

The Reading of Young Chinese-Indonesian of the Language Use in Imlek Shows on Television

Liliek Soelistyo
Department of English, Petra Christian University
Loow 4 : The Latitude
June 3 – 4, 2014

Abstract

This paper deals with the reading of young Chinese-Indonesians of the language use in Imlek shows on televisions. It discusses how these young Chinese-Indonesians negotiate and construct their identities while they read/receive the language. The research is done by participation-observation and interview methods. The research finds out that the language use in the Imlek shows has constructed their identities as being ambivalent. The language has shaped them to perceive them as both Indonesian-Chinese and Chinese-Indonesian. Throughout the research it can be seen that their identities keep on changing and constructing.

Keywords : reading, language, identity, negotiation, construction

Introduction

There has been a kind of overwhelming expression on Chinese culture on televisions during the Chinese New Year. This is due to the fact that the culture has been permitted to be expressed through the Presidential Decree no. 6/2000 issued by the Government of Abdurrahman Wahid. I see that during the Chinese New Year most television channels present many shows that deal with Chinese cultural performances. Many Chinese-Indonesians respond the freedom of celebrating the Chinese culture by having the Chinese rituals, decorating the public places and performing and watching the television shows, ranging from comedy shows, talk-shows, and even fortune telling done by Chinese fortune tellers. My research focuses on how the young Chinese Indonesians read the language use in the Imlek shows on television. I choose the young Chinese Indonesian as my informants in this research with the assumption that their experience of watching the Imlek shows has not been influenced by the knowledge that such shows had been banned until 2001.

I did my research by staying in the family of my informants. To get the data about how they experience in watching the Imlek show and how they understand the language use in the shows, I observed, took notes and interviewed them. I also participated in my informants' activities such as going to the fitness center, accompanying them to go for shopping, and spending their Sundays in the church. This paper analyzes the reading of these young Chinese-Indonesians on the language used in the shows. How they negotiate and construct their identities while reading the language and how this reading affects their personal lives will be discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Since this study focuses on the audience as the one who watches the Imlek shows on television, I am going to talk about how the audience is actively engaged in the experience. Audience is the producer of meaning of text and technology. How the production of meaning happened depends on the complex interest of the micro-politics, especially the micro-politics of the media consumption in everyday life (Ang 1996, 8). The micro-politics here refers to the concept of Foucault that the power is either formally or informally used by individuals or groups to achieve their purpose in organizations or institutions. Besides, audience is called “active” when they receive (read) the media text, depending on the context where text is received, and on the personal attitude of the audience when they receive the text. This means that a text is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but they interpret the meanings based on their life experiences.

Concerning the audience research, Alasuutari (1999) suggests three phases of reception studies. The first phase is called the “reception research” which is dated back to Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model. This model approaches any communication from the media as a process where certain messages are sent and then received with certain effects. A message is no longer understood as a ball thrown to the receiver. However, when a message is encoded by a programme producer and then decoded by the receivers (the audience), the sent and received messages are not necessarily the same. This means that a different audience might decode the programme differently. Second phase that he suggests is “audience ethnography (4)”. In this phase, researchers study the role of the media in everyday life, not the impact (or meaning) of everyday life on the reception of a certain programme that the audience experiences. It has been argued that this kind of study entails at least several months stay in the field, while there are some restrictions of doing participant observation study in a home where most television viewing takes place in very small and private settings. Therefore, the third phase is suggested by Alasuutari. The approach is called a constructionist view which entails a broader frame within which researchers are interested in the role of media in everyday life, “both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourse (6)”. That means the media and their contents are seen in the discourse as reality and as representations or distortions of reality.

Above, the development of the audience research has been shaped by a shift from encoding/decoding model to audience ethnography and then to a constructionist view. My analysis on the reading of young Chinese Indonesians of the language use in Imlek shows on television is approached from the constructionist view because this approach conceives of the television and its programmes in a broader perspective than just an encoded message to be then decoded by my informants. Instead, the emphasis is on viewing practice in which my informants and the media contents (the programmes) are tied. Therefore, the dialogue with my informants is both positioning them and positioned by them. Alasuutari points out that the frames used by a researcher is “the audiencing frames of television makers, and the frames used by the audiences in justifying their viewing habits all tell us about the embedded moralities of everyday life and media use” (152).

