

# Relevance of Vernacular in the Contemporary World: Use of Vernacular Languages in the Presidential Debates in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Language is the main instrument in the political communications in elections around the world. It has become equally important in the last Indonesian presidential candidate debate. The linguistic aspects of the construction of debates that discuss various themes regarding existential problems in the Indonesian republic has far-reaching consequences. In them, the numerous ethnic groups in Indonesia must be accommodated as much as possible in order to guarantee a sense of national unity. In the contemporary Indonesian political discourse, the sense of national unity is torn apart as a result of Papua being still turbulent with some people trying to separate themselves. In this context, the employment of regional languages in the presidential debate contributes to manifest the politics of language into a reflection of the presidential candidates' ability in recognizing the languages of all the vernacular ethnic groups. This research examines the use of vernacular languages in the presidential debates in Indonesia.

The research employs descriptive qualitative research methods. Data source is the recorded text of the 2024 presidential candidate debates obtained from the TV broadcasts. Data collection involved 'listening' and note-taking as the techniques. The data analysis technique employed Norman Fairclough's critical discourse theory. The analysis examined the text as a construction of social identity, social relations, and meaning.

The results show that in this debate, there has been a strong emphasis on the recognition of social identity of the people of Indonesia. The three regional languages used by the presidential candidate Anies Baswedan in the debate reflect these identities of different ethnic groups: Java, Sunda and Maluku. what Anies highlighted was his efforts to bring about interactions among the ethnic groups. He argued that they must interact with each other to produce Indonesia as a unified nation. Anies has employed the languages to articulate philosophical meanings related to the struggle, nobility, consistency, honesty, wisdom and femininity.

**Keywords:** Vernacular, Languages, Presidential, Debates, Indonesia.

## Introduction

Language and democracy are inseparable entities. In the political processes it is more so. Both fulfil a relationship that places the position of instrument and message. Language is an instrument to convey political messages from the political actors to the wider community who will later become the constituents. Democracy must be processed into political messages when the democratic process is to be carried out to fulfil the provisions of the law regarding political recruitment in Indonesia.

The presidential election process as a means of celebrating democracy cannot be separated from campaigns to gain national attention. One form of campaign between the three presidential candidates in Indonesia is the presidential and the vice-presidential debates. Debate is a discussion and exchange of ideas about a matter in which people give each other reasons to defend their views. Indeed, it is one of the campaign tools that plays a very important role for the presidential and vice-presidential candidates in communicating their visions and missions to the public. The voice, vision, and mission of each candidate are conveyed through language as a whole

As Afrianti et al. (2024) point out, the argument is a discourse. In the discourse, the use of languages in the national debate has been regulated by specific regulations. However, in debating the vision and mission of the 2024 presidential candidates of the Republic of Indonesia, elements of regional languages were used by one of the presidential candidates. This use of regional languages from three ethnic groups has far-reaching consequences, given the fact that Indonesia consists of thousands of ethnic groups who have their own languages with specific philosophical meanings.

The contents of the presidential debate is an interesting text to be studied critically, given that the debate is the view of a prospective national leader. These views will determine the direction of policy pursued later if elected as the president. Contemporary issues become narratives broadcasted to all corners of Indonesia where the audience holds their respective minds. The mindset influenced by the perceptions and responses to political communication is something awaited by the presidential candidates in connection with the quality of thought or discourse disseminated regarding objective thinking as a basis for policy.

Discourse plays a significant role in shaping a person's political image. Discourse, to borrow Michel Foucault's definition, is closely related to power. Power in Foucault's perspective is not power in the form of positions, but information and knowledge intertwined in every relationship or interaction between people (De George, 1969). Discourse is spread by certain groups not only to disseminate information, but also to spread political power and lead public opinions. In the case of the discourse on the rejection of the U-20 football team, there is a deliberately built opinion to improve or worsen the image of a political figure, and that is what is being played out. In fact, that is what is being played out by the opposition groups against Ganjar Pranowo too (Aminulloh & Fianto, 2023).

