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Research Article

TYPES OF ONOMATOPOEIC REFERENCES IN INDONESIAN AND JAVANESE: A CONTRASTIVE LINGUISTIC STUDY

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Abstract
Studies on the contrastive analysis of onomatopoeia in Indonesian and Javanese remain limited, particularly in terms of the diversity of referents. Previous research (Anjaswati, 2015) indicates that Javanese onomatopoeia has expanded to encompass referents related to sound, smell, shape, movement, taste, appearance, and manner. However, whether a similar pattern occurs in Indonesian remains unknown. This study aims to classify and compare the patterns of referents in onomatopoeia in Indonesian and Javanese. The data consist of 15 Indonesian and 15 Javanese onomatopoeic forms collected from written sources. Analysis was conducted using the agih (distributional) method with seven referent categories. The Indonesian onomatopoeic forms in the data were found to refer only to sound and motion, whereas the Javanese onomatopoeic forms exhibited a broader diversity of referents, covering all six other categories. Several lexemes in both languages also exhibited dual referents. The findings suggest a higher complexity in the development of Javanese onomatopoeia and provide a basis for further research on the cultural, cognitive, and linguistic factors underlying these differences.

Keywords: Onomatopoeia, Javanese language, Indonesian language, Contrastive linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of comparative linguistics, onomatopoeia was once considered one of the early theories regarding the origin of language (Bredin, 1996; Sasamoto & Jackson, 2016). This concept stems from the assumption that humans often use imitations of sounds from their environment as inspiration for communication (Young, 2016). According to Chaer (2009), onomatopoeia is the naming of objects or actions based on the sounds they produce, such as *crow*, *buzz*, *roar*, *growl*, and *chirp*. This imitation is based on human sensory impressions of what is seen or heard (Benczes & Szabó, 2022). To this day, onomatopoeia remains in use, for instance, the word "*meong*" to refer to a cat.

The phenomenon of onomatopoeia can be found both in everyday speech and in written forms such as novels and comics. Contrastive studies are frequently employed to compare linguistic aspects across languages (Whorf, 1957), including onomatopoeia in Indonesian and Javanese, particularly from phonological and semantic perspectives. The interest in studying this arises because onomatopoeic forms can differ between languages due to the perceptual differences of their speakers. For example, the sound of a rooster is called *kluruk* in Javanese, whereas in Indonesian it is called *kokok* (Sudaryanto, 1985:281).

Furthermore, onomatopoeia is not limited to sound imitation but in some languages—such as Javanese—can evolve to encompass other sensory domains like smell, motion, taste, appearance, and manner (Anjaswati, 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on onomatopoeia in Indonesian and Javanese, two languages that are genealogically related but have developed in different socio-cultural contexts, to further examine the diversity of referents and their developmental patterns contrastively.

Previous studies on onomatopoeia have been conducted extensively, for example in Japanese and Korean (Anindya, 2022; Panggabean et al., 2021), which generally examine onomatopoeia in comic media using semantic or translation approaches. Meanwhile, in the context of Indonesian and Javanese, research such as that by Umniatul Fadhilah, Suwadi, et al. (2024) has examined the meaning and function of Indonesian onomatopoeia in the webtoon "7 Wonders" but has not yet addressed the diversity of referents beyond sound. The research by Mira Anjaswati (2021) on Javanese onomatopoeia indicates that onomatopoeia in Javanese not only imitates sounds but has also developed into imitations of smell, shape, motion, taste, appearance, and manner. However, that research was intralingual and has not conducted a systematic comparison with Indonesian. Related research on contrastive onomatopoeia was previously discussed by Herodion (2019), but that study focused on contrasting Japanese and Javanese onomatopoeia in the context of eating and drinking; thus, there has been no contrastive study that systematically compares the diversity of onomatopoeic referents between Indonesian and Javanese. Based on this review, a research gap exists, which forms the basis for the necessity of this study. The objectives of this research are to classify onomatopoeic forms in Indonesian and Javanese based on their referent categories and to analyze the similarities and differences in the patterns of referent diversity between the two languages. The research questions this study seeks to address are: (1) How are the diversity and patterns of referents (sound, smell, shape, motion, taste, appearance, manner) distributed in Indonesian and Javanese onomatopoeia? (2) Does Indonesian onomatopoeia also demonstrate the development of referents beyond sound, as found in Javanese?

