17. The Rotenese sermon as a linguistic performance

The increasing use of Rotenese and the special use of Rotenese ritual language to convey the knowledge of Christianity have led to the creation of hybrid forms of linguistic performance where Rotenese is combined with Malay. A prime occasion for this linguistic virtuosity is the sermon.

The sermon or *chotbah* is a form of elevated speech that occurs in a well-defined context for an audience who, though largely silent, is attentive to the stylistic nuances of the performance. It is supposed to be provocative, persuasive and exhortatory. It invariably derives its inspiration from a scriptural theme that serves as its source and it is thus frequently interspersed with references to other exemplary linguistic forms that require commentary and explanation.

In an Austronesian context, as its name implies, the *chotbah* is a derived, rather than a traditional, speech form. In Islamic and Christian regions of Indonesia, the *chotbah* has now become a highly valued form of speaking worthy of careful comparative examination.

In this chapter, I wish to examine briefly the Rotenese *chotbah* as a linguistic performance. Because of the variety of linguistic resources on which it draws, the *chotbah* can be considered one of the most complex forms of speaking among Rotenese today. For this reason, and because there is considerable variation in their performance, *chotbah* cannot be described simply or briefly. Furthermore, a *chotbah* is merely the high point of a religious service and to be fully comprehended must be considered in this wider context. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall therefore concentrate my analysis and draw my examples from a single performance. This is a performance that was filmed and recorded in its entirety during a period of ethnographic film research on the island of Rote in 1978. Although I shall be focusing on the verbal aspects of this performance, a fuller analysis will eventually include examination of crucial nonverbal aspects as well.

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The linguistic situation: Resources for the performance

Most Rotenese are conversant in two languages: Rotenese and Malay. This, in itself, is not of great significance. What are significant are the various registers of these two languages that are utilised in speaking. In both languages, there are ‘high’ and ‘low’ registers, and their use parallels one another.

Figure 17.1: Esau Pono preaching in the GMIT Church in Nggodi Meda

The Rotenese language refers not to a single undifferentiated language but to a number of related dialects. The Dutch linguist J. C. G. Jonker, in his dictionary (1908:ix–x), distinguished nine dialects of Rotenese but failed to take account of the dialect of Delha on which he had no information. A list of 10 dialects, however, would not do justice to the sociolinguistic reality on the island, for the Rotenese themselves invariably insist that each of the 18 former political domains (nusak) possesses its own dialect (dede’a nusak). The evidence cited for this claim derives from a conglomeration of phonological, grammatical and semantic differences between neighbouring domains, yet it is clear that since the mid-seventeenth century speakers of Rotenese dialects have attempted to distinguish themselves further from one another to justify political recognition and autonomy (Fox 1971; 1977:81–3). Thus even today, every Rotenese speaks a specific dialect that serves as a sign of local identity or origin. This is equally true of Rotenese who live in villages on Timor that have been settled for more
than 100 years. Although somewhat attenuated, Rotenese dialects on Timor still reflect nusak origins on Rote.

In addition to a local dialect that is the register for everyday speech, most Rotenese understand a high register of Rotenese. This is a poetic form of speech—a ritual language. Although there are distinct phonological as well as semantic differences in its use, ritual language is broadly intelligible throughout the island. This is in part due to the fact that ritual language incorporates synonymous or equivalent terms from different dialects to create many of its canonical pairs or dyadic sets. It thus exploits semantic differences among dialects to foster intelligibility that extends beyond the boundaries of any one speech community. As the vehicle for proverbs, poetry, songs and chants, ritual language is used in situations of formal interaction whenever an elevated form of Rotenese is deemed necessary.

Malay

Like Rotenese, Malay has high and low registers. In the Timor area, the lowest of these registers is Basa Kupang, a dialect of Malay that has been developing in Kupang since the mid-seventeenth century. Basa Kupang is related to other eastern Indonesian dialects of Malay (Larantuke, Ambon, Minahasa) but includes a considerable number of Rotenese loan words, since the Rotenese have long been the dominant population of the Kupang area. The following sentence is a simple illustration:

1) Beta su pi ma lu sonde ada.

Saya sudah pergi tapi kamu tidak ada.

The pronouns beta and lu are typical of Malay dialects in eastern Indonesia, as is the tendency to drop final syllables in the case of su from sudah (and in contrast with Jakarté, where initial syllables are dropped); whereas ma is a possible conflation of the Rotenese conjunction ma, with an abridged form of the Dutch conjunction maar, and sonde is the curious negative (possibly from the Dutch zonder) that is distinctive of Basa Kupang. This register is the everyday language of the market, of intimate interaction among members of distant nusak and among school friends and acquaintances from other islands.