This research examines the issue of the discourse of the Indonesian presidential candidate debate. This discourse has been examined within the framework of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as a tool or analytical knife that is considered compatible with the discourses developed in the debate. The discussion reveals one of the three key aspects developed in critical discourse analysis theory, namely the text in its connectivity with empirical socio-cultural reality (Fairclough, 2017).

The research examines the words derived from the regional languages in details used by the presidential candidate Anies Baswedan in the vision and mission debate broadcast nationally. Anies used three languages in his political speech. Its aim is to explore the phenomenon of regional vernacular languages in the national official events of Indonesia.

## Theoretical Framework

Throughout the world, there are hundreds of vernacular languages. Even within one country, there are likely to be more vernacular languages than what people can imagine. In the former Soviet Union, for example, about a hundred vernacular languages have been spoken. In Papua New Guinea, there are over 700 different vernacular languages, of which Buang is a

typical instance. Many of these vernacular languages have never been written down or described. In a multi-lingual speech community, many different groups may use many different ethnic or tribal languages,. These different ethnic or tribal languages are referred to as vernacular languages. Vernacular languages are usually the first languages learned by people in these multilingual communities, and they are often used for a relatively narrow range of informal functions (Ming, 2020).

Fairclough (2017) defines discourse in three different ways. First, in the most abstract sense, discourse is understood as the use of language as a social practice. Second, discourse is defined as a type of language used in a particular field, such as political discourse, scientific discourse, and others. Third, in the most concrete sense, discourse is used to designate a way of speaking that gives meaning to the experiences of certain perspectives, such as feminist discourse, Marxist discourse, neoliberal discourse, and so on (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2012).

The dialectic between social structure and discourse or social practice is an important point in the construction of critical discourse analysis. Indeed, it becomes an important point in the construction of critical discourse analysis. Social practice, according to him, is not merely a reflection of reality and is independent, but is always in a dialectical and active relationship with reality and can even transform it. Vice versa, reality can influence and shape social practices. The implication is that social structure as part of reality is also dialectically related to discourse or social practice (Munfarida, 2014).

### **Discourse**

Discourses also shape subjectivity by defining the body, mind, and life of the subject. Judith Butler (2004) states that regulatory power not only acts on the subject but also seeks to mould the subject. That is, being a subject of regulation means being subjective by the regulation and at the same time, being a regulated subject (Butler, 2004). Fairclough considers the analysis of the text alone as developed by linguists to be insufficient, because it cannot reveal further and deeper the socio-cultural conditions behind the emergence of the text. Likewise, this view also critic post-structuralists who emphasize the socio-cultural aspects of the emergence of texts without providing an adequate methodology for the analysis of texts which are essentially representations and articulations of the thoughts, interests and ideologies attached to the text. Furthermore, discourse, according to Fairclough, plays a role in the construction of social identities, social relations, and ideologies. That is construction of social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning. Therefore, discourse has three functions: identity function, relational function, and ideational function.

Fairclough's understanding of ideology embedded in discursive practices is heavily influenced by the views of John Thompson who considers ideology as a practice that exists in every process of meaning- production orientated to maintain power relations. This is also in line with the views of other Marxist intellectuals, such as Althusser and Gramsci, who see the significance of meaning production in everyday life in maintaining the status quo. However, in contrast to Althusser who emphasized the constitutive aspect of ideology that makes the subject interpellated, Gramsci's view of the production of meaning is different (Althusser, 1970).

### **Ideology**

When the sign is unstable, it is possible to see the workings of ideology. Ideology is at its most powerful when it is invisible, when discourses have been naturalized and have become part of our everyday common sense. This is what results in writers using a discourse of paternalism unconsciously, because it is available. By being there, it and the other available discourses constitute our identities and our constructions of the world. In a time of change, new discourses become available offering us new subject positions from which to speak and read the world. The conditions of text-production and text-reception are gradually transformed (Janks, 2020).

