

# Pragmatic particles and information structure in colloquial Indonesian dialogue

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, four pragmatic particles from colloquial Indonesian, i.e. *sih*, *kok*, *lho*, *dong*, will be examined. We will address these particles by examining them from the perspectives of new topic vs old topic, new information vs old information, agreement vs disagreement, certainty vs uncertainty, non-acceptance of information, and finally, sharing vs forcing of information. The data comes from dialogues in three contemporary Indonesian films depicting life in Jakarta.

Linguists of Indonesian language have claimed that Indonesian pragmatic particles have no significant referential semantic function, but rather they express speaker mood or are used for emphasis (Sneddon 2006, Errington 1985). However, these explanations do not answer an important question, namely ‘what are the differences between particles when the meanings of them are the same?’

Indonesian native speakers often equate these particles with other lexical items. For example the particle *deh* denotes *jadi* ‘to be realized’, or *sudah* ‘already completed.’ (Atmosumarto 1994). The question then arises, why do the speakers choose to substitute *deh* for *jadi* or *sudah*?

Bataone (n.d.) compares the particles to Indonesian verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. He explains *sih* as a particle for reasoning or uncertainty, *kok* for surprise, accusation, or negative feeling, *deh* for softening imperatives or leading to finishing up. He explains *lho* as a particle which connotes surprise or emphasis.

Based on the hypothesis that the Indonesian cultural value of solidarity is marked by the use of particles Wouk (2001) tried to place them along a scale of solidarity. According to her, for example, the tags *kan* and *ya*, denote a level of familiarity and informal relationship between the speaker and hearer.

Faizah (2007) conducted extensive studies of *ya* and other particles, focusing on contour variations. She classified the functions of the particles along **three** axes: Coherence; focusing on speech act types such as statement, command and warning; Topic, focusing on whether it is a new topic or old topic; and finally, politeness, paying attention to solidarity.

Based on a hypothesis that they reflect the speaker and hearers’ access to the

information and knowledge that the speaker convey, this paper will attempt to reconsider the functions of discourse particles as they are used in conversations depicted in film. I will also argue that in addition to access to information the particles reflect the emotional condition of the interlocutors. That is, I hypothesize that in informal or casual conversation, the particles play significant roles in linking the knowledge and information accessible to speakers to their emotional states. I also argue that since many of the particles are polysemous, they require context dependent analysis.

In this study, I will mainly analyze the particles *sih*, *lho*, *kok*, and *dong*, although brief discussion of other particles such as *deh*, *tuh*, *nih*, etc. will be added when needed for making comparisons.

## 1. *sih*

*Sih* is a phrase final or sentence final particle. (It can also be used in an independent intonation unit.). In the dialogues of three films, *Ada apa dengan Cinta?* 'What's up with Cinta "love"?', *Arisan* 'Gathering' and *Arisan 2* 'Gathering 2', the most frequently appearing particle is *sih*. *Sih* has the following functions.

### 1.1. Ironical question: Interrogative + *sih*

Immediately following interrogative markers, *sih* shows a more ironical attitude of the speaker as shown in (1) to (5):

- (1) (Looking at rude behavior of the addressee)

Kamu itu apa, *sih*?  
you DEM what, *sih*  
'What are you, *sih*?'

- (2) (Looking at an instance of arrogant behavior by a man)

(Dia) laki-laki gimana, *sih*, ya?  
He man how *sih*, ya  
'What kind of man is he, *sih*, ya?'

- (3) (noticing the suitcase is very heavy),

Isinya apa aja *sih*?  
Content-DEF. what just, *sih*  
'What's is inside, *sih*?'

(4) (looking at a strange hair-do)

Rambut kamu ngapain, *sih*?

hair you do what *sih*

What did you do with that hair, *sih*?

(5) (A little child asks)

Om, siapa lagi, *sih*, yang datang?

uncle who else *sih* RE.Pro. come

'Uncle, who else *sih* is coming?'

All the sentences above can exist without *sih*. Interrogative sentences without *sih* are pure question sentences such as :

(5a) Om, siapa lagi yang datang?

'Uncle, who else is coming?'

