SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Short Communication

Kita's usage in spoken discourse: Collectivity to Singularity

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ABSTRACT

This short communication explains that *kita* 'we' has an alternative usage as a singular personal pronoun, presented as *kita* 'I'. The usage of *kita* is classified into six classes, based on its substitutability with *saya* and the context in which *kita* occurs. The purpose of this paper is to prove that there are three contexts that render *kita* a singular pronoun: (i) the speaker refers to people in general to share her point of view; (ii) the speaker wants to share information with a group of people whom she knows; (iii) the speaker exercises negative politeness.

Keywords: Collectivity, *kita* 'we, I', Malay language, personal pronoun, singularity

INTRODUCTION

In standard Malay grammar, the first person plural pronoun *kita* 'we' is categorized as an inclusive marker. It stands in contrast to *kami* 'we', an exclusive marker, which includes the speaker but typically excludes the hearer. When a student speaks to her classmates, saying *Kita ada ujian besok*, 'We have a test tomorrow' (Mintz, 1994), she includes herself and her classmates. This type of inclusion takes the form of collectivity: her utterance is shared by 'others', in this case, her classmates. This short communication will demonstrate a new aspect of *kita*'s usage, which occurs frequently in spoken discourse, namely that although *kita* 'we' is a plural marker, it represents a speaker as a single person in certain speech situations. The reason the speaker employs *kita* 'we', and not *saya* 'I', is that the use of the plural form enables her to add an extra meaning: first, she can refer people in general to share her point of view (Class IV); second, she can share information with a group of people whom

she knows (Class V); and third, she can exercise what Brown and Levinson (1987) called 'negative politeness' (Class VI). Underlying these three uses is the speaker's desire to encode her expressivity by using a form that is otherwise contradictory. To prove the speaker's collective and singular references, I have underscored *kita*'s substitutability with *saya* 'I' as a clue to the speaker's multiple roles. This substitutability has allowed the isolation of six classes. When *kita* is substitutable, *kita* and *saya* are synonymous, but they never have the same meaning in the collated data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of scholars in the West have pointed out the referential flexibility of first person plural pronouns across languages. The most recent studies in this direction include two edited volumes by Pavlidou (2014), and Gardelle and Sorlin (2015), and the special issue of *Pragmatics* edited by de Cock and Kluge (2016). When it comes to studies in the region, few scholars have mentioned *kita*'s singular usage, such as Ewing (2005; see also Djenar, 2015) for Indonesian and Othman (2006) for Malay. None of these scholars has offered an analysis of *kita*'s singular usage, however. Pavlidou (2014) formulated that '"we" is not just "the sum of more than one speakers [*sic*]"'. This conception of 'we' lends support to what Harré (2014) referred to as 'double indexicality', which means that a single speaker can play a double role,

and what he calls 'diffuse responsibility', which hints at an invariant link between collectivity and singularity embodied in the usage of 'we'. Pavlidou (2014), thus, concluded that 'we' 'shares or diffuses agency from the individual speaker to a collective subject and eventually diminishes the speaker's own responsibility'. Although the word 'diminish' will not be used in the analysis below, the speaker in Class VI, the last phase of the continuum, certainly 'diminishes' her role in the sense that she detaches herself from the immediate speech event.

METHOD

Examples were collected from talk shows broadcast in Malaysia in 2006, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015, and available on YouTube at the time of compilation (January 2015–February 2016). The duration of the corpus is 3 hours 41 minutes, and it contains 21,146 words in total. The token *kita* is used 641 times, and of these utterances 74.7% bear a collective meaning while 25.3% bear a singular meaning. The entire data set was transcribed, glossed, and translated into English, and the personal pronouns *kita* 'we' and *saya* 'I' were numbered consecutively with annotation of the time (minutes and seconds; e.g., 07.30) at which they were uttered in their respective talk show. Table 1 presents the distribution of *kita* in terms of category, substitutability with *saya*, 'I', the collectivity–subjectivity scale, referential roles, occurrence, and percentage.

Table 1
Distribution of kita

Category	Substitutability	Collectivity to singularity	Referential roles	Occurrence		Percentage		
I	−	C	More than one speaker	83	86	13	13.4	
II	−	C	Speaker and addressee	3		0.005		74.7
III	−	C	Speaker and people in general	393	393	61.3	61.3	
IV	+	S	Speaker and people in general	77		12		
V	+	S	Speaker and other participants	51	162	8	25.3	
VI	+	S	Speaker alone	34		5.3		
			Total: 641			100%		

SIX CLASSES

This section proposes six classes of *kita*'s usage, each of which is accompanied by a representative example taken from the aforementioned corpus. These six classes form a continuum, that is, the shift from collectivity to singularity occurs in a step-by-step manner. An important shift is found in Class III, where the speaker begins to include people she does not know but imagines at the time of speech. Examples of *kita* in classes I–III are not substitutable with *saya* 'I', whereas examples in classes IV–VI are.

Class I

Kita 'we' refers to the host and the two guests (SS and AR). This usage may resemble that of Class III but collectivity here is formed through including people who are visible to the speaker: the host's utterance is shared by all the participants in the talk show.

Host:

(3) ***Kita*** (02.01)   *kawan*   *tiga*
    we   friend   three

orang.   *Bagitau*   *saya*   *cepat.*
people   tell   I   quickly

'The three of us are friends. Tell me [what you're doing] quickly'.

(TS16/23/7/2013: MeleTop – An Interview with SS & AR)

Class II

Kita 'we' refers to both the host and the guest, who are the only participants in the talk show. Despite the fact that *kita* is not substitutable with *saya*, the exact usage of *kita* here is not the same as in Class I: here, *kita* expresses a request to do a catwalk with the guest, whereas Class I is a statement that includes the guests. As shown in Table 1 above, this class is the least frequent.

