

## THOSE WHO SPEAK *PROKEM*\*

Henri Chambert-Loir

Translated by James T. Collins

For about the last five years, a new language, usually called *bahasa prokem*, has been emerging among the youth of Jakarta. Actually this language is limited to a few hundred words while its grammar and the rest of its vocabulary are still ordinary Indonesian (or Jakartan). The appearance of *bahasa prokem* is an event which is properly of interest in the development of Indonesian because, in an extraordinary way, we can witness the creation and use of a sort of Indonesian slang, that is, a vocabulary which seems to be the property of a certain social group and which is used by that group as an argot. This development gives rise to a number of questions both linguistic and sociological.

The Indonesian used today in Jakarta is very diverse. Each inhabitant of the capital has his own style of speaking in accordance with his place of birth, ethnic background, environment, social status, and education. Every speaker of Indonesian enriches the language with words or expressions drawn from other sources. So it is that Jakartan and other regional languages (especially Javanese and Sundanese), as well as foreign languages (especially English), have acted as stimulants for the development of Indonesian, sometimes even providing the distinctive flavoring of the language, both by adding to an insufficient vocabulary and by imparting a certain coloring to a particular statement.

*Bahasa prokem* is also a source for the coining of new words within the framework of Indonesian. However, its characteristic features are quite different, because the new words of *bahasa prokem* are not words invented because they are thought not yet to exist in Indonesian. Rather the words are intended to duplicate already existing words. In fact, they are often invented on the basis of existent words. In contrast to the process of borrowing foreign words, on the whole the creation of *prokem* words is an internal process, that is, a development of the language from within.

What is properly called *prokem*?

If we observe the contemporary language among the young people of Jakarta, or if we read the so-called "pop" novels, we are faced with a large number of words not recorded in the *Kamus Umum Bahasa Indonesia* or words used with distinctive meanings. Some time ago, the author, Yudhis, presented the following example of a conversation in the colloquial language of Jakarta youth.

*Roni Volvo dan kawan-kawan lagi asyik cuap-cuap sembari nenggak es teler. Linda Cilacap datang sama gacoannya, Donni Ceking.*  
-- *Ya nggak? Ya nggak? Ya nggak? Ronni menyapa.*  
-- *Asyik! sahut Linda dan Donni.*

---

\* "Mereka Yang Berbahasa Prokem" is published in *Citra Masyarakat Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan/Archipel, 1983), pp. 112-30.

- *Lu semakin aja sekarang, Lin.*
- *Wah! geer deh gue!*
- *Terus deh.*<sup>1</sup>

The intention of that conversation was not to deliver a message but rather to convey an impression. It has no content other than the expression of a feeling of intimacy. All the words are understandable, but it is as if their arrangement has no meaning. The sentences function as passwords which indicate close relationships among friends. In these sentences, it seems that only *teler* can be called a real prokem word, but, even at that, it is used here with a distinctive meaning.

Other examples can be found in pop novels. It is easy to collect many strange words, some of which have become common, or at least known by the general public, such as *bloon*, *caem*, *salome*,<sup>2</sup> *gombal*, and so forth; but the meaning of others is obscure. In general, these words are not prokem words but words which are widely referred to as "youth language."

Youth language mixes together foreign words (*stone*, *fly* ["in a marijuana induced stupor"]; *rojer* ["up to you"]; *antik akoustik* ["beautiful, sleek, attractive"]; *nyentrik*, *ngetop*, *fotocopy* ["go back and forth, hang around"]; and so forth); Jakarta words (*keki*, *srek*, *umpet*, *yahud*); Sundanese and Javanese words (*bodol*, *trenyuh*, *dahar*, *ogah*), and a number of others; distinctive words whose origin is often unknown, such as *bloon*, *caem*, *acuh beybeh*, *tongpes* (<*kantong kempes*: "broke"), *geer* (<*gede rasa*: "full of self-importance"), *ajojing* ("to dance"), *gombal* (from Javanese), *kuper* (<*kurang pergaulan*: "not great social mixers"), and others.

Thus, youth language collects new words from various sources. Moreover, in our opinion, *bahasa prokem* can not be equated with youth language (as it often is); rather *bahasa prokem* is only one of its sources, and not even the most important one. Except for words which are only used by a certain author or a certain group of youths, the characteristics of youth vocabulary are that it quickly spreads among the young, it is heavily used by them even in magazines and private radio broadcasts, and it also quickly becomes out of date. Youth words in Jakarta today certainly are quite different from those which were *ngetop* ("far out") ten years ago. The words were invented to replace the usual Indonesian words which were considered worn out and old fashioned, but these words, too, quickly become obsolete.

In fact, delight in using new words is not restricted to young people. We may witness the same phenomenon among other groups which tend to borrow Old Javanese or English words, for example. By renewing Indonesian vocabulary in this way, each social group is trying to renew its concepts and characteristics while inventing a kind of code of its own. By using those new words, an individual can indicate clearly his desire to be considered a member of a certain group. If many regional languages (Javanese is always mentioned as an example) reflect a system of social organization by the use of language levels, so contemporary Indonesian tends to invent levels of its own in order to reflect a new system of social organization. The use of English words--no matter how inappropriate and superfluous--is meant to demonstrate the essence of an educated person who is capable of facing up to the modern world. At the same time others prefer to make use of regional words when they are speaking Indonesian, in order to emphasize their regional origins and culture.

