

Of Zebra Doves and Prawn Crackers: Javanese Metaphors for Vocal Types

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Both the English and Javanese¹ languages describe music largely in metaphoric terms. In English, for instance, we use the spatial metaphor "up" and "down" to refer to differences in pitch. In Javanese these same differences are described as "small" and "large," respectively. The linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson, in their stimulating book, *Metaphors We Live By*, have shown how metaphors are a basic component of any conceptual system. As they put it (1980, p.115):

Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientations, objects, etc.). This need leads to metaphorical definition in our conceptual system.

Lakoff and Johnson found, in examining certain English language concepts, that a whole series of metaphors from one domain were being used to talk about a concept from another domain. Two of the examples they gave were "time is money" and "argument is war." Because these metaphors serve to structure our thought (that is, they both reflect and shape the culture of the speaker), they call these *structural metaphors*. Arguments, for us English speakers, are conceived of and experienced as war: we win, lose, demolish, shoot down arguments; we plan and use strategies; we defend and attack claims. We think of time both as a limited resource and as a valuable commodity: we spend, waste, save, spare, run out of, lose, gain, borrow, put aside, budget, and invest time.

The classification of singers into vocal types is an example of a complex, abstract concept that is understood in terms of more basic concepts. The Italian voice classification we have inherited in English emphasizes vocal range. The metaphors used are therefore taken primarily from the "up-down" continuum (soprano, alto, basso, basso profundo), supplemented by theatrical (dramatic, helden, buffo, robusto) and melodic qualities (coloratura, lyric, cantante). The structural metaphors used in Java for classifying singers are taken mostly from the lexical domains of food, apparel, shape, personality type, and birds.

Some examples of food metaphors are *renyah* ("crisp"), *empuk* ("soft, tender"), *atos* ("hard, tough"), *manis* ("sweet"), and *pulen* ("the soft, chewy texture of well-cooked rice"). As an illustration of how these terms are applied to voices, take *renyah*—the texture of prawn crackers. No Javanese meal is complete without

something thin and crisp, and there are many foods with onomatopoetic names, like *peyek*, *kripik*, and *krupuk*, whose sole purpose is to lighten, with a refreshing crackle, the generally sodden texture of main dishes. A *renyah* voice is accordingly light, pleasant, and agile, with a quick vibrato. Underlying the food-song metaphors are three points of convergence. First, both food and song are perceived as something pleasurable to be consumed. Second, both food and song may be used as offerings to the spirit world. And third, the singers themselves (at least female singers as viewed by men) are seen as objects of delectation.²

Clothing metaphors include *bregas* ("dapper") and *kau* ("ungainly, awkward"). Terms that refer to physical shape include *bunder* ("round"), *tajam* ("sharp"), *tipis* ("thin"), *ageng* ("large") and *alit* ("small"). As for personality types, in Java these are almost always explained in terms of characters from the *wayang*, or shadow puppet theater, whether one is talking about singing or psychology³. The stories of the *wayang* are mostly taken from the *Mahabharata*, an ancient Indian epic that has long been a cornerstone of Javanese culture. For female singers, the two principal categories are *luruh* ("humble") and *branyak* ("brash"). These are exemplified by the characters Sembadra and Sri Kandhi, respectively (see Fig. 1). Although they differ in particulars, many of these metaphors have corollaries



Figure 1: Sembadra (*luruh*, "Humble") and Sri Kandhi (*branyak*, "brash"). From Hardjowirogo (1949).

in the way we talk about singers' voices in English, and in other languages as well. Because the bird metaphor is so extensive, and so characteristically Javanese, I shall focus on it for the remainder of this paper.

Throughout the Indonesian islands birds have long had a preeminent importance. Images of birds have figured prominently in the visual arts since paleolithic times (Holt 1967, pp. 17-19). More recently, birds have been a favorite symbol used by novelists and poets alike in their book titles. Musical compositions also frequently include birds in their titles. And Javanese dance terminology makes use of bird metaphors for certain body positions (e.g., Brakel 1995, p. 12).