Another register of Malay is standard Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). This is of increasing importance because it is taught in all schools and is used in all official and public situations. It is important to note that Rotenese pride themselves on speaking a proper Indonesian and on not mixing the registers of Basa Kupang and standard Indonesian.
Yet another register—the highest of all—is ‘Biblical Malay’, a form of Malay based originally on the early translations of the Bible. Since Rote has a tradition of local schools dating from the 1730s, and since one of the principal goals of these schools was to teach the language of the Malay Bible, this register is deeply embedded in Rotenese culture and its forms of speaking. Although in recent years a more modern translation of the Bible has been promoted and used in Protestant churches throughout the island, it is still common to hear quotations from the ‘old’ translation (much as in the English-speaking world, recourse is still made, on formal occasions, to the King James translation).

In this there occurs a significant cross-cultural coincidence of linguistic forms. The highest Rotenese register coincides with the highest Malay register in its reliance on parallelism. In particular, the Book of Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, the Book of Isaiah and much of Jeremiah are expressed in a parallelism that is hardly mistakable in the Malay Bible. A simple juxtaposition of a few lines from the Song of Songs in the Alkitab used on Rote (Sjiru’l-Asjar Solaiman 2:1–3) with English translation from the King James version and a few lines from a popular Rotenese poem give a clear idea of the similar, traditional use of parallelism.

2) Malay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akulah bunga air-mawar dari Sjaron</td>
<td>I am the rose of Shar'on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan bunga bakung dari lembah.</td>
<td>And the lily of the valleys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seperti bunga bakung diantara duriduri,</td>
<td>As the lily among thorns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demikianlah adinda diantara segala anak-dara</td>
<td>So is my love among the daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seperti pokok djeruk diantara segala pohon kaju hutan</td>
<td>As the apple tree among the trees of the wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demikianlah kekasihku diantara segala anak-teruna.</td>
<td>So is my beloved among the sons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Rotenese:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rotenese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Te leo mafo ai-la hiluk</td>
<td>But if the trees’ shade moves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma sao tua-la keko</td>
<td>And the lontars’ shadow shifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na, Suti, au o se</td>
<td>Then I, Suti, with whom will I be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma, Bina, au o se</td>
<td>And I, Bina, with whom will I be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fo au kokolak o se</td>
<td>With whom will I talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma au dede’ak o se</td>
<td>And with whom will I speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tao neu nakabanik</td>
<td>To be my hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma tao neu namahenak?</td>
<td>And my reliance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note A: Note the difference in translation of the same Hebrew passage in the Malay Alkitab and the King James Bible as, for example, ‘djeruk’ (‘a kind of orange’) in the Malay translation and ‘apple’ in the English translation.
Coincidence is, however, not identity and there are also differences between these two ‘high’ registers. Rotenese ritual language may be used only for the production of parallel utterances, whereas Biblical Malay, though used to express similar parallel verses, has many other uses as well. (It is the medium for translating an original Hebrew that, like Rotenese, distinguished between poetic and ordinary discourse.) Thus the use of these two registers does not result in the expression of parallel statements in one and then the other medium, but rather encourages the rendering of Biblical statements in canonical Rotenese forms.

This has far-reaching implications for understanding the processes of linguistic creativity. To render Biblical ideas into Rotenese ritual language, equivalent parallel terms must be created. Some of these are understood and accepted throughout the island; others seem to be confined to a particular dialect area and others idiosyncratic to specific preachers. Some commonly recognised terms are as follows:

4) (a) Heaven: *Nusa Sodak//Ingu Temak*  
Domain of Wellbeing//Land of Fullness
(b) The Holy Spirit: *Dula Dalek//Le’u Teik*  
Patterner of the Heart//Marker of the Inner Self
(c) To repent: *Sale Dalek//Tuka Teik*  
To turn the heart//To change the inner self
(d) Golgotha: *Lete Langaduik//Puku Pakulimak*  
Hill of the Skull//Mount of the Nailed Hands
(e) To redeem: *Soi//Tefa [Tifa]*  
To free//To pay
(f) The Redeemer: *Mana-soi//Mana-tefa*  
The One who freed//The One who paid

These terms are relatively simple compared with the majority that are highly metaphoric and often theologically dense and difficult to translate. Christ, for example, is referred to as *Maleo Lain Pua-na//Masafali Poin Tua-na*, which implies that Christ is the transformer of God’s mercy (*Maleo Lain//Masafali Poin*, indicating this heavenly transformation).