This study employs referential meaning theory. According to Kridalaksana (1984, cited in Suwandi, 2008), referential meaning is the meaning of a linguistic element that has a very close relationship with the external world (object or idea) and can be explained by componential analysis; this meaning is directly related to reality or the referent (Djajasudarma, 1999:11). Componential meaning analysis is used to analyze words by deconstructing them into their smallest meaning components.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a descriptive-qualitative study employing a contrastive approach. Data were collected from a limited written corpus consisting of five Indonesian digital comics published between 1954 and 2023—namely *My Pre-Wedding* (by Annisa Nishifani, 2015), *Kemala* (by Sweta Kartika, 2020), *Si Buta dari Gua Hantu* (by Ganes TH, 1967), *Sri Asih* (by R.A. Kosasih, 1954), and *Gundala* (by Harya Suraminata, 1969)—as well as Javanese short story texts from the anthology *Kumpulan Cerita Rakyat Jawa* (2015–2022). Both sources were selected because they contextually allow for the occurrence of onomatopoeia in dynamic speech varieties that are close to everyday usage.

The criteria for data selection were established as follows: the data must meet Chaer's (2009) definition of onomatopoeia, appear at least twice within the same corpus, and have a clear context to allow for the identification of its referent. Data that were borrowings from foreign languages or lacked an equivalent in one of the compared languages were excluded from the analysis. Data collection was conducted using the observation and note-taking technique (documentary observation), followed by consultation through the uninvolved conversation observation technique with two native Javanese speakers and two Indonesian language experts to validate the context and meaning.

Referent categories in this study were operationally defined as follows: (1) *sound* as the imitation of sounds produced by objects, living beings, or natural phenomena; (2) *shape* as the visual imitation of an object's form; (3) *motion* as the imitation of movement or action; (4) *smell* as the imitation of olfactory impressions; (5) *taste* as the imitation of gustatory impressions; (6) *appearance* as the imitation of overall visual impression; and (7) *manner* as the imitation of emotional states or character. Each category was supplemented with contextual indicators observable within the data.

Data analysis was conducted using the agih (distributional) method, followed by referential componential analysis. The process involved identifying onomatopoeic expressions along with their contexts. The research findings are presented formally in the form of referent distribution tables and informally through narrative description. Each example is accompanied by a sentence context and a meaning gloss to ensure interpretative clarity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each onomatopoeia has a referent that connects the meaning and the symbol used to describe it. This relationship is usually arbitrary. In this study, there are several categories of referents that are sought, namely sound referents, form referents, smell referents, movement referents, taste referents, appearance referents, and attitude referents. The following is a table of the acquisition of onomatopoeia referents in Indonesian

Code	Onomatopoeia	Onomatopoeia Transcription	Sound Reference	Ref Form	Ref Smell	Ref Movement	Ref Taste	Ref Appearance	Ref Attitude
1	Cuckoo	[gu'gu']	✓						
2	Tok tok	[tOk tOk]	✓			✓			
3	Haha	[haha]				✓			
4	Gong	[gOŋ]	✓						

5	Meow	[məŋɛOŋ]	✓	
6	Pyar	[pyar]	✓	
7	Dor	[dOr]	✓	✓
8	Bum	[bUm]	✓	
9	Thud	[gədəbuk]		✓
10	Prang	[praŋ]		✓
11	Jlep	[jləp]		✓
12	Kiss	[kəcup]		✓
13	Pental	[pəntal]		✓
14	Keriang keriut	[kəriaŋ kəriUt]		✓
15	Decup	[dəkup]		✓

Table 1.1 Onomatopoeic Data in Indonesian

Based on Table 1.1, of the 15 Indonesian onomatopoeic data points, six were classified as having sound-imitation referents and nine as having motion-imitation referents. Meanwhile, the five other referent categories—shape, smell, taste, appearance, and manner—were not found in the analyzed corpus. This pattern indicates that the Indonesian onomatopoeia in this dataset remains confined to the auditory and kinesthetic domains, not yet extending to more abstract sensory domains.