Talking about viewing habits, Ien Ang says that these habits are complex. She states in *Watching Dallas* (1985) that the experience of watching television serial is very complicated, “no experience is “unambiguous: It is always ambivalent and contradictory” (13). The ambivalence is the mixed feeling where a person experiences uncertainty or indecisiveness

concerning something. It is what Ien Ang (2003) states as ‘in-betweenness when she describes her own identity. She experiences her lack of Chinese cultural-capital and heightened visibility as an awkward dilemma. She says (2005): “In Taiwan I was different because I couldn’t speak Chinese; in the West I was different because I looked Chinese (vii). What Ang explains is the ambiguous position of a ‘neither/nor’, or ‘both/and’, an argument beyond identity and difference. Ang underlines that there is a double standard of what it means to be Chinese because being an overseas Chinese, she might be “too Chinese” or “not Chinese enough” (Ang 2003: 25).

My Informants’ Ambivalence

When I asked my young informants about the Imlek shows on televisions, they said that they were not interested in the programmes showed during the Chinese New Year. They admitted that the shows were great. I realized that these preliminary responses to the shows were not satisfying, so I conducted the second interview and did the chats with them during my stay. I also interviewed them about whether or not the characters in the Imlek shows are Chinese, they absolutely said “yes” because they perceived the skin color, the shape of eyes and facial features as the stereotypes of the Chinese. However, when I asked my informants whether they are Chinese or not, they get confused. They say that they are Indonesian but their parents always tell him that they are Chinese. After several talks with them, they started to focus the topic on the language used by either the character in the Imlek shows or by the host of the programmes.

For my young informants, media has shown the use of bad Indonesian language. The language used in the television programmes of Imlek is not correct and accurate. There is an over-accentuated articulation, which is not common in the daily life of the Indonesians, formally or informally. For example, in one of *Opera van Java* shows, one of the characters says: “lu pulang pelgi kagak pake pamit” (you come and go without permission). According to them, there has been an eradication of the Indonesian language that might not be repaired if people adopt the language from the programmes.

From here, I see that there is a kind of rejection of being included in the society who speaks the language. One of my young informants, Rio, says that he does not belong to those who ruin the national language because every day he speaks good Indonesian language. Even, he does not want to be seen as a person identified by how he/she speaks. As what Alasuutari (1999) argues that audience constructs and is a constructed by the media that he/she watches. In the activity of watching television, audience does not only have the activity of watching, but also of being watched. Like what Rio has experiences, my other young informant, Daniswara, also feels that in the Imlek shows on television, his national language has been so confusing as he never experiences in his daily life someone speaks the way the character in the Imlek shows speaks. He does not want to be identified as what the character in the shows is identified because of their language. There is a power in the language that defines who the audience is (Bourdieu, 1987). Both of my informants feel that they do not belong to the society that has harassed the national language.

On the other hand, my informants Rio and Daniswara also feel that the over-accentuated language used in the programmes of Imlek on television might be intended to ridicule the Chinese. In my opinion, through language there is a prejudice. The over-accentuated language used by the characters in the Imleks shows might raise a prejudice toward the Chinese. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1988) says that “the expectation of inarticulacy based on someone’s

appearance or accent, is one of the most prejudice there is” (11). Despite their Chinese appearance such as slanted eyes, a male character with a pigtail, the characters do not necessarily speak with such inarticulacy. According to my two informants, in addition to the over-accentuating language used to ridicule, there are also negative stereotypes of the Chinese such as being arrogant, rude, materialistic, stingy, selfish and corrupt.

To some extent, my two informants do not realize that they are undergoing the inclusion process. They feel that they are included in the programmes, so they have been the object of ridicule. The television programmes on Imlek shows have made fun of them (read: the Chinese). When they are watching the programme, they consider themselves as being represented by the characters who speak the incorrect Indonesian language. Here, I see that there are dual self-identifications as what Freud (1921) states that identification is, in fact, ambivalent from the very start.

The process experienced by the two informants when they are watching the Imlek shows on televisions has been characterized by the ambiguous consciousness as a Chinese-Indonesian and as an Indonesian-Chinese. The hyphenated term used above, according to Ien Ang suggests the “complicated entanglement” (2001) of Chineseness and Indonesianness within the process of hybridization. However, the hyphenation that deals with ethnicity might lead easily to essential category—that is becoming too Chinese or too Indonesian (Caglar 1997: 172). So, the term may also mean that there will be a limitation of heterogeneity that also again might undermine the cultural characters of both.

Negotiation and Construction

Because of what is read from the Imlek shows on the television, there is a feeling of ambivalence of my two young informants about their identities. The language used in the Imlek shows reminds them of both being a foreign origin who does not want to be ridiculed and being a true Indonesian who admits his national language. However, as I further observed and participated in their daily life, I saw that my two young informants try to negotiate their identity and construct it.

