

Variation in Indonesian sign language

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This paper considers lexical and morphosyntactic variation in Indonesian sign language. Findings are presented from the first part of a contrastive analysis of the sign language varieties used by deaf communities in two optimally-distinct locations in Indonesia.

Since the work of Tervoort (1953) and Stokoe (1960), the attention that has been given to the sign languages used by deaf people has grown exponentially. Sign languages are natural languages that exploit the visual-gestural modality, rather than the auditory-vocal, and 50 years of research has shown that, like spoken languages, signed languages can be described on different levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic etc.) sharing conventional vocabularies, duality of patterning, productivity, syntactic structure, and similar timetables of acquisition (Meier et al., 2002).

The number of sign language users in Indonesia is not known, though the Dinas Kesehatan (Indonesian Health Ministry) estimates that there are up to 600.000 deaf children in Indonesia (Wright, 1994; this figure does not include deaf adults). Not all deaf people use sign language, but sign languages usually develop where a number of deaf people can congregate (Senghas et al., 2008), and there are sign language communities in many if not all major urban centres across Indonesia. In recent years, the growth and continuation of sign language communities has been influenced by the Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) – schools that accept deaf children – and by Deaf organisations.

There has been no research so far into the nature and extent of variation in the sign language used by different deaf communities. Given the archipelagic nature of Indonesia, regular interaction with deaf people from other urban centres was not possible in the past. Where communities of language users are spread over a wide geographical area without regular contact, it is reasonable to hypothesise that there is both lexical and morphosyntactic variation in the sign language varieties used in Indonesia. However, with increasing mobility and more access to information and communication technology, such as 3G phones, it is likely that the sign language varieties used by younger generations of deaf people are converging.

So far, a corpus comprising 19 hours of data has been generated for the sign language variety used in Solo, Central Java. Short video clips from the corpus will be shown to illustrate the points that are made in the presentation. For example, a brief survey of the data has identified a number of categories for negation, and these categories differ in the way they employ manual and non-manual components (see (1)-(4) below for examples).¹

¹ Sign languages have both manual and non-manual articulators which can be used simultaneously. For an excellent typological overview of negation strategies across 37 different sign languages, see Zeshan (2006).

(1) Simultaneous use of a negative *non-manual* marker (a head shake) to negate a lexeme or clause that is expressed manually:

non-manual:	<u>hs</u>
manual:	DIA AKU RINDU
translation:	'Aku tidak rindu dia.' 'I don't miss her/him.'

(2) Simultaneous use of a *manual* negative particle to negate a lexeme that is expressed non-manually, using mouthing:

non-manual:	<u>"tahu"</u>
manual:	AKU NEG.
translation:	'Aku tidak tahu.' 'I don't know.'

(3) Sequential use of a manual negative particle to negate the lexeme or clause that precedes it:

manual:	AKU ITU LIHAT NEG.
translation:	'Aku tidak lihat hal itu.' 'I haven't seen it.'

(4) Negative suppletion, whereby the negative form as a whole is different from its positive counterpart:

manual:	ITU TIDAK-MUNGKIN
translation:	'Itu tidak mungkin.' 'It is not possible.'

It is not yet known whether these same categories will be found in the second, comparable variety or not. However, while the data that has already been collected displays a lot of lexical variation, such as various number systems originating from different SLBs, signers appear to use similar morphosyntactic structures. Extrapolating these findings to the broader Indonesian context, it is therefore hypothesised that content lexemes will exhibit a higher degree of regional variation than function signs.

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