A phonosemantic analysis of sound-referent onomatopoeia reveals an iconic relationship between phonetic structure and referential meaning. For example, the word *guguk* [gu'guʔ] utilizes the repetition of the syllable /gu/, depicting the repetitive pattern of a dog's bark. The back vowel [u] and the voiced stop consonant [g] create an impression of a "heavy" and "full" sound, aligning with the cultural perception of a dog's bark as a marker of presence or warning. Similarly, in the word *gong* [gɔŋ], the use of the velar nasal [ŋ] in the final position produces a prolonged resonance effect, iconically representing the hum produced by that metal musical instrument. In a cultural context, the selection of the voiced and strong phoneme [g] reflects the values of sacredness and power inherent in the gamelan instrument within Javanese society, even though this word has been adopted into Indonesian.

In the examples *pyar* [pjar] and *bum* [bʊm], different phonotactic strategies for representing specific types of sound are observed. The word *pyar* utilizes the consonant cluster [pj] and the front vowel [a], producing an impression of a "sharp" and "fast" sound, consistent with the high-pitched and short sound of breaking glass. Meanwhile, *bum* uses the back vowel [ʊ] and the bilabial consonants [b] and [m], creating an acoustic illusion of an explosion—beginning with the plosive [b] and ending with the nasal [m], as if depicting the echo or impact after an explosion. The selection of these lexical forms demonstrates speakers' phonosemantic awareness in mapping acoustic features onto the language's phonological system.

Within the motion-referent category, the mechanism of iconicity also operates through phonetic metaphor. The word *tok-tok* [tɔk tɔk] uses the voiceless stop consonant [t], which

produces an impression of a "firm" and "staccato" sound, iconically depicting the repetitive and spaced-out action of knocking. The full reduplication pattern (*tok-tok*) further reinforces the representation of a repetitive motion. Meanwhile, *gedebuk* [gədəbʊk] utilizes the voiced consonants [g] and [d] along with the central vowel [ə] to create an acoustic impression of "heaviness" and "depth," corresponding to the motion of a heavy object falling. The more complex CVC.CVC syllable structure iconically represents the falling process involving stages: contact, impact, and resonance.

These findings indicate that although the Indonesian onomatopoeia in this dataset does not demonstrate the same diversity of referents as Javanese, there is a systematic mechanism of iconicity governing the relationship between phonetic form and meaning. However, the limited expansion of referents into other sensory domains is likely influenced by sociolinguistic factors, where Indonesian—as a lingua franca—tends to retain onomatopoeia for direct and universal denotative functions (sound and motion), not yet extensively developing layers of connotative meaning related to specific cultural perceptions.

Code	Onomatopoeia	Onomatopoeia Transcription	Ref Sound	Ref Form	Ref Smell	Ref Movement	Ref Taste	Ref Appearance	Ref Attitude
1	Plenthong	[plɛntoŋ]		✓					
2	Penthung	[pəbtUŋ]	✓						
3	Klinthing	[klintIŋ]	✓						
4	Slenthing	[səntlŋ]			✓				
5	Sentheng	[səntəŋ]	✓						
6	Cethetheng	[cətəntəŋ]							✓
7	Dong-dong	[doŋ-doŋ]	✓			✓			
8	Bedhug	[bədUg]	✓						
9	Othok-othok	[OtOk-OtOk]				✓			
10	Kopyok	[kOpyOk]				✓			
11	Pethingthing	[cətəntəŋ]							
12	Plethok	[plətOk]				✓			
13	Kremus	[krəmus]				✓			
14	Mblaus	[mblaus]						✓	
15	Thronthong	[trontOŋ]						✓	