Sentence 5 with *sih* shows that the questioner child is already tired, and he is not happy that somebody else may be coming. A lack of eagerness, fatigue, or irritation is denoted by *sih*.

### 1.2. Complaining

*Si* added to a descriptive statement connotes a negative feeling or complaining.

(6) Primitif banget, *sih*, airportnya.

Simple very *sih* airport

'The airport is so primitive, *sih*.'

(7) (A child is crying)

Kamu, *sih*, buat nangis.

You *sih*, make cry

'You *sih* are the one who made him/her cry.'

### 1.3. Topic marker, comparing and contrasting

*Si* is a topic marker for comparing or contrasting. In (8) and (9) each of the speakers compares the current situation with past.

(8) Tahun lalu, *sih*, mamanya minta tas Birkin special edition.

year past *sih* mom-DEF. ask bag Birkin special edition

‘(Compared with this year) Last year, *sih*, my mom asked a special edition Birkin bag.’

(9) *Dulunya sih, datang kesini cuma main saja.*

Before *sih*, come to here only play just

‘(Compared with now) I used to come here only to have fun.’

In (10), the speaker compares what he wants and the reality.

(10) *Maunya sih, gitu,*

Desire *sih*, that way

*tapi ntar aku disangka orang gila lagi*

but later I to be considered person crazy again

*sama orang-orang Jakarta.*

With/by people PL. Jakarta

‘(Differently from the reality), my desire is like that, but later I will be considered a crazy person again by Jakartan people.’

In (11) the speaker is comparing her own condition to the addressee:

(11) *(Hearing that the woman has cancer)*

*Buat saya, sih, berkah.*

For me, *sih*, blessing

‘For me, it is blessing

*Saya juga kanker....rahim.*

me also cancer .....uterus

‘I also have cancer, uterine cancer.’

#### 1.4. Reasoning/justification

*Si*h connotes reasoning or justifying.

(12) *(I don't buy that)*

*Soalnya mahal, sih*

because expensive *sih*

‘Because it is expensive, *sih*.’

### 1.5. Idiomatic expression: *masa sih?*

*Masa sih* 'how come' is an idiomatic expression.

(13) (being given a compliment for looking slimmer)

Masa sih, ini kayaknya efek baju, lho.

How come, *sih*, this apparently effect outfit *lho*

'How come, *sih*, it seems an effect of the outfit, *lho*.'

(14) (Hearing that Sakti was afraid of telling Mei that he is a gay.)

Sakti, masa sih gue pikiran secepat gitu?

Sakti, how come *sih*, I think that narrow like that

'Sakti, how come *sih* you thought that I am that narrow-minded?'

## 2. *Lho*

*Lho* can be located at the sentence initial position as an exclamation for surprise, which I will discuss later. *Lho* as a phrase final or sentence final particle can be compared or contrasted with *sih* discussed in Section I. I will start my discussion by comparing them in sentence final position.

### 2.1. Information and knowledge on *sih* and *lho*

When used at the end of a phrase/sentence, both of the particle *lho*, and *sih* emphasizes the speaker's emotion (Bataone n.d.). More importantly, *lho* provides new information while *sih* connotes another rather negative statement. Compare (15) and (15a).

(15) Itu (Sakti) orangnya baik banget, lho.

(15a) Itu orangnya baik banget, sih.

that personality-DEF. good very

'He is such a nice guy, *lho/sih*.'

The difference between (15) and (15a) is only *lho* and *sih*. In (15), the speaker introduces a character called Sakti as a very nice person, on the other hand in (15a), the speaker introduces Sakti as a very nice person but connotes that there may be some problems in him. 15 is a new information, meanwhile 15a could be a response sentence.

In (16), a child speaker uses *lho* to provide new information about himself. Then the

uncle confirms the information, praises him, by using *sih*.

- (16)a Uncle, aku sekarang udah bisa nulis namaku lho, uncle.  
uncle, I now already can write my name, lho, uncle.  
'Uncle, I can already write my name, *lho*, uncle.'
- b. Eh, pinter banget, sih.  
EXC. smart very, sih  
'Wow, (you are) so smart, *sih*.'

## 2.2. Definiteness and emphasis

*Lho* connotes definiteness. In (17) the speaker boasts that she has joined five social meetings, by adding *lho*.