As in so much ritual language, many metaphors are based on a botanic idiom. *Tale//fia* (taro//yam) are botanic icons for the (male) person. Christ’s crucifixion is thus referred to as *lona fia//male tale*, which implies a withering or temporary death of these plants. Similarly, using an entirely traditional ritual expression, Christ can be referred to as:

(5) *Huni ma-lapa litik//Tefu ma-nggona liliok*  
The banana with copper blossom//The sugar cane with golden sheath
This accounts for another—perhaps the most important—rhetorical feature of Rotenese sermons. Since Rotenese and Malay are both intelligible, there is seemingly no need for both languages to be used in a sermon. The chief rhetorical feature of sermons is, however, that both languages are used in a complex way. This duality is explicable not as a translation of one language into another, but as another form of parallelism in which similar statements are expressed, in elevated form, as pairs. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of this kind of linguistic performance.

A Rotenese chotbah: The performance

A preacher, like an oral poet, is expected to warm up and become ‘hot’ during the course of his sermon. Thus sermons begin slowly using a combination of ordinary Rotenese and Malay, work up to a crescendo and then gradually taper off. Ideally, the crescendo is marked by the use of Rotenese ritual language. The sermon that I wish to analyse here follows precisely this format. The theme of the sermon as announced at the very beginning is taken from the gospel reading Luke 19:1–10. (As Jesus enters Jericho, a rich tax collector, Zacchaeus, climbs a tree to see Him. Jesus looks up and tells him to come down quickly from the tree because He intends to spend the night at his house.) The preacher, Esau M. Pono of Termanu, gives particular emphasis to Christ’s order to Zacchaeus to come down immediately from the tree. This becomes a major metaphor that he develops at length.

The sermon begins slowly in Rotenese with a simple restatement of the gospel story. The medium is ordinary Rotenese marked by numerous parallel phrases. The gospel, for example, is:

6) (a) Lamatuaka dede’a-kokolan fo nan’detak do nan’sulak
(b) Tunga faik ma tunga ledok ita basa tama-nene
(c) Ita basa-basa tala-pakak ita di’i-don, buka ita dalen

The Lord’s speech/talk that is marked or written
Each day and each sun we all listen
We all open our ears, open our hearts

Only once in the initial part of the sermon is Malay used and this single sentence is also marked by a parallel phrase:

7) Dengarlah firman Allah hari ini, apa artinya dan tujuannya buat hidup kita.

Listen to the word of God today, what is its meaning and purpose for our lives.

The next time Malay occurs it is used in parallel with the same statement in Rotenese.
This ‘double-language parallelism’, once begun, continues throughout the sermon. In fact, once introduced, each new rhetorical device becomes part of an ever more complex repertoire. Simple repetition is another such feature.

Yet another subtle form of parallelism is to make a statement in one language but to use a single word or expression from the other language—particularly at the beginning or end—for the purposes of emphasis. This cross-language parallelism can work either way.

Intermixed with all of these rhetorical devices—Rotenese parallelism, double-language parallelism, cross-language parallelism and simple repetition—the sermon is highlighted with quotations from the old translation of the Malay Bible:

It is at this stage, the crescendo, that the preacher switches to an extended use of Rotenese ritual language with only an occasional word or phrase in Malay.
Explorations in Semantic Parallelism

Sehingga an’dadi neu huni malapa litik
Ma an’ dadi neu tefu manggona lilok
De lapa litin fifiu
Ma nggona lilon ngganggape
De ana ngape leli Hela Dulu
Ma fiu feo Kosi Kona,
Fo ana-ma Hela Dulu
Boe o nanasuluka la, boe-ma
Falu-in Kosi Kona
Lo nanahapak,
Sesuai no kokoa-kiok
Neme ita tolano kor-museik.
Ana-ma Binga Lete la
Ala lamatan
Ma falu-in Kade Seli la
Lasa-kedu bedopo
Ma lama-tani balu-balu
Ala doko-doe se?
Ala doko-doe hanya
Touk Dali Asa Koli
Do Ta’ek Lolo Mata Sina,
Tou manaso sidak
Ma Taèk manaseu saik.
Inilah Zakeos!
Ana doko-doe se?
Ana doko-doe kada Kristus mesakana
Adalah Tou manaso sidak
Ma Ta’e manaseu saik.