Table 1.2 Javanese Onomatopoeic Data

Based on the phonosemantic analysis of Javanese onomatopoeia data in Table 1.2, a systematic iconic relationship between phonetic structure, referent category, and cultural perception context can be identified. For instance, data (3) *klinthing* [klintIŋ] with the sound referent utilizes the lateral approximant [l], which gives an impression of flow, and the final-position velar nasal [ŋ], which creates prolonged resonance, accurately representing the ringing sound of metal. This choice of phonemes reflects the Javanese cultural familiarity with metallic materials in art and daily life. Data (1) *plenthong* [plɛntoŋ], which refers to the referent of a perfectly round shape, demonstrates a shift in iconicity from the auditory to the visual domain. The initial consonant cluster [pl] conveys an impression of density, while the final [ŋ] implies completeness. This construction aligns with Javanese aesthetics, which values perfection and wholeness of form, as reflected in traditional carving art and architecture.

In non-auditory referent domains, iconicity is mediated through phonetic metaphor. Data (4) *slenthing* [slәntIŋ] for the referent of a pungent smell uses the consonant cluster [sl-], which produces a sharp and piercing impression, followed by a sequence of consonants and the final [ŋ] depicting the smell's lingering and persistent nature. This shows the conceptualization of smell as a sensory experience possessing intensity and duration akin to sound. Meanwhile, data (11) *pethingthing* [cәtәntәŋ] for the referent of an astringent taste is constructed from a CəCəCəC repetition pattern with stop consonants [c] and [t], creating a monotonous rhythm and a "gripping" sensation on the tongue. This form reflects linguistic sensitivity to gustatory nuances within the rich Javanese culinary tradition.

The expansion of iconicity into the psychosocial realm is seen in data (6) *cethetheng* [cәtәntәŋ] for the referent of a talkative manner. Its repetitive, dense, and "noisy" phonetic structure iconically symbolizes incessant and intrusive speech, aligning with cultural values that prioritize politeness and harmony.

Finally, data (14) *mblaus* [mblaus] for the referent of a glossy, wet appearance and data (15) *thronthong* [trontOŋ] for the referent of a plump, round appearance confirm the phonotactic flexibility of Javanese. *Mblaus* utilizes the prenasalized consonant [mbl-] and the diphthong [au] to combine the visual impression of gloss with a flowing auditory resonance sensation. *Thronthong* uses the consonant cluster [tr] and the heavy final [ŋ] to depict a dense and solid visuality. This entire analysis demonstrates that Javanese onomatopoeia operates within a productive system of iconicity where each phoneme choice is consciously aimed at mapping sensory qualities and cultural values into linguistic sound forms, far exceeding the simple function of sound imitation.

The results of the analysis of fifteen Indonesian and fifteen Javanese onomatopoeic data points reveal a significant difference in the distribution of referent categories between the two languages. In Indonesian, onomatopoeia were found to have only two referent categories: sound imitation (40%) and motion imitation (60%). Conversely, Javanese onomatopoeia shows a broader and more complex referent spectrum, encompassing all seven categories studied: sound (33.3%), motion (26.7%), shape (6.7%), smell (6.7%), taste (6.7%), appearance (13.3%), and manner (6.7%). This finding confirms previous research by Anjaswati (2015) that Javanese onomatopoeia has developed beyond sound imitation. Furthermore, both languages exhibit the phenomenon of lexemes with dual referents, such as *tok-tok* (Indonesian) and *dong-dong* (Javanese), which simultaneously represent sound and motion.

Further phonological analysis reveals an interesting pattern: nine of the fifteen Javanese onomatopoeic forms (60%) contain the velar nasal [ŋ] in syllable-final position, as in *klinthing* [klintIŋ], *plenthong* [plɛntoŋ], and *thronthong* [trontOŋ]. This frequency is much higher compared to Indonesian onomatopoeia, which has only two occurrences (13.3%). This pattern indicates the role of phonosemantic iconicity, where the velar nasal sound [ŋ] functions as a marker of resonance and continuity (Rhodes, 1994). In the context of Javanese onomatopoeia, this sound not only represents sound but also iconizes enduring sensory

qualities (like smell in *slenthing*), holistic visual impressions (like appearance in *thronthong*), or stable internal states (like manner in *cethetheng*). Thus, [ŋ] operates as a phonological tool that extends the language's iconic capacity into more abstract sensory domains.