---

1. See Yudhistira A. N. M. Massardi, "Bahasa 'luar' dan proses pencarian," Paper presented at the Seminar on Polylingualism, Pacet (August 19-22, 1981).

2. The word *salome* has become so popular that it has lost some of its original vulgar connotations and has even been used as the title of a song and film.

In the same way, young people produce their own language as a symbol that they form a group which also has its own personality and culture. In this case, however, it is always accompanied by a very to-the-point sense of humor. The youth are very critical about the mishmash language which is used by some of their elders, while at the same time they are repelled yet amused by the standardization of Indonesian, which means even more rules and discipline. This phenomenon is very apparent in one aspect of youth language, namely the large number of acronyms which play with words and reverse meanings as a joke or taunt toward the language itself. For example, the word *gersang* ("barren, desert-like") is given the meaning *segar merangsang* ("fresh and exciting"); the word *Puskesmas*, an acronym of *Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat* ("Public Health Center"), is reinterpreted as *pusing keseleo masuk angin* ("nauseous, sprained, feverish"); *semampai* ("slender") can mean *semeter tak sampai* ("not even a meter"); *benci* ("hate") becomes *benar-benar cinta* ("truly in love"); *jet set* is reinterpreted as *jelek-jelek tapi stel* ("ugly but fashionable"); and many other examples. The practice of forming acronyms, sometimes so numerous and complex that they are incomprehensible, is satirized by youth by forming acronyms which are even more complex, and merely humorous (*Rustam Lubis* from *rusak tampak luar biasa* ["really ugly face"]; *muklasbakam* from *muka klasik bahan kampung* ["classical face right from the kampung"]; and so forth).

Another characteristic of youth language which is also a reaction against the standard language is a delight in mixing up spelling. By using elements of foreign orthography, ordinary words become ludicrous or obscure. Note for example *pra one two land* for *perawan tulen* ("an authentic virgin"); *see kill* for *sikil* ("leg" [Jv]); *chantique* for *cantik* ("beautiful"); *read one* for *Ridwan* ("man's name"); *choqrem* for *cokrem* (*cowok krempeng* ["skinny boy"]); and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

Youth language plays no favorites in its choice of sources. In the sentence *Bokin gout kilo bravo now*,<sup>4</sup> the last word is certainly English and the first two words are *prokem* (*bokin* ["wife"]; *gout* ["I"]); whereas the other two words are borrowed from citizens' band radio jargon. So the sentence means *Bini gue KB sekarang* ("My old lady is on the pill now").

This example is, of course, an extreme one, but it gives a picture of the character of youth language, which always depends on fads and is often purposely mixed up.

It will become clear that *bahasa prokem* is quite different, if one pays attention to the following facts: its spread among youth occurred only a few years ago; the circle of its users is far more proscribed; its secretive quality is still partially protected; and the language has morphological (word formation) principles which are clearly not found in youth language.

Obviously the secretiveness of *bahasa prokem* seriously complicates research. As we shall see below, its vocabulary and principles are different from those of youth language, although the boundary between them is not always clear. The milieu of its users is also different. Youth language is used more or less by all youth, and it tends to spread to a larger circle, whereas *bahasa prokem* is limited to criminals, street kids, and some students in the capital.

---

3. Examples like these appear in pop novels--and in particular in graffiti, which have been studied carefully by Dr. Boen S. Oemarjati ("Graffiti dan pemakaian bahasa oleh remaja: menolak kerutan dahi," *Bahasa dan Sastra* 4, 1 [1978]).

4. Cited in Jay Bimo, *Prokem: Bahasa kerennya The Indonesian Graffiti*, Supplement to *Hai*, no. 29 (1981).

The bahasa prokem which is the easiest to know about and which has been discussed in some newspapers and journals is the language of young people. The language of criminals and street kids, with its arcane meanderings is, of course, more difficult to study in detail, and its function as a secret language is also more important.

In an effort to give as clear a definition of bahasa prokem as possible, we should first survey a few other codes. Bahasa prokem is not the only jargon which has existed within a language of the archipelago. We know of at least three kinds of codes in these languages, each of which shows some similarities and differences with bahasa prokem. The types of codes are: (1) magical code; (2) children's code; and (3) a small number of slang words in some regional languages. "Code" implies the meaning of "secret," and all these kinds of codes have a basis of similarity with bahasa prokem. However, both from a linguistic perspective and from a social one, bahasa prokem has its own features; thus, these codes will be touched upon only briefly.

The first type of jargon is the magical code which was once associated with a ritual activity. In the Malay Peninsula or in Champa, for example, persons engaged in the collection of camphor or aloeswood used a special language which has been documented and studied.<sup>5</sup> Even today honey collectors in North Sumatra have a number of special terms which are used when they look for bees' nests.<sup>6</sup> These activities are very dangerous, because one must enter the deep forest and climb very high trees, and, even more so, because the forest and the trees are thought to be inhabited by various kinds of spirits and invisible powers. Because of that, the general feature of these special languages is the tabooing of certain words: the names of the tiger, bee, rice, or rattan, for example, may not be uttered; only special periphrastic expressions may be used: the tiger is called *Si lemah* ("the weak one"); the bee, *Hitam manis* ("the sweet and dark one"); and so forth.