In Java, as elsewhere in the Malay world, cage birds have long been prized possessions. This is brought home in a novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1991), Indonesia's leading fiction writer, about a young man coming into adulthood at the close of the Dutch colonial era (which officially ended in 1945)⁴. On the eve of the young man's wedding, his mother comes to him to offer advice. She's upset that he is marrying a young woman of mixed parentage, and that he has been turning away from his own heritage. She tells him of the five attributes of a Javanese knight: a house, a wife, a horse, a bird, and a *keris*, or ritual dagger. She says (p. 312), "The fourth, the bird, is a symbol of beauty, of distraction, of everything that has no connection with simple physical survival, of only the satisfaction of one's soul. Without this, people are only lumps of soulless stone." She ends by saying, "Now you know all that a knight need know. Never be without even one of these five things. Do not scoff at the knightly attributes: each of them is a sign of yourself."

Some birds are, of course, valued over others. Perhaps the most prized of all is the *perkutut* (*Geopelia striata*), or "zebra dove" (also called "barred ground dove," "peaceful dove," and "turtle dove"). This bird may live for over 50 years, and requires from five to fifteen years of daily training to reach its peak as a singer, at which point it may be worth thousands of dollars. Javanese bird fanciers appreciate the song of the zebra dove not only for its beauty, but also for its power to calm the mind. In the words of B. Sarwono (1989, p. 73), "In the past, people enjoyed zebra doves while seeking to develop awareness [*kewaspadaan*] and inner calm [*ketenangan batin*]"⁵. They considered the sound of the zebra dove to be the best means of achieving their goal. This is because its call was perceived as a melody that was able to connect being and nothingness [*tidak ada (kosong)*]." The association with the supernatural, in evidence here, shows up also in the belief that zebra doves have the power to bring both good and bad luck. A whole science has developed that is designed to predict, from a bird's coloring and its singing behavior, what influence it will have on the life of its owner. (Sarwono [1989, pp. 45-52] lists 31 named types of coloring and 12 named singing habits; the names of Hindu gods figure prominently in this terminology.) The price of a bird thus depends both on the aesthetic qualities of its voice (or of its predicted voice) and on its magical properties as manifested in its physical and behavioral traits.

The song of the zebra dove is subject to much discussion and careful evaluation. Birds are entered into contests, and their songs judged according to fixed criteria. The call is divided into three parts. The first is called the "lifting" (*angkatan*) or the "front" (*pengajeng*); the second, the "middle" (*penengah*) or "stroke" (*pukulan*); and the third, the "tip" (*ujung*), the "falling" ("dawah"), or the "throw-away" (*pembuang*). Every sound in each of the three parts is ranked according to how beautiful it is (see Fig. 2), and the call as a whole is also judged for clarity and for the beauty of its rhythm. Much of the terminology used to describe the

calls is derived from Javanese musical terminology (for example, *angkatan*, above). This is especially true of aspects having to do with relations between parts, such as melody and rhythm (e.g., *wirama*, *thuthukan*, *cengkok*, *wilet*, *lagu*, *laras*), or with phonetics (e.g., *lulut*). On the other hand, terminology that is specific to zebra dove calls is used metaphorically to refer to singers' voices. This is especially true of those aspects that have to do with the quality of sound, such as timbre and pitch.

Of the many onomatopoeic words used to represent zebra dove sounds, two are particularly important in musical terminology: *kung* and *arum*. The best Javanese singers can be put into one of these two categories. Those with high, clear voices are called *arum*, which is a shortened form of *keteko arum*, or sometimes, *keteko langu arum*. The word *keteko* is taken from the middle and end of one of the possible zebra dove calls (see fig. 2). The word *arum* means "fragrant," and *langu*, somewhat inexplicably, means "rank-smelling." An *arum* voice is medium loud and *empuk*, which literally means "tender"— what in English we would call "warm" or "velvety." Lower, resonant voices, on the other hand, are called "kung." They are rare, and, like zebra dove voices that end in *kung*, are highly valued. Some singers, whose voices are not good enough to be called *arum* or *kung* might be called *kuk*— the least-valued ending for a zebra dove call (see fig. 2).⁶