- (17) Aku sebulan ikut arisan lima kali, lho.  
I every month join arisan five times, lho  
'I join *arisan* (socialization meeting) five times, lho.'

## 2.3. Warning

*Lho* warns or gives strong advices. *Lho* added to an imperative form connotes a bad result if the hearer does not follow the command.

- (18) Tunggu, lho.  
Wait IMP, lho.  
'Wait, (otherwise...) *lho*.'

18a without *lho* is a simple command form.

Cf. (18a) Tunggu,  
'Wait.'

- (19) Kamu makan dulu, nanti lapar lho.  
You eat before, later hungry lho.  
'You eat now, otherwise you will get hungry, *lho*.'

- (20) Cepetan bikin appointment keburu, penuh lho, nanti.  
Quickly make appointment hurry full lho later.  
'Hurry up and make an appointment, otherwise it will get full *lho*, later.'

### 3. *Dong*

Above an imperative form which was added to with the particle *lho* was discussed. For comparison, two other end of sentence particles, namely *deh*, and *dong* will be discussed below.

#### 3.1. Soft imperative

After the imperative form of a verb, *dong* is added to soften the imperative as in

(21) Adding *dong* is often used for flirting purpose, especially when it is used by a woman as in (22). In both sentences, the vowel for [o] is lengthened.

(21) Tenang, dong.

Calm, dong

'Calm down, *dong*.'

(22) Sayang, jangan pulang, dong, ya?

Darling, don't go home dong, ya

'Darling, don't go home, *dong, ya*'

#### 3.2. Desperate request/ interrogative

This *dong* is similar to 3.1. above, but it is not in the form of an imperative.

(23) (Hearing that people know he is a gay)

Kalau ga ada yang bilang trus siapa yang bilang.dong?

If NEG. exist that say then who that say

'If there is nobody who said (so), then who is the one?'

(24) a. Kata dokter, aku nggak bisa punya anak.

say doctor, I NEG. can have child

'The doctor said that I cannot have children.'

b. Sayang, kamu omong sesuatu, dong.

darling you say something, dong.

'Darling, you say something, *dong*.'

#### 3.3. Definiteness

(25) a. Ya, kamu dong yang cukongin.

Yeah, you doing that contribute

'You dong is the one who should pay.'

- b. Masa tamu disuruh bayar, sih?

How come guest being forced to pay, sih

'How come that guests are forced to pay, sih?'

### 3.4. Cheering up

- (26) a. Kok bisa, dokter?

- b. Bisa aja, dong.

'You can do that, dong'

## 4. *Kok*

*Kok* is also a highly polysemous particle. *Kok* can be located sentence initially, about which I will discuss later. On the other hand, a sentence final particle *kok* connotes that the uttered sentence is against the expectation of the hearer.

### 4.1. Unexpected statement

- (27) a. Omong-omong, Nino ga datang?

Talking about Nino NEG.come

Talking about Nino, isn't he coming?

- b. Nino datang kok.

Nino come kok

'Nino comes, *kok*.'

- (28) a. Lo nggak capek, nih?

You NEG tired, this

'Aren't you tired?'

- b. Enggak. Gue enggak cape, kok.

No. I NEG. tired, kok

'No, I am not tired, *kok*.'

- (29) a. Ini kenal dulu, Andien.

This get to know before, Andien

'I am introducing (her) first, Andien.'

- b. Udah kenal, kok.

already know kok

'We are already acquainted, *kok*.'

#### 4.2. Statement of fact

*Kok* is added to a truthful statement.

(30) Sebenarnya aku juga masih mau tinggal disini, kok.

Actually I also still want stay here kok

'To tell the truth, I also want to still stay here, *kok*.'

#### 4.3. Mitigating

In both (31) and (32), each of the speakers tries to show his/her caring attitude toward the addressee.

(31) (Being asked if Bu Mei is tired)

Bu Mei cuma ngantuk, kok.

Bu Mei only sleepy, kok

'I am just being sleepy, *kok*.'

(32) Ikut juga tidak apa-apa, kok.

join also NEG what kok

'We don't mind you coming with us, *kok*.'

