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## **Youth Language, *Gaul* Sociability, and the New Indonesian Middle Class \***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the linguistic form and social functions of bahasa gaul, the informal Indonesian “language of sociability,” as it is used among Indonesian university students and in various publications aimed at middle-class Indonesian youth. Bahasa gaul registers youth modernity in both its positive and more contested aspects. It expresses not only young people’s aspirations for social and economic mobility, but also an increasingly cosmopolitan, national youth culture. Perhaps most significantly, bahasa gaul articulates the desire of Indonesian youth for new types of social belonging through the formulation of relationships that are more egalitarian and interactionally fluid as well as more personally expressive and psychologically individualized.*

*Keywords:* Indonesia, slang, youth culture, the new middle class, *bahasa gaul*

### **ABSTRAK**

Artikel ini mengkaji bentuk linguistik dan fungsi-fungsi sosial bahasa gaul sebagaimana digunakan oleh para mahasiswa dan dalam berbagai publikasi yang ditujukan untuk anak kelas menengah di Indonesia. Bahasa gaul meregistrasi modernitas anak muda baik dalam aspek-aspek positif maupun yang diperselisihkan. Selain mengekspresikan aspirasi anak muda dalam mobilitas ekonomi dan sosial, bahasa gaul juga mencerminkan budaya anak muda nasional yang semakin bercorak kosmopolitan. Selain itu, mungkin yang terpenting, bahasa gaul mengartikulasikan hasrat anak muda Indonesia mengenai bentuk-bentuk baru identitas sosial melalui formulasi hubungan yang lebih egaliter, cair dan interaktif serta lebih ekspresif secara personal dan lebih mempribadi secara psikologis.

*Katakunci:* Indonesia, bahasa anak muda, budaya anak muda, kelas menengah baru, bahasa gaul.

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Since the fall of the New Order regime in the spring of 1998, a new Indonesian youth language has captured public attention and has become a lightning rod for the latest social trends. *Bahasa gaul*, literally 'social language' or the 'language of sociability', is a speech variety associated with Indonesian youth and based on Indonesia's national language, *bahasa Indonesia*. Among Indonesian university students *bahasa gaul* functions as a type of slang, "the ever-changing and fashionable vocabulary of sociability that students use casually with one another" (Eble 1996:1). The casual language of Indonesian student sociability borrows from other informal Indonesian speech varieties, including Jakartan Indonesian/Jakartan Malay and the cant of gangsters and criminals (*bahasa prokem*), but expresses the particular experiences, preoccupations, and aspirations of the current generation of Indonesian youth.

Like the slang used by American college students, *bahasa gaul* emphasizes a shared social identity and sense of belonging among its speakers. It speaks to solidarity rather than status differentials and to a shared positive value placed on cool and occasionally ironic distancing from the formality and hierarchy of an earlier generation. *Gaul* differs from American college slang, however, in the degree to which it is oriented both "upward," expressing aspirations for social and economic mobility, and "outward," expressing an increasingly cosmopolitan, Indonesian youth culture. Perhaps most significantly *gaul* articulates the desire of Indonesian youth for new types of social identifications through the formulation of relationships that are more egalitarian and interactionally fluid, as well as more personally expressive and psychologically individualized.

This article examines the linguistic forms and social meanings of the informal language of sociability used among Indonesian university students and in various publications aimed at educated, middle-class youth. The

research presented here is part of a larger ethnographic project on Indonesian youth and social change. During an eight month period in 1999 and five subsequent month-long visits between 2001 and 2006, I conducted some 200 interviews and participated in innumerable informal discussions with young people on issues pertaining to their lives and experience. In the course of that investigation, I collected several hundred *gaul* words and expressions within the context of their use. I then cross-referenced them with other available lists and with slang usages in youth publications, including magazines, newspaper advice columns, and self-help books. Periodically, I took my findings back to students and asked them to indicate those words and expressions they used regularly, those they considered *gaul* (even if they didn't use them themselves), and those they felt were not *gaul* or were no longer *gaul*. Determining what is or is not *gaul* is of course a slippery slope, as an important part of *gaul*'s appeal, and of slang's appeal more generally, lies in its up-to-date or contemporary character. *Gaul*, like American college slang, is constantly changing as new words or expressions become popular and others fall out of use.<sup>1</sup>

*Bahasa gaul* registers youth modernity in both its positive and more contested aspects. Its metapragmatic multivocality and competing ideological valences are central to an understanding of its social role and linguistic value. As a form of slang, *bahasa gaul* has been disparaged by some Indonesian observers as "ruining good and proper Indonesian." Its critics argue that that *gaul* will corrupt the integrity of the standard and limit the linguistic creativity of youth (cf. Sarjono

1 Some terms, however, may stay around for a significantly longer period of time as slang; these words are what Robert L. Moore (2004:59) calls "basic slang." Basic slang terms are those which may be used for decades and "not wear out" because of the centrality of the values they represent. "Cool," for example, is one such word. Other words eventually catch on and become part of the everyday, colloquial language.