These code languages form part of the ritual which must be performed when engaging in those dangerous activities. They spring from a sense of fear of and, at the same time, respect for the spirits inhabiting the forest. For that reason, these codes may be considered types of language level; indeed, they have been compared to the *kromo* and *kromo inggil* levels of Javanese.

Codes once used in the Malay Peninsula certainly seem very remote from the jargon currently employed by young people in Jakarta. However, if we view each of these types of special languages not merely as a list of terms but as a feature of a social group which needs a jargon appropriate to its position and role in society, or if we emphasize each special language as a speech level of the general language, then it is apparent that magical codes and bahasa prokem are also interrelated.

The second kind of jargon is one which can be referred to as children's code. The codes generally are used by children of primary and lower secondary school age, and their chief characteristic is the systematic changing of the day-to-day language, that is, changing each word in the same way. Codes such as this are found in almost all languages, and among the languages of the archipelago there are numerous systems. As a result of a preliminary survey, examples were found in the fol-

---

5. See in particular Skeat and Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* (London, 1906), vol. 2; Winstedt, "The Camphor Languages of Johore and Southern Pahang," *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums*, Vol. 9 (1920); Cabaton, "À propos d'une langue spéciale de l'Indochine," *Études Asiatiques* (Paris, 1925).

6. See Goldsworthy, "Honey Collecting Ceremonies on the East Coast of North Sumatra," *Studies in Indonesian Music*, ed. M. Kartomi (Monash University, 1978).

lowing languages: Indonesian, Jakartan, Javanese, Sundanese, and Minangkabau. Similar codes have been reported in Malay, Murut (Sabah), Tagalog (Philippines), and others.<sup>7</sup>

The code of which there are the most examples is the one usually known as "backwards language." There is a great diversity of types: sometimes what is inverted is the consonant (*pacar* ["sweetheart"] becomes *capar*; *besok* ["tomorrow"] becomes *sebok*; and so on); sometimes the syllables are switched (*abdi bade angkat* ["I want to go"] becomes *diab deba katang*); sometimes it is as if the words are read from back to front (*pacar* ["sweetheart"] becomes *racap*; *besok* ["tomorrow"] becomes *koseb*).

Another kind of code is the addition of a consonant and a vowel to each existing syllable; the consonant is determined by the code selected, while the vowel is the vowel of the syllable involved. The Sundanese word *eta* ("that"), for example, becomes *epetapa* if the consonant of the code is *p*. Codes of this sort have been found with the consonants *p* (in Indonesian and Sundanese), *f* (in Sundanese, Javanese, and Minangkabau), *s* (in Javanese), and *g* (in Minangkabau). This sort of code is very common; in fact it is even found in French--with the nickname *Javanais* (Javanese)!

Rather interesting among these codes are those which use affixes. There are, for example, occurrences of prefixes or suffixes which are added to each word, sometimes along with other changes. Infixes have been noted, too, for example, the infix *ark* or *arg* in Indonesian; thus *dingin* ("cold") becomes *dingarkin*; *anjing* ("dog") *anjargin*; *sepatu* ("shoes") *sepatarku*. Similarly in Javanese the infixes *in* and *ark/arg* have been noted.

There are many other kinds of code. Among those which seem most complex is change of consonants in Javanese based on a two-column arrangement of the Javanese syllabary letters; the first ten letters are written beginning at the top and going downwards, the second ten letters from the bottom upwards. Those letters which are paired with each other are then exchanged. So, *ha* is exchanged with *nga*, *na* with *ta*, *ca* with *ba*, and so forth. This yields *jedu* from *sewu* ("1000"); *patang* from *lanang* ("male"); etc.

Usually children's codes have rather simple rules or systems. What is surprising is that these can be used by the children in a systematic way to form complete sentences to the point that they can have conversations in a language which sounds completely strange.

The quality of secretiveness of these codes is not too important. Children invent such word games in order to identify themselves as a group (usually students in the same class). All these codes have a systematic quality (a principle of change is applied to each word in each sentence), which is not found in other special languages.

The third kind of code consists of slang words found in some languages. These codes are close to *bahasa prokem* because they are similarly used by criminal or

---

7. I would like to express my thanks to all those who contributed information about these codes, especially to S. M. Ardan, Cholid Sodrie, Nh. Dini, Iskandarwassid, and G. Moussay. See also Suhardi's article, "Permainan kata dalam bahasa Jawa," *Bahasa dan Sastra*, 3, 6 (1977); Jasawijata and Kartadarmadja, "Eenige voorbeelden van geheimtaal in het Javaansch," *Djawa*, 3, 1 (1921); Prentice, "Some Ludic Aspects of Timugon Murut," Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics, Denpasar (January 1981).

street kid groups. However, they still differ in that their vocabulary is very limited and they do not possess fixed morphological principles.