Fairclough (2017) emphasizes the agency of the subject so that social transformation emerges. Ideological battles, according to him, are precisely one dimension of discursive practices to reshape existing ideologies and discursive practices in order to restructure and

transform relations of domination. The existence of ideology is latent, operating behind discourse and social discursive practices. Precisely because it is latent, ideology has great potential to influence and shape subjects' views in interpreting reality and directing their social practices. Furthermore, because it is embedded in discursive practices, ideology can become more effective if its existence is naturalised so that it becomes common sense and is accepted by society as a truth (Fairclough, 2017).

A number of regional languages exist in the republic of Indonesia. When the use of regional languages in the national arena is widely broadcast, there are many ramifications. This study used theories of language constituted of words and meanings associated with the recent socio-political conditions related to the rapid democracy debates in Indonesia. In this research the words and the theory of discourse analysis are considered appropriate as a guidance to deeply explore the making of national discussions and decisions.

## Research Methods

This research employed critical discourse analysis with a critical paradigm. In critical discourse analysis (CDA), discourse is not understood merely as a study of language. In fact, language is analyzed not by describing only from the linguistic aspects, but also connecting with the context.

Context here means that language is used for certain purposes and practices, including the practice of power. This study employed descriptive research with a qualitative approach (Hantono et al., 2018). Therefore, data is taken and identified in the following order: (1) data collection (2) data sorting (3) data analysis (4) conclusions making. As for data analysis, there is a predetermined sequence in accordance with the steps taken, namely as follows: (1) Examination of data (2) suspected data findings, (3) Data confirmation (4) Diagnosis, (5) Action (Grieshaber, 2020).

Data source is the recorded text of the 2024 presidential candidate debates obtained from the TV broadcasts. Data collection involved 'listening' and note-taking as the techniques. The data analysis technique employed Norman Fairclough's critical discourse theory. The analysis examined the text as a construction of social identity, social relations, and meaning.

## Findings

### Vernacular Languages in the Debates : The Javanese Philosophy

Debates are public spaces to disseminate the big ideas of the national leaders. In this context, the presidential candidates become political actors who will give political messages about how they will take the nation into the future. The delivery of this message of course uses tools, one of which is language.

In the midst of the diversity of the country's population, the problem of thought dissemination must certainly be coupled with a language that unites understanding of the political messages conveyed by political actors or presidential candidates. By regulation, the debate organized by the General Election Commission of the Republic of Indonesia must use the Indonesian language. Thus, the reality of political communication produced through the debate is interesting, in terms of the use of employing vernacular languages, namely Javanese. It was said:

“We see so many people have the principle of **‘sopo wani rekoso, bakal gayuh mulyo’** (Baswedan,2024). (Its meaning is as follows:) Whoever is serious in his endeavours will achieve glory. But if the opportunity is there, if the opportunity is not there, it results in frustration,”

The bolded words in the quote above are Javanese, the mother tongue of the Javanese people who geographically inhabit central and Eastern Java. The language can be interpreted within the framework of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. In this analysis, we will discuss three perspectives: social identity, social relations and deep meaning.

### Social Identity

The first is social identity. What presidential candidate Anies said is a reflection of social identity that the language is the mother tongue of the Javanese tribe. In this context, Anies wants to show that he can understand Javanese which also reflects the breadth of his language skills. The statement means that if a person has the courage to work hard without getting tired, that person will get positive consequences. Positive consequences mean that people who work hard will get success, happiness and positive and constructive results.

It implies that the presidential candidate has an 'emotional resonance' with the social identity of the people. It reflects that the presidential candidate Anies is able to identify the language of his citizens. This shows the ability of the presidential candidate in disseminating the social identity of the tribe that is part of the shade of the country. This is because language is the social identity of a particular group, a tribe or a nation (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2010).



**Fig. 1:** The Javanese tribe  
Source: <https://mamikos.com>

### Social Relations

Second is the perspective of social relations. In this perspective, one thing that stands out is that the presidential candidate Anies realizes that language reflects strong social relations. When it is used as a communication message, what appears is that language fulfils its duties as an important means of social relations. It is known that the people belonging to the Javanese tribe exists in almost all cities or islands in Indonesia. Undeniably, as Alek (2021) points out, one of the social relations is built from the interactions between the mother tongues of the tribes (Alek, 2021).