2004; *Suara Merdeka* 2004; *Direktorat Pendidikan Menengah Umum* n.d.) —to say nothing of the countercultural values associated with its use. In the relaxed social language of university students, however, there is little evidence that *gaul* is created in special or unfamiliar ways. On the contrary, *gaul* follows quite regular language patterns in forming new words and in adapting dialectal and foreign word borrowings and does not violate the grammatical patterns of informal, spoken Indonesian. Moreover, in infusing Indonesian with a liveliness, emotional expressivity, and cosmopolitan cachet, *bahasa gaul* may in fact be increasing the appeal of the national language to young people across Indonesia's diverse ethnic groups, further eroding the position of regional languages as the codes of informal, in group interactions.

### 'Good and Proper Indonesian'

The nation of Indonesia encompasses some fourteen thousand islands from Sumatra in the west to West Papua (*Irian Jaya*) in the east. With over 234 million inhabitants, Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority country and the fourth most populous nation in the world. Estimates of the number of languages spoken in Indonesia vary considerably; however, "a figure of 550, one tenth of all the languages of the world, is not excessive" (Sneddon 2003:5). Indonesia's national language and the country's sole official language (*bahasa Indonesia*) is based on a variety of Malay. Indonesian was declared the language of national unity in 1928 at a youth congress in Batavia, then capital of the Dutch East Indies. Young nationalists pledged the celebrated 'Oath of Youth' (*Sumpah Pemuda*) which recognized a 'unified [Indonesian] people' (*satu bangsa*), speaking 'one [Indonesian] language' (*satu bahasa*) in a 'single [Indonesian] homeland' (*satu nusa*) (Errington 2000:208). In the first decades of the twentieth century, Indonesian was the mother tongue of no more than five

percent of the population (Sneddon 2003:105). Today, in what is widely acclaimed as a remarkable political and linguistic achievement, the number of Indonesians who can speak their national language is well over 90 percent (Errington 1998:2; Sneddon 2003:11). The achievement is all the more remarkable inasmuch as Indonesia is a multilingual and multi ethnic nation, one in which the majority of Indonesians grow up speaking a regional or ethnic language as their mother tongue and as the language of ingroup interactions.

The spread of Indonesian as the national language is widely associated with the often heavy-handed nation-making policies of the New Order state which governed Indonesia from 1966 to 1998 (Anderson 1966; Errington 1998; Liddle 1988). Language standardization was implemented as one aspect of the government's ambitious development project. Within the context of state 'developmentalism' (*pembangunan*) great emphasis was placed on Indonesian's role as an instrument of modernization and nation-making; conversely, less attention was paid to Indonesian's communicative function and cultural meanings (Heryanto 1990). Perhaps not surprisingly government efforts at language planning and standardization focused on formal Indonesian and ignored informal varieties, denigrated as the antithesis of 'good and proper Indonesian' (*bahasa yang baik dan benar*). The Australian linguist James Sneddon (2003:17-18; see also Errington 1998) goes so far as to posit the "essentially diglossic" nature of Indonesian, pointing to the significant differences between the formal standard and colloquial varieties of everyday spoken Indonesian and the rigid compartmentalization of their corresponding functions and contexts of use.

Formal Indonesian is learned almost exclusively in school and is associated with print publications, government pronouncements, and official media, but is not used in everyday, informal interactions. It has

been described as stiff, turgid, and “soul-less,” and as too impersonal and humorless to ever function as a language of everyday, social life (Anderson 1966:105-106; Peacock 1973:9). Young people who grew up under the New Order report their experience of formal, schooled, Indonesian as an official voice of the bureaucracy and political elite, as something distant and distinct from their everyday experience. “My generation,” a young Indonesian critic writes, “was taught to see everything in standardized and uniform form” (Swastika 2003:7).

