

## ICONICITY IN JAVANESE

A. Effendi Kadarisman  
 Universitas Negeri Malang  
*effendi\_kadarisman@yahoo.com*

Iconicity stands in contrast with arbitrariness—the well-known Saussurean postulate stating that in principle there is no logical connection between form and meaning, or between signifier and signified constituting linguistic signs. In other words, iconicity is not only the opposite of arbitrariness but also an exception of the general rule. That is, referring to the lexicon of any language, most of the words are arbitrary and only a **very** small number of them are iconic.

Pursuing further, a closer examination of iconicity across languages would reveal that one language can be more iconic than another. In this regard, my own observation of introspective data in Javanese suggests that Javanese is a strongly iconic language. Many content words seem to have been derived from onomatopoeic words (known as *tembung wod* or “deepest-root” in traditional grammar), as can be seen in the two sets of illustrative examples presented in the table below.

A			B		
1	2	3	1	2	3
<b>Onomato poeia</b>	<b>Noun (concrete/ abstract)</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Onomato poeia</b>	<b>Adjective</b>	<b>Noun</b>
thik	thithik	nithik	kricik	kemricik	
thuk	thuthuk	nuthuk	krucuk	kemrucuk gembrojug	grujugan
thek	thethek	nethek	krecek	kemrecek	
thok	thothok dhodhog	nothok ndhodhog	krocok	kemrocok gembrojog	grojogan
thak	kethak	ngethak	kracak	kemracak gembrajag	

The onomatopoeic words in columns A1 and B1 suggest the sounds of “hitting a hard object” and “dripping water” respectively. The vocalic move from [i] through [a] **in the onomatopoeic words in both columns** suggests the move from smallness to bigness and/or from softness to loudness. The nouns and verbs in Columns A2 and 3 are derived from the “deepest roots” in A1; and the verbs and nouns in columns B2 and 3 are derived from the “deepest roots” in B1. Notice also the move from [-voice] to [+voice]: <th> → <dh> in A and <k(\_m)r\_c\_k> → <g(\_mb)r\_j\_g> in B—the former **suggesting smallness and the latter suggesting bigness**.

These two sets of examples are selected out of many other sets of iconic words in Javanese. Interestingly, following the above “iconic pattern”, several cultural maxims in Javanese are expressed this way. Here are three maxims selected out of many as illustrative examples: *asah—asih—asuh* (in Education, meaning “training—love—care”); *rarah—riri—ruruh* (for the “ideal woman”, meaning “careful—tender—humble”); and *metu—mantu—mati* (description of one’s “life cycle”, meaning “hatch—match—detach” [Pemberton 1994]).

In classical Javanese literature, known locally as *tembang* or “sung poetry”, iconicity shows up in excessive use of alliteration, particularly obvious in the literary works by Pakubuwana IV, Ranggawarsita, and Mangkunagara IV. In verbal art, most notably in *wayang* or shadow-play performance, alliteration together with internal rhyme looks dominant in *janturan* or “poetic description” of a place, a person, or a situation—outer-physical as well as internal-psychological.

Briefly, iconicity in Javanese shows up prominently in both everyday and literary use of the language. If this phenomenon of iconicity seems to have been disappearing in many parts of Central

and East Java, it is because of the drastic decrease of linguistic and communicative competence among younger members of today's Javanese speech community.