### Meanings

Third is deep meanings. The expression of Anies is actually related to a Javanese philosophy that provides guidance for all of us in achieving happiness and success in the face of resilience, enthusiasm, and hard work and sufficient patience. There is no possibility that success is achieved easily; indeed, as Martinez del Castillo (2015) points out, there are always challenges that are natural to test the endurance and persistence of people in realizing their dreams in the future.

### Sundanese Vernacular Wisdom: Words and Actions

One of the regional languages used by the presidential candidates in debates, apart from Javanese, is Sundanese. This tribe occupies the Western part of the Java Island included in the province of West Java. This language is different from Javanese although there are similarities in terms of only a few terms. In his speech, Anies said the following:



“...I will use a Sundanese term, which relates to the principle of consistency between words and deeds when given a mandate. And when we carry out our mandate, we will uphold the principle of ‘**ngadeg sacekna nila saplasna**’ (meaning) consistency of words and deeds upholding honesty and wisdom.”

Baswedan,2024

The presidential candidate Anies uses the Sundanese language in this discourse as a moral foundation and a basis for action when becoming a leader of the country. As has been applied in the analysis of the use of Javanese above, the analysis of the presidential candidate's speech in Sundanese begins by looking at language as an expression of social identity.

### Social Identity

Firstly, as social identity, the Sundanese language used by Anies Baswedan shows that Sundanese people have their own mother tongue. For Anies, his political communication is a brand for himself: it shows how important it is for a pluralistic candidate to be a national leader to know the languages of his constituents. The hope is that the ethos in the Sundanese language will provide identity of the Sundanese community in general and it will be imitated by prospective national leaders as a provision for running the government in the future.



**Fig 2:** Sundanese playing anglung, a traditional Sundanese musical instrument  
Source : <https://mamikos.com>

### Social Relations

Second is language as a medium of social relations. In this discourse, Sundanese is a vehicle compatible with the need to establish social relations with the Sundanese people as potential voters in the upcoming general election. By mastering or at least understanding even a little about the Sundanese language will definitely increase the chances of being elected in the West Java electoral district. It implies that the transfer of Sundanese values should be part of the pattern of interaction in the society. The formation of character values must be supported by the creation of an atmosphere in line with the character to be developed (Parhan, 2021). There is a kind of emotional connection cultivated so that it becomes a positive sentiment to organize people's ideas by voting for the candidate Anies Baswedan.

### Meaning

Then there are the deepest meanings in language. In the context of the language used by Anies, there is a universal value that speech must be congruent with actions. This is a kind

of personal declaration in front of the Sundanese people in particular and the people or prospective constituents in general to see that Anies is a presidential candidate who displays congruence between what is said and what is done carefully.

## Conclusion

Political communication in an effort to create a personal image using a language approach as its own power in bringing the emotions of the constituents closer. Language is understood to be a medium for creating personal or group identity and creating social relations that can be used by the user for strategic interests needed. Thus, the local language, or the mother tongue becomes a significant medium for political communicators to make their communication effective.

Given these interpretations, this research concludes the following:

1. From the social identity dimension, the three regional languages used by the presidential candidate Anies Baswedan in the debate reflect the identity of ethnic groups in Indonesia, namely Java, Sunda and Maluku.
2. From the dimension of social relations, what Anies said was his effort to show that ethnic groups must interact with each other as a unified nation.

From the dimension of meaning, the words uttered by Anies has a deep philosophical meanings related to the struggle, nobility, consistency, honesty, wisdom and femininity. These are values shared by all the three communities expressed through the three vernacular languages. This research shows conclusively that even in the modern world, vernacular has a significant role to play. In this instance, it is the vernacular languages and that is an indication that the presidential candidate has the ability to understand the nuances of the variety of vernacular cultures of the communities to whom he is offering leadership and vision to bring about the much needed unity in Indonesia.

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