Arguments surrounding Indonesian’s alienation from its speech community, however, have typically focused on formal, bureaucratic Indonesian, and have discounted the widespread existence of informal Indonesian varieties. In contrast to the school-based formal standard (*bahasa baku*), informal Indonesian, sometimes referred to as *bahasa sehari-hari* (‘everyday language’), is learned outside of school through daily interactions and is often inflected with linguistic elements which reflect the regional language backgrounds of its speakers. Informal Indonesian is used to express familiarity and solidarity, especially but not only, between individuals who speak different regional languages and in situations of status ambiguity (d. Tanner 1972:133). Among university students, informal Indonesian is used in informal student gatherings, in interactions between students from different ethnic backgrounds, and with younger professors or instructors who are Western-educated or with whom one is on friendly footing. In urban areas, informal Indonesian competes with regional and ethnic languages. In the nation’s capital, Jakarta, informal Jakartan Indonesian is the dominant speech variety in all but the most formal contexts, and migrants to the capital not uncommonly lose their regional language and begin to speak the Jakartan dialect of Indonesian within a generation or two (Sneddon 2003:11; see also Oetomo 1990).

*Bahasa gaul* is an informal register of everyday Indonesian which borrows heavily from the Jakartan dialect of Indonesian to articulate an attitude of casual ease and cool cosmopolitanism. Indonesian students identify it as a form of *sleng/slenk* or *slang* (‘slang’), itself a foreign language borrowing that hints at knowledge of the latest trends. *Gaul*’s speakers deliberately strike an attitude of playful disregard for the social strictures and status differentials of formal Indonesian, distancing themselves from what they perceive as the stiffness and inflexibility of the official standard. *Gaul*, with its focus on interactional flexibility and relaxed informality, hints at the more inclusive aspirations of a current generation of speakers who came of age in the optimistic era of ‘[democratic] reform’ (*reformasi*).

### **Gaul Ideology**

*Gaul* ideology articulates a rejection of what is viewed as the previous generation’s orientation toward patrimonialism, formality, and fixed social hierarchy. This outdated orientation is jokingly referred to by students with the New Order acronym *ABS* (*asal bapak senang*) ‘as long as the boss/ dad/the man in charge is happy’, and occasionally with the more academic *bapakisme* (literally ‘father-ism’). An index of *gaul*’s rebellious undercurrent is the incorporation into *gaul* slang of many words from *bahasa prokem*. *Prokem* is a Jakartan slang or cant identified with the world of criminals and gangs. In its origins, *prokem* is a secret language, used to discuss the illegal activities of a narrowly delimited and proscribed group. Henri Chambert-Loir (1984:105) hypothesizes that elements of *bahasa prokem* first began to appear in the language of young people in Jakarta in the late 1970s. Borrowings from *prokem* can still be found in contemporary youth slang (among them *giting* ‘high, drunk’; *jiper* ‘afraid’; and

*cimeng* ‘marijuana’) and speak to *gaul*’s illicit and dangerous roots.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its countercultural orientation, *bahasa gaul* cannot be understood as a full blown anti-language in Michael Halliday’s (1976) sense of the term, nor as what Marcyliena Morgan (2002) has called a counter-language. An anti-language indexes the value system of anti-society (a society set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it); a counter-language speaks to a widely shared (counter-)cultural ideology developed in response to a history of subjugation. Halliday, for example, describes prisons as anti-societies that may develop anti-languages which directly oppose dominant institutional norms. Morgan (2002:23) describes African American English (AAE) as a counter-language marked by strategies of indirectness characteristic of African languages which allow its speakers to maintain an important measure of social face and agency in face-to-face encounters.

*Gaul*, by contrast, is not normally used in face-to-face encounters with adults or older people who are not assumed to share the same youth values or orientation. Neither is *gaul* some kind of secret code used to disguise the discussion of taboo or unacceptable topics in the presence of adults. In most instances the number of *gaul* items in a single utterance is fairly limited and meaning is typically clear from the context. Utterances made up entirely of *gaul* items are unusual even in the relaxed conversation of students. When they do occur, it is usually for the purpose of parody or dramatic effect.

As is true of language ideologies more generally (Irvine and Gal 2000:35), the ideology of *gaul* sociability poses *bahasa gaul* in opposition to the other varieties with which it contrasts in the larger sociolinguistic field—most notably, the Indonesian standard, but

also regional varieties labeled *kampungan* (‘rustic, bumpkinish’) and *medok* (‘heavily accented’). Rural, regional dialects are widely stereotyped by the media and by middle-class youth as unsophisticated and plodding, the antithesis of *gaul*’s easy fluency and self-confidence. This stereotype of ‘provincial insecurity’ (*minder, kurang percaya diri*) and ‘lack of experience’ (*kurang pengalaman*) explains in part the appeal of *gaul* sociability among students from rural backgrounds, particularly those from rural Muslim boarding schools (*pesantren*). *Gaul*’s associations with a modern cosmopolitanism and social sophistication are summed up in the following comment made by a first-year student of Indonesian language and literature.