An example of a code of this type<sup>8</sup> is found in Yogyakarta Javanese: *sarat* ("prerequisite") means "go"; *jaran* ("horse"), "bicycle"; *kolir* ("unable to get good cards in the *ceki* game"), "financially broke"; *cacing* ("worm"), "bangle"; and so forth. In Bandung, Sundanese *langeng* ("stretched out"?) means "in a marijuana induced stupor"; *tilep* ("fold in two"), "steal"; etc. In Medan, Indonesian *cas* ("charge [electricity]") or *ciak* ("eat" [Ch.]) means "eat"; *pencin* ("money" [?Ch.]), "money"; *makan* ("eat"), "kill, beat up"; *kawan* ("friend"), "person"; and so forth. In the Indonesian used in a military barracks in West Java, *beo* ("parrot") means "pedicab"; *slip* ("slide, insert"), "police"; *cagak* ("forked branch"), "trousers"; *ukar* ("ochre powder" [?]), "cigarette"; and so forth.

These examples demonstrate a feature which we will find in some prokem words too: some words are new creations, while others are ordinary words which are merely given new meanings, such as, for example, *jaran* or *cacing* in Javanese.

In fact, codes of this third type can be compared to terms used by a social group differentiated from general society by its activities, origins, or some other characteristic. Clearly, criminals are distinguished from general society because of their activities, and the code they use is at the same time secret and technical. Frequently, too, those who possess highly technical skills invent a number of new words to refer to objects or concepts which are not known by the layman. Other groups might possess a special identity because of their ethnic origins. For example, when speaking Indonesian, people of Arab descent in Jakarta like to use some words which clearly originate from Arabic: *reja'* ("go home"), *rejal* ("man"); *harim* ("woman"<sup>9</sup>); *regut* ("sleep"); *kul* ("eat"); and so forth. Again, transvestites are generally known to use words with the suffix *ong*, such as *polesong* (<*polis* ["police"]); *kemenong* (<*ke mana* ["where to?"]); *lejong* (<*jalan* ["go for a walk"]); *nepsong* (<*napsu* ["sex drive"]); *pentong* (<*pantat* ["ass"]); and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

Those, then, are a few of the kinds of special languages which are or have been used within the framework of Indonesian (or other languages of the archipelago). It will become apparent to us that, compared to these languages, bahasa prokem possesses distinctive features, both with regard to its morphology and to its function. It appears as if bahasa prokem is the only slang (criminal argot) which is developing on the basis of definite principles, but actually we should be aware that bahasa prokem is not something new or unique in the development of Indonesian. For centuries, some segments of society have invented their own languages as deviations from the general language, with the intention of distinguishing themselves from general society or of protecting their activities from that society.

The morphological principles of bahasa prokem can be summarized as follows. Prokem words consist of three groups: (1) new words, the origins of which cannot be determined; (2) ordinary words which are given new meanings; and (3) derived words.

---

8. Thanks are due to Sdr. Areng Widodo and C. Guillot who also provided some information about these terms.

9. The word *harim* is also used in bahasa prokem with the meaning of "girlfriend" or "wife."

10. Apparently homosexuals use similar words, for example, *lekong* (<*lelaki* ["man, male"]); *gedong* (<*gede* ["big"]); *mesrong* (<*mesra* ["intimate"]); and so on.

In the first group, a number of words should be mentioned which are either new creations or perhaps derived words where the base is unclear. The word *gout* (or *ogut* ("I")), for example, certainly reminds us of the word *gue* ("I"), but there is not a single other example which might explain the change of *gue* to *gout*. Similarly, it is not definite that *doi* ("he") is from *dia* ("he"). Other words of the same type are, for example, *beceng* ("pistol"); *bohay* ("attractive girl"); *boim* ("stupid"); *tukang bola* ("pickpocket"); *buay* ("chicken"); *ceng* ("tease"); *dokat* ("money"); *gintur* ("sleep"); *tit* ("dead"); etc.

In the second group, there are ordinary Indonesian words which are given new meanings. Marijuana, for example, can be called by other names, such as *amplop* ("envelope" [because it is sold in an envelope]); *barang* ("goods" [because it is the sought-after commodity]); *gelek* ("roll [of a ball]" meaning "roll or twist in the palm"); *rumpot* ("grass" [just like the English term]); or *nisan* (apparently because Nissan jeeps are used by the police task force [Tekab] to pursue marijuana users). Similarly *cabut* ("yank out") is given the meaning of "go, go home"; *haji* ("one who has made the hajj") means "police"; *kijang* ("antelope") means "stubborn"; *tembak* ("shoot") means "extort" or "vomit" (or various other meanings!); *ulkan* ("vortex, core") means "pistol"; *tiup* ("blow") means "drink intoxicating beverages"; *meledak* ("explode") means "succeed in stealing valuables"; etc. In bahasa prokem one can usually still feel an obvious connection between the base words and the new meaning.

However, it is in fact the third group which is the most productive, in that it uses two basic methods to change an ordinary Indonesian word to a prokem word.

