as excessive which facilitates their disqualification from the right to occupy modernity. This returns the collective Self to the centrality of this position as they define it.

This representation of excessiveness positions Indonesians as neither entirely modern nor primitive but more so as a stranger who in modernity has been confronted with violence (Bauman 1993). As a stranger, modern Indonesia is a world destroyer who brings the outside inside. It is both modern and traditional, like 'us' but different. A latecomer to 'our' modern time and space who retains the privilege of returning to the past. Its presence is potentially worse than that of the enemy for at least the enemy validates our classification of reality (Bauman 1993, pp. 55-61). Hasan the timber magnate represents the hybrid character of modern Indonesia which confounds the premises of 'our' modern subjectivity. His mimicry of 'our' reading of modernity appropriates it and reveals Indonesian mastery and 'our' particularity. What's more, this 'excessive' Indonesian claims a right to speak<sup>4</sup> and represent the space of the collective Self, making difficult the students objectification of Indonesians. The response to this even more clearly shows how the students environment discourse is implicated in the politics of subjectivity. Whereas it was argued that the Punan needed to move into the 1990s, this was perhaps only a means of establishing difference. It was pleasurable at the time in the context of the 'primitive' Other, but painful when it happened. Either way, the Indonesians were damned if they did and damned if they didn't.

### Implications

Firstly this analysis has shown that an environment discourse can facilitate the process of Othering. While the data was

obtained outside of environment education, this result questions the effectiveness of these learners experiences in environment education to date. Particularly in terms of the curriculum's provision of alternative discourses. Secondly, the analysis has shown that attitudes may be positive, negative and ambivalent. While ambivalence can be the product of enunciation (Bhabha 1994, p. 37) it has been argued that ambivalence in the students discursive response to the films also reflects the presence of desire in the process of subjectification. The students representations of Indonesians showed that attitudes are not set in concrete and cannot be unproblematically transferred across all contexts. They change in accordance with the politics of subjectivity and are informed by the presence of others who may have different understandings of space. Their discourse also showed how relatively positive representations can reflect the subject's dominant position in their Self-Other relationship. However, when the position's security is challenged, a more overtly aggressive and negative response can emerge and to this extent this discussion of the environment parallels contemporary movements in Anglomorphpic identity narratives (Kincheloe 1999). Consistent with this, the representations show that the process of Othering need not make overt references to race or the body as occurred with more biologically informed racisms. Through cultural racism (Giroux 1993) which this environment discourse appears to facilitate, this can be achieved through cultural and value references. As such, the absence<sup>5</sup> of reference to the body may reflect a discursive silence which is characteristic of the discourse of whiteness (Kincheloe 1999).

Negotiating these attitudes in the classroom may, however, benefit from a critical approach sensitive to the macro-context (Payne 1995, Fien 1992). In particular an approach informed by critical literacy strategies (Singh 1998) which attempt to step outside of positivist understandings of nature and the learner and proceed upon the basis that both are discursively constructed. Contemporary poststructuralist thinking in cultural studies which is slowly informing L2 education is not incompatible with this and may be of relevance. Significant amongst these strategies is the need to explore the subject's understandings of the topic whether positive, negative or indifferent as the basis of engagement. With this, practice may not be so much orientated towards the provision of the 'facts' which can be reinterpreted according to desire, but towards exploring and revealing how existing discursive frameworks inform subjectivity and ways of reading the world. This is not to say that the provision of more knowledge as facts is without value. Disputing the false causality in many Western critiques of the Other's environment problems and practices (Shiva 1993) remains a significant need. To this end, what may facilitate negotiating the problem of negative attitudes in environmental education as in second language education, is firstly moving beyond research methodologies which find attitudes to be unproblematically negative or positive. From this a range of critical post-positivist social theory frameworks that depart with established fictions about nature (Gough 1991) and foreground not only the ambivalence of subjectivity but provide an awareness of other frameworks for understanding

the 'human'-'nature' relationship might be considered. This may mean looking beyond the individual as the source of questionable understandings about the environment and focusing instead upon socially shared discourses. However, this post-positivist approach should not be orientated towards terminal change, but premised upon the liberation of other possibilities previously silenced and, understanding of the contextual informants of the learner's Self-Other relationships.



## Notes

- 1 In Queensland children in Year 6 are approximately 11 years of age. Those in Years 9 and 10 are 14 and 15 respectively.
- 2 The films were limited to about 15 minutes each. Overviews were provided.
- 3 The term 'Indonesian/s' is used throughout referring to Malay peoples generally.
- 4 Hasan spoke English and compared the red Australian landscape to Mars.
- 5 Limited references to the body were made during a discussion of immigration, reinforcing the connection between aggressive defence of space and identity.

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