*Gaul* means someone who is self-assured and good at adapting socially. A kid who can talk to older people or to people from the village or to city people or modern people is a *gaul* kid. They’re ‘up-to-date’ (*tidak ketinggalan jaman*), developed, and ‘advanced’ (*maju*). *Gaul* is modern. I think whoever or whatever is not *gaul* is just not modern.

In this way and others, *gaul* ideology is very much a product of contemporary political and social developments which have dramatically altered Indonesian definitions of youth.

## Youth Culture and Social Change

In December of 1998 I returned to Java after a 13 year absence to conduct research on youth and social change in the south-central Javanese city of Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta is home to dozens of high schools and more than one hundred colleges and universities; it also hosts a wide variety of Muslim and non-Muslim religious institutions. Young people come to Yogyakarta from across the country seeking an education. Others come looking for work in the service industry or in the factories which lie on the outskirts of the city.

<sup>2</sup> Historical associations between *prokem* and *gaul* are so strong that some Indonesians use the terms interchangeably.

I first encountered the term *gaul* as a label for a new social category in my initial discussions with young people concerning the spectacular increase in the number of modern malls, clothing boutiques, movie theaters, and cafes which had sprung up in Yogyakarta since I had lived there in 1985. Along with these modern developments was the very visible appearance of a particular group of young people who frequented them. These young people, most of them males, dressed in Western-style jeans and in tee-shirts with logos like Marlboro, Nike, and Levis. They socialized in small groups, playing the pinball machines and electronic games on the smoky uppermost floors of the mall and chatting up the foreigners in the cafes, hoping to improve their English, bum a cigarette, or possibly begin a relationship. Though fewer in number, there were similar groups of young women—some of whom dressed in a manner that suggested sexual availability in a way that contrasted sharply with the more modest Muslim dress of the university students I spent my days interviewing. “Oh those people,” I was told, “Those are *anak gaul*,” literally, ‘social kids’. On further questioning, the category expanded to include not only mallrats but also street kids, runaways, druggies, and suspected prostitutes. *Gaul* then seemed to be used to refer to an illicit sociability, something over the top, excessive, too familiar, and verging on dangerous—socially and sexually.

The presence of *anak gaul* in the malls and cafes, in urban shopping districts and around tourist hotels in Yogyakarta, was just one indication of a new and widely expanded category of Indonesian youth that had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s under the “New Order” of President Suharto. In May of 1998, after 32 years in office, Suharto had finally been forced out of office and his New Order government officially ended. Indonesian youth had played a vocal and visible role in the political struggle which led to the president’s removal, a role which has given young people a new social and political

prominence (Kraince 2003; Madrid 1999; Rahmat and Najib 2001).

Although the New Order regime was politically authoritarian, state programs implemented under Suharto contributed significantly to the reformulation of youth identity. Defined as the socially constructed period between childhood and adulthood, the category of youth is linked cross-culturally to lengthy schooling and thus prolonged dependence on parents, to distinct patterns of consumption and leisure, and to “modern” courtship and dating particularly as related to self-choice of marital partner (Robinson and Utomo 2003:5). These aspects of youth culture underwent far-reaching transformation under the New Order as a result of state policies related to universal education and population regulation (Smith-Hefner 2006).

During the 1970s and 1980s the New Order government drew on windfall oil profits to expand educational opportunities throughout Indonesia (Hefner 1990; G. Jones 1994; Robinson 2000). Identifying education as crucial for human resource development as well as national development, the government undertook an ambitious program of school construction and made primary education compulsory first through grade six and later through grade nine (Johnson, Gaylord and Chamberland 1993:8; Robinson and Utomo 2003:6). Between 1965 and 1990, the percentage of young adults with basic literacy skills skyrocketed from 40 to 90 percent. The percentage of youths completing senior high school grew from four percent to more than 30 percent today (Hefner 2000:17). These educational reforms have effected a shift in the public perception of youth as inextricably linked to schooling.

State policies regarding population regulation and marriage have also impacted Indonesian definitions of youth. In 1975 the government implemented new marriage legislation which set the minimum age for marriage as 16 for women and 19 for men.