The first method is to metathesize the sequence of letters in the base word. Actually, this method is frequently used in the children's codes discussed above ["backwards language"]. Usually in bahasa prokem what are rearranged are the two consonants in a disyllabic base word. For example, *payah* ("difficult") becomes *yapah*; *cewek* ("girl") *wecek*; *burung* ("bird") *rubung*; etc. Sometimes the vowels are also metathesized, as in *perkaos* from *perkosa* ("rape"); *yei* from *iye* ("yeah"); or *nyemot* from *monyet* ("monkey"). There are even cases where the whole syllable is metathesized as, for example, *kerja* ("work") becomes *jaker*; and *lapar* ("hungry") *harlap*. Ordinarily the base word is Indonesian, but it can also be Jakartan, such as *lebon* from *belon* ("not yet"); *due* from *ude* ("already"); *jae* from *aje* ("only"); or *tiem* from *item* ("black, dark-skinned").

As an unregimented language which is, as it were, in rebellion against ordinary language, bahasa prokem, of course, need not follow even its own rules, and we can always find exceptions which do not observe the usual guidelines. Nonetheless, these exceptions sometimes display a steady linguistic tendency. It is rather clear, for instance, that nasals preceding the consonants *k*, *j*, *c*, *d*, and *b* tend to be disregarded in the metathesis process: *bungkus* ("package") becomes *kubus*; *anjing* ("dog"), *panjang* ("long") *pinjem* ("borrow") become *jaing*, *japang*, and *jipan* respectively; *pendek* ("short") becomes *depek*; *hancur* ("smashed up") *caur*; and *Ambon*, *baon*. Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency to disregard the letter *m*, as in the words *suim* from *musim* ("season"), *boil* from *mobil* ("car"), and *baok* from *mabuk* ("drunk"). At the same time, we note that frequently there are two adjacent vowels in prokem words, and usually these two vowels are not phonetically connected by the consonants *w* or *y*; rather they are pronounced individually, as if there were a glottal stop between them. The word *su'im* ("season"), for example, is not understood if pronounced *suwim*.

Thus, the study of bahasa prokem can also uncover the attitudes of the speakers of Indonesian towards the phonology of their own language.

The second method for producing prokem words out of Indonesian words is by the infix *ok*. This method is the more productive and, in fact, the only bahasa

prokem element, the uniqueness of which cannot be disputed. The words thus far examined, whether they are new words (*gintur* ["sleep"]), words which result from semantic shifts (*cabut* ["go"]), or words resulting from metathesis (*nyemot* ["monkey"]), might all be considered by certain people as not prokem. The word *cabut*, for instance, is already perceived as normal usage and the word *nyemot* was used by the singer Benjamin S. in the early 1970s. In contrast, all derived words formed with the infix *ok* can be confirmed as prokem words.

These words are formed according to two guidelines: the final part of the base word is deleted while the infix *ok* is added to the penultimate syllable. Thus, *rumah* ("house") becomes *rokum*; *preman* ("street kid") *prokem*; <sup>11</sup> *sepatu* ("shoe") *sepokat*; and so forth. This method of word formation is similar to a Javanese code in which the final part of the base word is also deleted, and the affix *so* is added: *aku harep lungo* ("I want to go") becomes *soak sohar solung*. The origin of the infix *ok* is not known. This method of forming new words is very easy to apply, but clearly it is only used to yield a limited number of words and is not usually employed for others. The word *pokad* ("to") from *pada*, for example, conforms with the principles of bahasa prokem and was once mentioned by the author Teguh Esha, but, apparently, it is not recognized by other prokem speakers.

It should also be noted that actually most speakers of bahasa prokem do not seem to be aware of the formulae discussed above. They do not, for example, distinguish the formation process for *ogut* from that for *rokum*; and hence, they do not tend to form many new words on the basis of a specific morphological pattern. Perhaps, bahasa prokem only began to develop systematically after it spread among students who, because of their education, tended to pay attention to and apply principles of language organization.

Within the process of word formation with the infix *ok*, there are also exceptions which sometimes indicate certain general tendencies but sometimes seem chaotic. The word *nyak* ("mother"), for example, becomes *nyokap*, not *nyokak*, perhaps in order to be similar to the sound of *bokap* ("father") from *bapak*. Likewise, *siapa* ("who") becomes *siokap*, but also *sokap*; *lari* ("run") becomes *lokar*, but also *lokap*. The sound, *h*, in the middle of a word tends to be disregarded: *tahu* ("know") and *tahi* ("feces") become *tokau* and *tokay* respectively (here with the final part of the word not deleted!). In some words where the letters *u* or *i* are adjacent to *a* it is not the final part of the word that is deleted but rather the letter *a*: *jual* ("sell"), *keluar* ("go out"), and *lihat* ("see") become *jokul*, *kelokur*, and *lokut* respectively.

This method of word formation can yield ambiguous words: *sokam*, for example, means *sama* ("together, same") as well as *samsu* ("a brand of clove cigarettes, *ji sam su*"). That, then, is the major pattern for forming prokem words. Several other principles exist, but they are not productive. For example, there is the prefix, *kos*, but only three words seem to have been formed with this prefix, namely *kospul* (<*pulang* ["return home"]); *kosmob* (<*mobil* ["car"]); and *kosbun* (<*bunting* ["pregnant"]).