The bird metaphor for singers does not stop there, however. Zebra dove terminology is sometimes used to describe a singer's development. Thus the word *ngayer*, which refers to a bird's being able to sing several times in a row— which the doves achieve only after many months of prompting— may be used for a singer who has gotten past the shaky beginning stages. Similarly, the word *bocor*, which literally means "to spring a leak," or "to become unplugged," is used for a singer whose voice finally loosens up. Singers' professional names also occasionally reflect the bird metaphor: one male palace singer was called Bandar Kung, after the *kung* sound of his voice, and one of the female singers at the radio station is called Prendjak, a kind of songbird. Another clear use of the bird metaphor came up during one of my singing lessons. My teacher was discussing the singing of a famous female singer who likes to show off her voice by making up virtuosic melodies. Her innovations, to his taste, go beyond the limits of the acceptable, creating havoc within the tradition. One phrase he used to describe her behavior was *mengobrak-abrik kurung*—"she turns the cage topsy-turvy."

While there are certainly other cultures in which singers are referred to metaphorically as songbirds (Jenny Lind comes to mind), few are as highly developed in this respect as Javanese culture: birds and birdsong have richly layered meanings for Javanese people. This metaphor reflects central values, practices, and beliefs of a certain segment of Javanese society.⁷ The peace of mind afforded by the zebra dove's song is the cornerstone of well-being in Javanese mysticism. Also important is the belief that the voice— both in speech and in song— can have a strong effect on the world of praxis. This is seen in the zebra dove's power to bring good or bad luck to its owner. The slow, deliberate rhythm and relatively flat intonation of the well-trained dove are reminiscent of refined Javanese speech, and reflect the high value placed on self-control.⁸

But more specifically, musical values are highlighted by metaphors as well. The opera tradition's emphasis on vocal technique and expression of the text is what gives rise to the "high-low," dramatic, and melody-type metaphors used to categorize operatic voices. Javanese singers, on the other hand, are not trained through vocal exercises, but through more wholistic participation in musical

TABEL ELEMEN SUARA PERKUTUT DAN NILAINYA

ANGKATAN	TENGAH	UJUNG
Ur. 3	(kosong) 2	Kuk. 3
Wer 3	Tek 3	Pek 3
Ok 3	Te. 4	Bek 3
Wek. 3	Re ke te 4	Klak 4
Ker 3	Ketek. 5	Kwak. 4
Klar. 4	Keteke 5	Ko 4½
War 4	Ketek. 6	Koo. 5
Hoor 4	Ke-tek 6	Koong (kotor) 5
Klir 4	Ke-te 7	Koong (kasar) 5
Wir 4		Koong (cowong) 6
Klaar 5		Koong (angin) 6
Waaar 5		Koong (harum) 6
Haaar 5		Koong (berat) 7
Kliour 5		Koong (bersih) 7
Aooorr 5		Koong (semblih) 8
Aur 5		
Aeer 5		
Weer 5		
Kleer 5		
Kle 5		
We 5		
Klo 5		
Kla 5		
Wo 5		
Wa 5		
Oo 5		
Wee 6		
Klee 6		
A-E 6		
A-O 6		
We-O 7		
Wa-O 7		
Kle-O 7		
Kla-O 7		
Wee-O 8		
Waa-O 8		

Sumber : dr. Soemoro, Perkutut di Jaman Modern, 1975.

Figure 2: "Table of zebra-dove voice components and their scores" Angkatan = "lifting, beginning", tengah = "middle", ujung = "tip, end." From Sarwono (1989); originally from Soemoro 1975.

activities. Technique is rarely discussed: almost all of the terms that refer specifically to vocal production are borrowed from Dutch, the former colonial language. Moreover, there is very little concern for expressing the text. For most pieces in the repertoire, a singer may plug in any text, as long as the poetic meter matches⁹. Many of the standard texts are composed at least partially in an archaic form of Javanese; their meaning is further obscured by the subtle word play that includes riddles and other devices. Most singers, then, have only a vague notion of what they are singing about, and singing does not “express” the text the way it does in the European tradition. What singing *does* express, however, is *rasa*, or affect.

The Javanese traditional repertoire can be very generally divided, according to their respective *rasas*, into heavy, serious pieces and light, frivolous ones¹⁰. Singers, too, can be divided along these same lines. *Kung* voices are generally better for heavy pieces, and *arum* voices are best for light ones.