First of all I see that their identities are constructed through a process of “self and ascription” (Barth, 1969). This leads to a continuous process of comparison and negotiation which makes my informants shape a sense of belonging, emotional attachment, and a feeling of pride. Thus at the end, they accept the norm and behavior of the groups. So, when my informants see that their identity as an Indonesian is threatened by the incorrect language, as the members of Indonesian citizens, they develop positive conceptions of themselves. They are proud to be Indonesian with its national language. They try to criticize the media; in this case the television shows. They argue that the producer should have paid attention to the use of a good and correct Indonesian language. However, they realize that the producer might have had the intention of increasing the ratings of the programme. Rio, one of my informants, says that he understands why the producer applies that kind of language in order to attract viewers. Besides, their being students of colleges makes them surrounded by others who share a common background. This has pushed them to feel legitimate belonging to their homeland.

On the other hand, during the interviews with my informants, I realized that both my informants tried to share their common sets of values as Chinese Indonesians such as being obedient to their parents, respecting their ancestors, and celebrating Imlek. Therefore, they learn to deal with others through their habitual routines such as paying a visit to the elders during the

Chinese New Year, getting a long with their peer-group, and enjoying the Imlek programmes. Toomey (1999) argues that there are ‘two sources of identity typically influence an individual’s everyday interaction: group-based identity and person’s based identity’ (27). Because they live in the Chinese community where everyday they see and interact with the Chinese people, they also develop and negotiate their identity through their community. Besides, they acquire this cultural identity through their parental guidance during their formative years. As what Daniswara’s mother always tells him that they are “*pendatang*” which connotes people who come from outside the country, Daniswara believes so, despite the fact that he does not really understand the term, the newcomer. The status of “*pendatang*” is according to Hoon (2008) is a powerful construct and is “detrimental to the ability of the Chinese to identify fully as Indonesian” (138). The status creates a boundary of difference, the “imaginary line” that according to Gilman (1985) impossible to cross. The fact that how long the Chinese has settled in Indonesia has not changed the position of the Chinese as “*pendatang*”.

Furthermore, the language usage enters my informants’ cultural identity construction. Since they were educated to use the Indonesian language instead of the Chinese language by their parents and schools, they develop “the emotional significance” (Toomey, 30) that they attach to their sense of belonging and affiliation with the Indonesian cultural identity. Different from their parents who speak two languages, Indonesian and Chinese, these young informants have never learned the Chinese Language. Therefore, when they see the over-accentuated Indonesian language used in the Imlek shows, they feel that this has reproduced and perpetuated the negative stereotypes of the Chinese.

Conclusion

The reading of young Chinese-Indonesian of the language use in Imlek Shows on television has highlighted that it constructs their identity as being ambivalent. Being a Chinese Indonesian or Indonesian Chinese has been represented in the way they react on the language used in the programmes. The Chineseness that is always taken for granted and is never clearly defined will stay unconsciously or consciously with them for life. This is due to the fact that their parents tell them again and again that they are the “other” to the Indonesian people. The ambiguous identity imposed by their parents has made my two young informants construct their own identities.

The language in the programmes that they criticize has shaped them to perceive themselves as both the Indonesian-Chinese and the Chinese-Indonesian. Throughout this research, I can see that their identities keep on changing and constructing. My two informants assert that being an Indonesian- Chinese or Chinese-Indonesian is essential to their identities. This can be naturally exchanged according to the situation and condition. I feel that my two informants’ identities have been “historically grounded” but also “transformable” (Ang, 2000 :2). It is not essential but at the level of experience it might be essential.

Finally, the language used in Imlek shows on television has been received/read by my two young informants in their positions as both Indonesian citizen who are very proud of their nationality and as Chinese descendants who keep on negotiating and constructing their identities.

Reference:

- Alasuutari, Perri. 1999. *Rethinking the media audience*. London : Sage Publication.
- Ang, Ien. 2005. *On not speaking chinese : living between Asia and the West*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Ang, Ien. 2003. "Together-in-difference: beyond diaspora, into hybridity". *Asian Studies Review*. Vol. 27.No.2.
- Ang, Ien. 2000. "Identity blues." In *without guarantees: In honour of Stuart Hall*, edited by Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie, 1-13. London: Verso.
- Ang, Ien. 1985. *Watching Dallas: soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London, Methuen.
- Barth, F. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1988. *Language and media*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. "The force of law: toward a sociology of the juridical field." *The Hastings Law Journal*. Vol 38.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. *Global diasporas. An introduction*. London: UCL Press.
- Hoon, Chang-Yau. 2008. *Chinese identity in post-Suharto Indonesia: culture, politics and media*. Oregon: Sussex Academic Press.
- Ting-Toomey, S. 1999. *Communicating across culture*. New York: The Guilford Press.