It should be noted that some words are formed by two simultaneous patterns of morphological change. The word *kodu*, for example, comes from *duit* ("money") which, with the infix *ok*, becomes *doku*, and then is metathesized into *kodu*. Similarly *Cina* ("Chinese") becomes *cokin*, and then *kocin*; *bini* ("wife") becomes *bokin*, then *kobin*; *pulang* ("return home") becomes *kospul*, then *poskul*.

---

11. Thus, it turns out that the name, bahasa prokem, which is so quintessentially Indonesian, derives from a foreign language; prokem comes from *preman* ("street kid") which in turn derives from Dutch *vrijman*.

In addition, some root words can be changed in different ways: *baru* ("new") becomes *rabu* and also *bokar*; *payah* ("difficult") becomes *pokay* and *yapah*. Moreover, *pulang* ("return home") yields *kospul*, *poskul*, *pokul*, and *lupang*.

Actually, the morphology of bahasa prokem frequently deviates from the rules which have just been discussed here. The word *rokok* ("cigarette") for example, can be expressed as *koro*, *kokar*, *sekokar*, *semokar*, *semokil*, *gokar*, *oskar*, and *korce*. Among these words, *koro* is the result of a consonant exchange and *korce* may have been produced with the Dutch suffix *tje*.<sup>12</sup> But the origins of the other six words are unknown. (It is quite likely that *semokar* and *semokil* were formed with the English word "smoke" in mind.) Basically bahasa prokem is the result of word play, and the play element may, therefore, sometimes be completely independent.

The infix *ok* is a major element of bahasa prokem. It is not yet possible to determine the origins of this infix (which doesn't seem to exist in a single language of the archipelago), nor why or when it came to be used in bahasa prokem. A journalist once published the opinion that bahasa prokem was invented in the late '60s by Kusni Kasdut when he was in prison. Actually bahasa prokem is probably older than that and is more likely to have been invented, not at a single stroke in a systematic way by a single individual, but rather gradually by a group of people, each of whom contributed something. If indeed it was not borrowed from another language, there is a possibility that the infix *ok* was adopted from a word which happened to resemble an Indonesian word in shape and meaning.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, it should be emphasized that what is called bahasa prokem is actually not a language in a real sense, but only a vocabulary. The character of the infix *ok* (as well as the prefix *kos* and suffix *ce*) is entirely morphological; it has no syntactic function. The prokem "language" has no syntax of its own; prokem words are used in sentences the grammatical structure of which is ordinary Indonesian. If prokem words are affixed,<sup>14</sup> the affix is an Indonesian or Jakartan affix. Furthermore, one interesting aspect of bahasa prokem is that most of its vocabulary is formed on the basis of Indonesian, not Jakartan or regional, words.

That is to say, it is as if bahasa prokem were a hybrid branch grafted on to the Indonesian tree. The usage of bahasa prokem is also like that. If two persons are said to be speaking prokem, it means that they are using Indonesian or Jakartan and slipping in a large enough number of prokem words so that it is unintelligible to others. Below is an example:

--A: *Éh, gimokan nih. Entar malem jadi gara? Rencananya kan kita mau keme bareng-bareng. Kebetulan nyokap ame bokap ogut lagi gara dae nih.*

12. The suffix *ce* is also found in a number of other words such as *bulce* (<*bule* ["whitey"]) and *gelce* (<*gele* ["marijuana"]).

13. Simply as an illustration, the following example might be noted: in Dairi Pakpak language the word *mengokal* appears with the meaning *menggali* ("dig up"). See *Kamus Bahasa Dairi-Pakpak* by Tindi Radja Manik (Jakarta: Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, 1977). Perhaps similarities of that type were at one time noticed by people in Medan and then applied by them to other words.

14. This, in fact, rarely occurs. As a colloquial language both sleek and simple, bahasa prokem shuns derived words which theoretically would not be unusual but which sound odd, such as *bersepokat*, *disleborkan*, *tergintur*, *kelokitan*, and so forth.

--B: *Ini dia yang ogut juga lagi pikirin. Keme dimokan sih? Ogut sih terus terang aja lagi gara dae dokat. Mokal juga kalo ngajak si doi. Sokap aja nih yang ikut? Cesi ente dibawa nggak? Denger-denger ente sekarang ama si X nih.*

--A: *Ah, gokil lo. Doi kan udah dae beruangnya. Bisa-bisa ogut dibikin mokat. Oh, ya, ngomong-ngomong perginya naek roda sokap nih?*<sup>15</sup>

Some people might object to this example as an inaccurate one. The word *beruang*, for example, is probably not common among university students. But even that is one of the characteristics of *bahasa prokem*: there are various words which vary according to the district or social group of their users. It is altogether possible that a word is known in Tanah Tinggi but not recognized in Blok M. In just that manner, words used by secondary school students are often different from the vocabulary of street kids.

Emma Madjid,<sup>16</sup> for example, noted that students of the University of Indonesia used two different words for *tahu* ("know"), namely *tokau* and *watu*, depending on their respective faculties. However, in compiling examples of *prokem* words, this writer did not mention a single term related to theft, marijuana, or sex, whereas it is precisely those terms which are most frequently cited as examples by another group, the street kids.

