Particles and intonation: the expression of information structure in Manado Malay

Language description is more than phonology, morphology, and syntax: linguistics is also the study of intonation and information structure. In most Asian languages, however, they remain largely unexplored territory. For Manado Malay, a first move has been made to chart this terrain with an investigation of how focus is expressed in sentences.

Ruben Stoel

Manado Malay is the variety of Malay spoken in Manado and elsewhere in the northern part of Sulawesi. It is closely related to standard Indonesian, but the two languages are not mutually intelligible, owing to differences in grammar and the lexicon. For example, Manado Malay has many loanwords from Dutch and Tentare that are not used in Indonesian. One of the most striking characteristics of this language is the frequent use of discourse particles.

Discourse particles are words that add an extra dimension to the sentence by expressing the attitude of the speaker. Take, for example, the sentence ‘Vence doing?’ and then the focus would be on ‘Vence doing?’ If the focus determines their position? One sentence depends on the focus of that sentence, and thus, determines their position? One sentence depends on the focus of that sentence. Focus in Manado Malay indicates which means ‘it is about to rain’. By adding a discourse particle, several nuances may emerge, as in the following examples:

so ma ujang sto ‘it is probably going to rain’
so ma ujang no ‘it is definitely going to rain’
so ma ujang kata ‘someone said it is going to rain’
so ma ujang kote ‘I sense that it is going to rain (I felt the first raindrops)’
so ma ujang le ‘and now it is even going to rain!’
so ma ujang kwa ‘but it is going to rain!’
so ma ujang komang ‘once again it is going to rain’
so ma ujang so ‘it is really going to rain?’
so ma ujang kag ‘it is going to rain, isn’t it?’
so ma ujang to ‘it is going to rain, as you may know’
so ma ujang dang ‘in short, it is going to rain’

Every sentence is divided into a number of prosodic phrases, each ending with an edge tone. The last edge tone of the sentence is a low tone, while the other edge tones are high tones. Thus there are two types of high tones: those that mark focus and those that mark a prosodic boundary. The two tone types are easy to distinguish from one another - a high-tone accent is followed by a fall on the same word, while a high-edge-tone is followed by a fall on the next word.

An accent tells the listener what the focus of the prosodic phrases, each ending with an edge tone. The last edge tone of the sentence is a low tone, while the other edge tones are high tones. Thus there are two types of high tones: those that mark focus and those that mark a prosodic boundary. The two tone types are easy to distinguish from one another - a high-tone accent is followed by a fall on the same word, while a high-edge-tone is followed by a fall on the next word.

An accent tells the listener what the focus of the sentence is. For example, an accent on Utu in the sentence ‘Utu da ciong pa Ola no’ puts Utu in focus, and thus tells the listener that it was Utu, and not somebody else, who kissed Ola. On the other hand, an accent on Ola puts focus on Ola, thus indicating that the girl that was kissed by Utu is Ola, rather than some other girl.

There are thus several devices in Manado Malay that indicate what the focus of a sentence is, including the sentence accent and the discourse particle no, yet intonation and discourse particles have other important functions which are worth studying. Intonation can signal the distinction between a statement and a question, as well as several more specialized functions. It is possible that there is some dialectal variation in the intonation of Manado Malay, as there are many second-language speakers, but this is a topic that has not yet been explored. In the near future the intonational system of Manado Malay will be compared first of all with that of other varieties of Malay, to find out if, and how, intonation is used to express information structure in these closely-related languages.

Reference

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Research

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