The dominance of more complex syllabic structures (CVC.CVC) and word-initial consonant clusters in Javanese onomatopoeia also provides greater morphophonological flexibility. This flexibility allows for the formation of an onomatopoeic lexicon to represent nuances of shape (*plenthong* for 'perfectly round'), smell (*slenthing* for 'pungent'), and appearance (*mblaus* for 'glossy wet'). This difference is inseparable from external cultural factors. The Javanese language developed within the context of an agrarian society with a rich oral tradition, such as *tembang* (singing) and *wayang* (shadow puppetry), which demand high sensitivity to environmental details and nuanced sensory expression. The philosophical Javanese concept of "*rasa*" (feeling/sensation/taste), which encompasses emotional, aesthetic, and intuitive dimensions (Geertz, 1976), appears to also drive the development of onomatopoeia into psychological and manner domains, as seen in *cethetheng*, which describes a talkative manner.

These findings have important implications for linguistic theory, particularly in debating the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs. The data show that the relationship between form and meaning in onomatopoeia is iconic and can develop systematically. The differences between the two languages reflect a continuum of onomatopoeic development: from being limited to physical domains (sound and motion) in Indonesian, to expanding into abstract domains through sensory metaphor in Javanese. Therefore, this study not only contrasts two language systems but also highlights how phonological resources and sociocultural contexts together shape a language's expressive capacity. These findings pave the way for further typological research on iconicity and onomatopoeic variation within the Austronesian language family.

CONCLUSION

Based on the contrastive analysis of Indonesian and Javanese onomatopoeia, this study yields four core findings. First, there is a significant difference in referent diversity: the Indonesian onomatopoeia in this corpus only has sound and motion imitation referents, whereas Javanese onomatopoeia exhibits a complete referent spectrum, encompassing sound, motion, shape, smell, taste, appearance, and manner. Second, phonosemantic analysis reveals the key role of the velar nasal [ŋ] and complex syllabic structures in Javanese onomatopoeia as iconic markers for representing enduring and abstract sensory qualities. Third, lexemes with dual referents (sound and motion) were found in both languages, indicating layered meanings. Fourth, the more varied development of Javanese onomatopoeia is inseparable from its socio-cultural context, including the philosophy of *rasa* (feeling/sensation), a rich oral tradition, and sensitivity to the agrarian environment.

These findings have important theoretical implications for linguistic studies, particularly in debating the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs. This research strengthens iconicity theory (Haiman, 1980) by demonstrating that the relationship between phonetic form and meaning can be systematic, productive, and driven by cultural factors. Furthermore, this study proposes that variation in onomatopoeic iconicity systems can serve as a typological parameter for mapping linguistic diversity within a language family.

Practically, this research provides tangible contributions to Indonesian and Javanese linguistics. For Indonesian linguistics, this study fills a gap in the literature regarding phonosemantic analysis of onomatopoeia, which remains limited. For Javanese linguistics, these findings not only document lexical richness but also uncover the cultural logic underlying word formation, which can be an important resource for language maintenance and revitalization. Additionally, the research results can serve as teaching materials for language

learning and translation, especially for handling sensory nuances that are difficult to express across languages.

For future research, several directions for further study can be developed. First, similar studies can be expanded with larger and more diverse corpora (such as natural conversations, social media, or classical literature) to test the generalizability of these findings. Second, experimental approaches can be applied to test native speakers' perception of sound iconicity in onomatopoeia. Third, typological studies comparing onomatopoeia in more Austronesian languages are needed to determine whether the pattern found in Javanese is unique or part of a broader continuum. Fourth, interdisciplinary research with anthropology and cognitive psychology can investigate more deeply the connection between sound structure, sensory experience, and cultural frameworks in Javanese and Indonesian-speaking communities.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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