*Bahasa prokem* certainly has a different function for students and for convicts. The latter emphasize to a greater degree its characteristic as a secret language. In the field of narcotics, for example, terms are changed with great rapidity, among other reasons, to replace a word which has become too widely known with a new one which is still secret. For instance, one word for marijuana, *gele*, has been turned into *lege*, *lesige*, *lesi*, and *gelce*.

The definition and rules of *bahasa prokem* are sufficiently clear. The discussion above has, perhaps, adequately demonstrated that it has certain principles of formation. If we review those principles, it appears that every rule of *bahasa prokem* is the same as, or similar to, a rule of another code language. Inverted words are found in children's codes. Words formed by using the infix *ok* have parallels in other codes. Similarly newly coined words can be compared to various other kinds

---

15. This is taken from *Kompas* (February 1, 1981) in which the conversation was translated as follows:

"Eh, gimana nih. Nanti malam jadi tidak? Rencananya kan kita mau pergi makan bareng-bareng. Kebetulan ibu bapak saya lagi tidak ada nih. - Ini dia yang juga saya pikirkan. Makan di mana sih? Kalau saya sih terus terang lagi tidak beruang. Malu juga kalau mengajak pacar. Siapa saja nih yang ikut? Pacarmu diajak enggak? Dengar-dengar sekarang pacarmu si X. - Ah, kamu gila. Dia kan sudah punya pacar. Bisa-bisa saya dibikin mati. Oh ya, ngomong-ngomong perginya naik mobil siapa sih?"

"Well, how about it? Is it on for tonight or not, huh? We planned to go out and eat together, didn't we? It turns out my folks aren't home right now."

"That's just what I've been thinking. But where are we gonna eat? As for me, to be honest I don't have any cash. It'd be embarrassing to ask my girl along. So who's going to come along? Are you asking your girl or not? Everyone's saying your latest is that X."

"Hey, are you crazy? She's already got a boyfriend, hasn't she. You wanna get me killed? Hey, talking about going out, whose car are we taking anyway?"

16. See Emma Madjid, "Bahasa prokem, jargonnya kaum muda di Betawi yang masih berseri," *Gaung IKSI*, 5, 12 (September 1981).

of slang. In other words, bahasa prokem is only another "restricted language" or "secret language," which is used in Indonesia at a certain period by a certain group. The uniqueness of bahasa prokem lies not in its type of rules but in its type of usage.

The articles and papers which have appeared so far concerning bahasa prokem or, more generally, youth language have mostly observed it as an element destructive to Indonesian while at the same time displaying the creativity of youth. The accusation of destructiveness has been replied to with incisive wit by Teguh Esha,<sup>17</sup> while the creative aspect has been discussed by Boen S. Oemarjati.<sup>18</sup> As one of the sources of enriching Indonesian (in the sense of expanding its vocabulary), youth language and bahasa prokem are obviously more creative, more supple, indeed more pleasant to the ear, than the wholesale borrowing of foreign terms.

The real problem does not lie here. A code or secret language is not only a game. A code appears because of a group's need to express its identity or to protect its activities in the midst of society. By using a special language, as if it were separate from the general language, a group proclaims itself likewise separate from the general society.

Because of this, it is worthwhile for us to review the origins and development of bahasa prokem, as well as the groups now using it. Apparently bahasa prokem emerged among gangsters and convicts and then became the argot of the street kids. We don't yet have any idea at all as to when and where bahasa prokem was first fashioned. In the early '60s, clearly, it already existed, perhaps it had already existed for some time before that. A number of people have claimed that bahasa prokem first appeared in Medan. Perhaps street kids from Medan played a role in spreading it to the capital. In any case, the street kids are the intermediary group which has been transferring bahasa prokem from the criminal group to the student group, and this phenomenon seems to have begun around 1970. In the late '60s bahasa prokem was already being used by youths accustomed to taking drugs, but only after 1975 did the language begin to spread widely among the youth in the capital.

The problem of marijuana and various other narcotics is related to the spread of bahasa prokem, because apparently youths who smoked marijuana were the ones who first used it, perhaps as an argot to conceal their activities, perhaps also because they "caught it" from the street kids dealing in marijuana. If we examine contemporary prokem vocabulary, it is obvious that the world of narcotics still is a very large field of terminology; note for example the following words: *barang, rambang, nisan, niseng, gele gokel, lesi, nirwana, amplop, rumput, boat, liplip, kancing, pun, putih, bedak mayat*, and so forth.

With regard to the dissemination of bahasa prokem, the young author, Teguh Esha, has played an important role. His novel *Ali Topan detektif partikelir* [Ali Topan, Private Detective] (Cypress, 1978), was the first (and in fact remains the only) one to use bahasa prokem systematically. A year earlier, he had published in the journal *Lelaki* (No. 9, February 1977) a list of a few prokem words which he had noted down from a convict named Hasan Dollar. It was at that time that Teguh Esha first heard of the existence of bahasa prokem, and when he inserted prokem words into his novel *Ali Topan* it was not with the intention of illustrating an already existing situation among the youth in the capital, but rather precisely of using an

17. See Teguh Esha, "Hayo rusak-rusakkan," *Zaman* 2, 52 (September 20-26, 1981).

18. See Boen S. Oemarjati, "Bahasa remaja: kreativitas yang perlu pembinaan," *Mutiara*, no. 228 (October 29, 1980).

argot in order to build up linkages to the gamins of Jakarta. In other words, according to the author himself, *bahasa prokem* was not yet widespread among students in 1978 when *Ali Topan* appeared.