Host:

(18) **Kita** (07.30)   *nak*   catwalk
　　 we 　　　　　　 want

　　 lagi   *sikit.* One more time!
one.more.time 　 a.bit

'We want a bit [more] catwalk, one more time. One more time!'

(TS6/15/7/2006: AC Mizal with Siti N. Part 4)

Class III and Class IV

Kita 'we, I' in this utterance is used for two functions falling under Class III and Class IV, respectively. The guest (a female politician belonging to the conservative party in Malaysia) uses *kita* in two distinct ways. The first *kita* at 23.11, annotated as (44), refers to people in general whom she had not met yet. The second and third *kita* at 23.29 and 23.30, annotated respectively as (45) and (46), refer to herself in the past back in her home town when she, like today's young people, expressed (strong) opinions about the government. She is presenting her personal history, which distanced her from the 'silent majority' who only wanted stability. By using *kita* 'I', she is able to reveal that the point of view expressed is her own but she also wants it to be shared by people in general. Although both types of *kita* pertain to 'people in general', their different interpretations discussed earlier can be put down to the substitutability criteria: the first instance (Class III) does not allow *saya* 'I', whereas the last two instances (Class IV) do (see Table 1).

Guest:

…,   (44) **kita** (23.11)   *tidak*   *boleh*
　　　 we 　　　　　　 not 　　 can

cartkan   *semua*   *generasi*
　 state 　　　 all 　　 generation

muda   *tidak*   *ah*   *apa*   *tidak*
young 　　 not 　　 ah 　　 what 　　 not

sokong   *Barisan.*   …
 support 　　 line

… *ya*   *lah*   *masa*   (45) **kita** (23.29)
　 yes 　 particle 　 time 　　　　 I

muda   *pun*   (46) **kita** (23.30)   *beri*
young 　 also 　　　　 I 　　　　　　 give

pendapat   *tapi*   silent   *majority,*
 opinion 　　 but 　 silent 　 majority

mereka   *nak*   *kestabilan*   *negara*,
 they 　　 want 　　 stability 　　 country

'… (44) **we** (23.11) can't conclusively state [that] all the young generation does not support the National Front. …
yes, when (45) **I** (23.29) was younger, (46) **I** (23.30) used to give my opinions [about the ruling party], too, but the silent majority [=other people] wanted the stability of the country, …'

(TS2/11/5/2012: Woman Today: Great Women in Politics)

Class V

Kita 'I' refers to the host himself. Because it is the host who reads the Twitter message, he is logically a single reader, alone. So why doesn't he use *saya* 'I'? The reason might be

that he is eager to share the information with the other guests, and TV viewers (there is no audience at the filming of this talk show). The difference here from Class IV is that the people with whom the speaker wants to share the information are real: they are the talk show's participants. This last point manifests the speaker's strong responsibility for the conveyance of his message, and, at the same time, indicated that collectivity no longer includes people in general; its focus is solely on specific people.

Host:

(23) ***Kita*** (11.28) *ada*   Twitter   *nak*
     I   have   want

baca.   *Yang*   *ni*   *daripada*
  read   which   this   from

    FA.   *Dia*   *cakap*   *SS*
personal.name   he   say   personal.name

nampak   *kurus*   *malam*   *ni.*
  look   slim   night   this

Omey   *angat!*
  cute   very

'I'm going to read a Twitter message from FA. He said that "SS looks slim tonight. Very cute!"'

(TS16/23/7/2013: MeleTop – An Interview with SS & AR)

Class VI

Kita, in this last example, designates the speaker only and no collectivity, as defined earlier, is involved. The guest uses *kita* in place of *saya* because he is trying to avoid discussing a private issue in a public space.

The guest's utterance is an answer to a question the host has asked. It would be logical to use *saya* 'I', since the question is directed at him alone. The guest might have thought that reference to his good deeds would sound self-elevating. This humble behavior might be conceived of as 'negative politeness' according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework: through his modest way of answering with *kita*, the guest can reduce the risk of negative face, that is, he can protect the privacy of his personal life.

Host:

Buat   *apa*   *di*   *bulan*   *puasa*   *ni?*
  do   what   in   month   fasting   this

'What do [you] do in this fasting month?'

Guest:

Okay *di*   *bulan*   *puasa*   *ni*   (4)
      in   month   fasting   this

kita (2.10)   *beramal*   *lah*
  I   practice.good.deed   particle

   alhamdulillah.
all.praises.belong.to.God.

'Okay, in this fasting month, I hope to do good deeds, praise be to God'.

(TS16/23/7/2013: MeleTop – An Interview with SS & AR)

CONCLUSION

This study shares the viewpoint that the semantics of 'we' involves both collectivity and singularity, forming a continuum, and that its communicative meaning

is determined by the role(s) played by the speaker in a given situation. The aforementioned investigation of *kita*'s usage in six classifications indicates that the use of *kita* 'I' as a singular pronoun is an indispensable alternative to *kita* 'we' and *saya* 'I', and therefore this tripartite pronominal design makes spoken Malay communication more effective and significant. In other words, the six classes have disclosed and systematized underspecified communicative meanings that are emerging in Malay spoken discourse. It is hoped that this study provides further understanding of how the shift from collective subject to individual speaker occurs in the context of Malay spoken discourse. The discovery of six classes of *kita*'s usage is a signpost to future study of the Malay pronominal system, an area that has not been discussed from the perspective highlighted in this paper.

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