#### 4.4. Sentence initial particles *kok* and *lho*

*Kok* and *lho* are the only particles which can be located in the sentence initial position. The difference between *lho* and *kok* seems subtle. There is time delay in (34) where *lho* is used. Also, *lho* seems stronger, for example, (34) was uttered by a psychiatrist to whom a patient asked a few more sleeping pills.

(33) Kok, bisa gitu?

kok can like that

'*Kok*, can it be like that?'

(34) Lho, saya sudah kasih

Lho, I already give

'*Lho*, I already gave (that) to you.'

## 5. Discussion

This paper examined only four particles *sih*, *dong*, *lho*, and *kok*. There are many other

particles, such as *nih*, *deh*, *tuh*, *kan*, *ya*, *gak*, etc., which I did not study this time. Those four particles fit my hypothesis that they connote the speaker's proximity or distance towards the information s/he provides. Even if they cannot articulate the similarities and differences among these particles in abstract terms, Indonesian speakers are aware of the similarities and differences among them. The functions of the particles are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. The functions of particles**

| Interrogation | Command / Request | Description/Evaluation | Reasoning  | Contrast / Comparison |
|---------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| <i>sih</i>    |                   | <i>sih</i>             | <i>sih</i> | <i>sih</i>            |
| <i>dong</i>   | <i>dong</i>       | <i>dong</i>            |            |                       |
|               | (?) <i>lho</i>    | <i>lho</i>             |            |                       |
|               |                   | <i>kok</i>             | <i>kok</i> | <i>kok</i>            |
|               | ( <i>deh</i> )    |                        |            |                       |

While *deh* was not discussed in this study, it turns out that the other four most frequent particles, *sih*, *dong*, *lho*, and *kok*, can be either descriptive or evaluative. The emphatic particle *dong* has three of the five functions: questioning, command or request, and description or evaluation.

The most frequent particle *sih* has a descriptive/evaluative function, as well as an (ironically) questioning function. Unlike *dong*, *lho*, or *kok*, particle *sih* is used more for expressing uncertainty or for soliciting listeners' agreement. *Sih* is ubiquitous: it can be attached to a noun, adjective, verb, and adverb. It should also be noted that '*sih*' can be used in monologues.

Also the high frequency of *sih* shows that a number of Indonesian colloquialisms are accompanied by tags, with which the interlocutors try to confirm their knowledge, information, or even feelings among each other. The high frequency of *sih* furthermore shows that speakers tend to try to solicit agreement from hearers by adding tags, although often the topic supplemented with *sih* connotes rather negative sentiments.

Wouk 1998, 2001 and Faizah 2007 tried to analyze the pragmatic particles from a politeness point of view as well by having recourse to the idea of 'solidarity'. The particle *dong* can be discussed in regard to solidarity, but it should be noted that other

particles such as *sih* connote uncertainty or doubt, or even an impolite attitude, while *lho* can connote assertiveness - linguistic behaviors far from 'solidarity' or 'politeness'.

Because of the polysemy of the particles, the study of them should be context-dependent. When trying to analyze particles in isolated sentences, we will encounter apparently contradictory functions. Connotations of the particles can be properly understood only by considering them in conversation sequences or pairs.

Finally, comparative or contrastive particles can be lodged only within the same column as shown in Table 1. Contrasts of new vs. old information, certainty vs. uncertainty, positive evaluation vs. negative evaluation, and stronger command vs. softer command, can be described as follows in Table 2.

**Table 2. The functions of particles in contrastive pairs**

|    |                            |   |   |                            |
|----|----------------------------|---|---|----------------------------|
| 1. | <u>New information</u>     | < | > | <u>Old information</u>     |
|    | <i>lho</i>                 |   |   | <i>sih</i>                 |
| 2. | <u>Certainty</u>           | < | > | <u>Uncertainty</u>         |
|    | <i>lho</i>                 |   |   | <i>sih</i>                 |
| 3. | <u>Positive evaluation</u> | < | > | <u>Negative evaluation</u> |
|    | <i>dong</i>                |   |   | <i>sih</i>                 |
| 4. | <u>Strong command</u>      | < | > | <u>Soft command</u>        |
|    | <i>o</i>                   |   |   | <i>(deh)???</i>            |

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