In that novel Teguh Esha used *bahasa prokem* as a sort of language level beside Indonesian and Jakartan. In dialogues, Indonesian feels formal; Jakartan indicates a close relationship; while *bahasa prokem* effects an even more intimate relationship. For example, Robert Oui (the "detective") and Ali Topan use *bahasa prokem*:

- *Ngatri omong prokem, gara? Kalo gara ngatri jangan sewot ya? kata si detektip lagi.*
- *Di mokaan rokmnye? sahut Ali Topan sambil senyum.*
- *Naa, gokit dong! Rokum gout di Garogol, bah! Gout tinggal sama bokin gout. Ntar ogut kenalin.*
- Nah. Nah. Makin los deh komunikasi di antara mereka.*<sup>19</sup>

A friend of Ali Topan was only mystified as he listened to that conversation. In this way the author succeeded in showing clearly the chief characteristic of *bahasa prokem* as an argot: its chief purpose is not to conceal the point of a conversation, but rather to draw a line between those who understand and those who don't.

Nowadays, *bahasa prokem* is widely used by students from the elementary up to the university level. Its dissemination is broad but not even: young people who are said to be *kuper* (<*kurang pergaulan* ["not great social mixers"]) know only a few words, whereas some university students, especially those who live in hostels and always associate with each other, use the language every day. Nonetheless, usually they do *not* use it in public or at home with the intention of not being understood by others (as for example parents sometimes use Dutch or English so that their children do not understand). Instead, they use *bahasa prokem* precisely at school, on the campus, or on the streets, that is just among themselves.

The question which arises is why young people need an argot, and how far they can be considered a group separate from the general society. If we observe in greater detail Teguh Esha's novels, we obtain a sharp picture of some of the problems of youth in contemporary Jakarta. Both *Ali Topan* novels were very successful in 1977 and 1978, because of their speech style which was clearly superior to the standards of ordinary pop novels, because the chief character was simultaneously realistic and idealistic, but also because of the social problems portrayed in them. The basic theme of both those novels is the generation gap.

In the first novel (*Ali Topan kesandung cinta* [Ali Topan tripped up by love]), two extremely different families are portrayed; yet both of them fail with regard to communication between parents and children. Ali Topan's father and mother live apart and are indifferent to each other; their behavior is very scandalous; and their relationship with their son is practically completely broken off. In the other

---

19. *Ali Topan detektip partikelir*, p. 147. It means:

"Mengerti bahasa prokem tidak? Kalau tidak mengerti, jangan marah ya? - Di mana rumahnya? - Nah, begitu dong! Rumah saya di Grogol. Saya tinggal bersama istri saya. Sebentar lagi saya kenalkan."

"Do you understand bahasa prokem or not? If you don't understand, don't get angry."

"Where's your house?"

"Ah, that's the way, right! My house is in Grogol. I live with my wife. In a little while, I'll introduce you."

This dialogue sounds somewhat artificial. But the blending of *bahasa prokem* with Jakartan and Indonesian matches the usage of colloquial language.

family, Anna is treated by her parents with severity and complete lack of understanding.

In the second novel (*Ali Topan detektip partikelir*) Ali Topan's feelings towards his parents are even clearer: he hates his father while he loves his mother--but at the same time he is disappointed in and ashamed of her behavior. Outside the home Ali Topan maintains a parent-child relationship with his elders on the basis of their attitudes and morals (the one is a middle-aged sugar-daddy and the other a gigolo-sated dragon). Ali Topan does not seem completely fictitious or entirely removed from reality. Ali Topan's feelings of disappointment, shame, and hatred towards his parents must be considered symbols of more general social attitudes: the basis of Ali Topan's judgments involve his perception of a social order and a value system with which he cannot agree. A number of scenes and conversations in both novels clearly demonstrate this fact. Conversations centering around political problems, social justice, personal integrity, the power of money, and so forth, indicate that Teguh Esha's novels not only narrate Ali Topan's rebellion against his parents but also represent the challenge of the younger generation to the older generation.

Actually there are numerous indications of the restlessness of today's young people. But, so far as I know, no serious research has ever been undertaken on this stratum of society; hence we are not yet able to draw a conclusion about this restlessness or even the riots that sometimes break out among the secondary school students in the capital. Research is urgently needed from the perspective of sociology (social and demographic developments), economics, politics, as well as psychology. Since 1966 students in large cities have been increasingly focused in upon. Perhaps at that time they emerged as a force which participated in determining political life. The youth problem in Jakarta today is actually more restricted, because it only involves a relatively small number of persons, yet at the same time it is broader because it is related to the development of Indonesian society since independence.

In this respect language study can also produce a valuable contribution, because language use is extremely significant. Bahasa prokem should be studied as a language phenomenon and, more importantly, as a social symptom. A code or a jargon does not come into being as the result of games but because of the needs of a segment of society.