While anthropologists have spent much of the past decade deconstructing the notion that cultures are coherent, bounded wholes, I am not ready to give up on the idea of limited coherence within a conceptual system as it is manifested in a language. I suggest that *rasa* is the key to understanding coherence across the five structural metaphors used in categorizing Javanese singers. The broad categories “heavy” and “light” can be thought of as endpoints on a continuum. This continuum can be used to organize the various terms within each structural metaphor: some are felt as “lighter” than others. One possible idealized scheme, in which several of these metaphoric terms are oriented according to this continuum, is shown in fig. 3.

<i>rasa</i> :	<i>entheng</i> (“light”)	<i>anteb</i> (“heavy”)
food:	<i>renyah</i> (“crisp”)	<i>pulen</i> (“well cooked”)
clothing:	<i>bregas</i> (“dapper”)	<i>kau</i> (“ungainly”)
shape:	<i>alit</i> (“small”)	<i>ageng</i> (“large”)
wayang:	<i>branyak</i> (“brash”)	<i>luruh</i> (“humble”)
birds:	<i>arum</i> (“fragrant”)	<i>kung</i>

Figure 3: Relationship of structural metaphors to basic *rasa* categories.

The main point in all this, is that the terms we use in describing music reflect fundamental beliefs and values about music and the world we live in. To paraphrase the mother in Pramoedya’s novel, “do not scoff at the metaphors we use: they are reflections of ourselves.”

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Endnotes

¹ Javanese is the primary language spoken for daily interaction by about 75 million people, who live mostly in the central and eastern parts of the island of Java. Nearly all ethnic Javanese are bilingual. They speak Indonesian, the national language, in academic or governmental settings, and with Indonesians who do not speak Javanese. The proportion of Indonesian spoken relative to Javanese is increasing with each successive generation (many young people no longer feel comfortable speaking Javanese in formal contexts).

² For some of the complexities buried in this deceptively simple statement, see Walton (1996), Sutton (1984) and (1989), and Cooper (1994). The speakers whose vocabulary I collected were invariably male. It would be interesting to see the extent to which female speakers use this same terminology, and whether it reflects the same male, heterosexual perspective. One of my teachers told me that male singing has no affect (others clearly felt it did). This is possibly because male singing is less improvisational than female singing, but it might also be that the element of flirtation is seen as lacking when men sing. The singer-as-food metaphor, however, is also sometimes applied to male singers as well, but with different connotations. Gamelan music in Java was (and sometimes still is) marked by good-natured competition amongst the musicians (both singers and instrumentalists). If a musician were challenged beyond his abilities by his fellow musicians— if, for example, they segued, without warning, into a little-known piece and he were unable to follow— he was said to be *kepangan*, or “eaten up.”

³ For further treatment of wayang stories as a basis for Javanese psychology, see Anderson (1965) and Weiss (1977, pp. 505-519).

⁴ I am indebted to Susan Walton for pointing out this passage to me.

⁵ These are two essential components of *kebatinan*, or Javanese mystical practice.

⁶ *Renyah* voices are similar to *arum* ones, but are not as *empuk*. While *renyah* is usually a positive term, the highest praise for a singer is to call his or her voice *kung* or *arum*.

⁷ Both cage birds and Javanese mysticism were traditionally associated with

the aristocracy (*priyayi*). Both practices are now fairly widespread among other social classes. The middle classes in particular tend to emulate *priyayi* ways, and have the leisure time to devote to *priyayi* pursuits. If there is a split in who values zebra doves and what they stand for, and who doesn't, it is probably more along traditional/modern than upper-class/lower-class lines.

⁸ For an explanation of Javanese speech levels and how they relate to sociology and personality, see Keeler (1987, pp. 25-38), Keeler (1984), Poedjosoedarmo (1968), and Errington (1985) and (1988).

⁹ Two highly-regarded male singers of the older generation, however, did tell me that they took into account the meaning of the text when they sang. But the implication was that most singers do not.

¹⁰ There are dozens of terms in Javanese and Indonesian for musical *rasas*, and there is considerable variability from speaker to speaker. Not all of these terms fit neatly into this binary scheme, but for most speakers there do seem to be two overarching categories. While pieces are often talked of as expressing a single *rasa*, when musicians analyze pieces in a more detailed way, they often find that the larger pieces have more than one *rasa*.