So that He became the banana tree with copper blossom
And He became the sugar cane with golden sheath
The copper blossom sways
And the golden sheath waves
He waves toward Hela Dulu
And sways toward Kosi Kona,
The orphan Hela Dulu
As is written, so
The widow Kosi Kona
As is mentioned,
In the praise-song [lit. crowing-peeping]
From our choir.
The orphans Binga Lete
They cry
And the widows Kade Sali
They sob sadly
And they cry pathetically
Whom do they request?
They request only
The man Dali Asa Koli [Christ]
Or the Boy Lolo Mata Sina [Christ]
The man who sews what is ripped
And the boy who stitches what is torn.
This, then, is Zacchaeus!
Whom does he request?
He requests only Christ alone
Here is the man who sews what is ripped.
And the boy who stitches what is torn.

Here in the heat of the sermon, the preacher calls forth an array of powerful images and metaphors. All of these are essentially traditional. The comparison of Christ with the ‘Banana tree with copper blossom//Sugar cane with golden sheath’ involves the extension of traditional botanic icons to a new context. The Rotenese recognise a large corpus of canonical chants, each of which is identified by the name of the chief chant character. To invoke the name of this character is to recall the appropriate chant and the message it conveys. This brief passage contains several of these oral literary allusions. Hela Dulu//Kosi Kona and Binga Lete//Kade, for example, are separate chant-character

2 For the use of these same icons in a traditional context, compare with Fox (1971:242–4).
names that call to mind specific chants. (Hela Dulu/Kosi Kona are also evoked in a ritual-language song sung by the choir earlier in the service.) What these characters have in common is that they are ‘widows and orphans’. This then forms the underlying metaphor for the passage. In the Rotenese view, man’s dependence in an imperfect world is likened to being an orphan and a widow. This is also Zacchaeus’s condition. What all these ‘orphans and widows’ have in common is their need for Christ, who, in this passage, is referred to in three different ways: 1) as Banana tree/Sugar cane; 2) by the chant name Touk Dali Asa Koli/Ta’ek Lolo Mata Sina; and 3) as the Man who sews what is torn/the Boy who stitches what is ripped.

Of linguistic significance is the fact that several lines that should be paired are, in fact, incomplete. This is the case in particular with the lines that contain the verb *doko-doe* (‘to request’). *Doko-doe*, however, is a word that occurs almost exclusively in ritual language and its normal pair, *tai-boni*, is well known and unequivocal. A network analysis of the verbs for speaking shows clearly and graphically the position of *doko-doe*/*tai-boni* in this semantic field. It can be argued therefore that the more specific the terms of a set parallel phrase are, the more likely it is that its counterpart phrase can be left unstated but understood in a real performance.

The passage I have just analysed is one of three in this particular sermon. Each is marked by a brief statement or statements in a mix of Malay and ordinary Rotenese. Thus the crescendo of the sermon consists of peaks and troughs, after which there is a return to the rhetorical style that preceded these high points. It is in this style that the sermon ends.

**Conclusion**

For anyone who understands the registers of the languages involved, a sermon is an exhilarating experience. A good preacher can always draw an audience from beyond his local parish. As a performance, a sermon is, however, unlike a traditional chanting ceremony. Sermons are relatively short and consist of a series of dramatic bursts, whereas a traditional chanting ceremony is a steady rhythmic continuum that can occupy an entire evening. The goal of traditional chanting is to preserve continuity with the ancestral wisdom of the past. In sermons, by the use of involved and sometimes convoluted metaphors, preachers push ritual language in new directions for their own spiritual purposes.

It should not be imagined that sermons of the kind I have discussed are a recent phenomenon. Hints in the missionary literature indicate that the use of traditional parallelism in sermons was already in use by the end of the nineteenth century and certainly these usages flourished in the prewar period of the twentieth
century. Ironically, ‘traditional’ sermons could be in more danger of disappearing than the older forms of chanting. The Protestant Church of Timor (GMIT) has trained a new generation of young Rotenese ministers (*pendeta*) in theological schools in Kupang and Jakarta, and these ministers are not as well attuned to local forms of speaking as the old *utusan injil*. What the next generation holds for the development of speaking on Rote remains to be seen.3

3 The research on which this chapter is based was conducted on various trips to the island of Rote since 1965. It was supported by grants from the US Public Health Service (NIMH), the National Science Foundation and The Australian National University. This research was done under the auspices of the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia and with the sponsorship of the Universities of Nusa Cendana in Kupang and Satya Wecana in Sala Tiga. I express my thanks to all of these institutions, and to Timothy Asch, who accompanied me to Rote in 1977 and 1978 to film the performance of sermons as one aspect of a program for the ethnographic film documentation of Rotenese culture.
This text taken from *Explorations in Semantic Parallelism* by James J. Fox, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.