Open pronominal system in Sasak

Languages of Southeast Asia are known to have the open pronominal system in which speakers may use more than one pronoun for a given referent (Thomason and Everett 2001). Languages of Indonesia evince especially interesting manifestations of these systems. However, while most studies on open pronominal systems have focused on the varieties of Indonesian (Djenar, Ewing, & Manns, 2018; Purwo, 1984; Manns, 2012) very few have worked on other languages of Indonesia (Ewing, 2001, 2014 are notable exceptions). Thus, this study investigates the applicability of the open system in Sasak, an Austronesian language spoken in eastern Indonesia with a caste-based register system. I first looked at the variation of pronominal forms in everyday conversation since efforts to describe the language (e.g., Austin, 2004; Mahyuni, 2007; Wouk, 1999, 2008) only have included limited descriptions of pronominal forms, with little to no description of their variation. Consequently, the explanation on how pronominal forms employed in Sasak is predominantly limited to descriptions of isolated sentences. In these studies, basic and polite forms are proposed to function in a well-defined fashion with uniform referents, leaving little evidence for the open system. By applying variationist sociolinguistics supplemented by qualitative analysis, I argue that Sasak, to some extent, employs a more open pronominal system than has previously been described.

The data used in this study are six conversations between 12 speakers from the non-noble class. The conversations were transcribed, and all pronominal referents were coded (totaling 2,753 instances). The analysis focuses on 653 instances of the first and second person referents. The discourse context was closely examined to identify the actual referents of the given pronominal forms and to observe their pragmatic effect. Since the vast majority of forms are realized as clitics, this study focuses on these forms. The results reveal that variation in clitic forms is linked with politeness, such that a higher percentage of clitic pronouns are preferred with the basic first person singular form, the form that is considered less polite, for first person referents, as shown in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 1](image_url) Clitic production by first and second referents across politeness level, with the basic forms in purple and the polite forms shown in light blue.

However, speakers apply a different strategy for second person referents. When addressing their interlocutor, speakers use a first and third person singular pronouns to refer to the second person referents. In these cases, I argue that the speakers do this when triggered by a Face Threatening Act (FTA; see Brown and Levinson, 1987). According to this theory, speakers always try to secure their and each other’s faces. So, when there are utterances that threaten one’s face, speakers will adopt a politeness strategy in order to save the interlocutor from any negative feelings. This current study presents evidence that speakers use pronominal forms as a politeness strategy. The discourse context of example (1) illustrates FTA where the speaker blames his brother, but he uses another pronominal form that is still contextually understood as referring to the second person. This evidence demonstrates that FTA overrides the seemingly concrete interpretation of pronominal forms and confirms that Sasak employs the ‘open-system’.

**Example (1)** Speaker uses third singular person clitic to refer to the second person

\[ Ndēq=ne \ anuq \ cumiq \ ngōnēq \ léq \ anuq \ tuaq \ Nan \]

Neg=3SG whatchamacallit squid earlier loc whatchamacallit uncle Nan

‘You did not buy squid earlier from uncle Nan’

**References**