It also “enshrined the principle that the consent of both parties must be obtained prior to marriage” (Robinson and Utomo 2003:6). The new marriage legislation was linked to the anti-natalist policies of the New Order which saw population as a threat to its developmentist ambitions. The new laws specifying minimum ages for marriage were aimed at regulating and limiting fertility. In conjunction with educational reforms, they have had the effect of significantly prolonging the period of time between the onset of puberty and marriage.

During this same period, New Order economic policies resulted in the availability of new employment opportunities for young people with the requisite skills in light industry, the greatly expanded civil service, and in the service sector. Today even many factory jobs and service positions require at least a high school diploma. The possibility of obtaining a well-paying job and a foothold in the emerging middle class has served as an incentive for parents to keep their children in school. Lower child mortality rates and smaller family size have gone hand in hand with a more intensive focus on the talents and potential of individual children, both male and female, and a willingness on the part of parents to make economic sacrifices for the education of the next generation (cf. Lubis and Niehof 2003).

In the past, young people stayed under the close supervision of parents until they were old enough to marry. Parents oversaw their children’s social lives, made their educational choices, and arranged their marriages. Because of new educational and employment opportunities, today it is increasingly common for young people to leave home at adolescence or shortly thereafter for school or work (G. Jones 1994; Smith-Hefner 2005). On job sites and in university towns, they often live with other young people in dormitories or boarding houses with little or no adult supervision. One effect of these developments is that young people today experience increased

opportunities to meet and interact with members of the opposite sex without direct adult oversight, a situation which has caused great anxiety for Indonesian parents. Parental concern has been exacerbated by public moral panics provoked in part by the mass media. The media has regularly featured sensationalist allegations of premarital cohabitation, high school call-girls and coed prostitutes, skyrocketing rates of premarital abortions, and such widespread sexual activity on college campuses that ‘lover 97 per cent of coeds are no longer virgins’ (Straits Times Indonesia Bureau 2002; Wijayanto 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; see also, *Radar Jogja* 2002).

The emergence of a new youth culture influenced by Western and East Asian patterns of social interaction and musical, fashion, and consumption tastes has only added to existing concerns about youth morality. Foreign investment, tourism and information technologies have also facilitated culture flows that have proved difficult for parents and public authorities to monitor and control. Initially the New Order government tried to limit and censor the media, particularly films and television programming. However, these policies slackened in the face of protests by well-connected media entrepreneurs (among them Suharto’s own family members), who called for and won a measure of media liberalization as well as a heightened role for private investment capital (Robinson and Utomo 2003:7-8; see also Sen and Hill 2000; Sutton 2003).

The new youth culture has not gone unchallenged. Many of the same social and economic conditions that have allowed for the development of a “Westernized” youth culture also opened the way for a more socially and religiously conservative Muslim resurgence. At colleges and universities across Indonesia, Muslim student organizations have expanded their membership and visibility. Conservative groups encourage young people to resist the influence of corrupting Western fashions and consumption and to emulate religious models

of modesty and piety. On high school and college campuses, increasing numbers of young women have taken up the veil; a smaller number has even adopted full chador (Brenner 1996; Smith-Hefner 2007). Alongside more Westernized styles of social interaction and dating, new conservative Muslim social styles have developed which reject dating as sinful and promote a pattern of courtship which foregoes premarital familiarization completely (Smith-Hefner 2005).

Regardless of the depth of their religious engagement, however, as a result of a broadly shared social and political formation, youth in contemporary Indonesia see themselves as actively engaged in a new and modern Indonesian project in which national development and personal development are closely linked. Social observers of the new Indonesian middle class have remarked that a striking characteristic of the new middle-class culture is the conviction that the future of Indonesia depends on individuals shaping themselves through self-cultivation and self-fashioning (C. Jones 2003:190-91; Lindquist 2002). A parallel orientation has been identified among Indonesian homosexuals in their efforts to achieve an upwardly mobile subjectivity, an orientation which Tom Boellstorff dubs “person as project” and elsewhere, “personhood-as-career” (Boellstorff 2004,2005).

A subtle indication of this new orientation emerged in my discussions with young people concerning their aspirations for the future. Whereas in the early 1980s young people echoed their parents’ hopes that they would grow up and simply *menjadi orang*, ‘become someone’ (literally, ‘become a person’), in the late 1990s young people had borrowed Western pop-psychological and self-help idioms to speak of ‘self-actualization’ (*mengaktualisasikan diri*), ‘cultivating [their] potential’ (*menggali potensi saya*), and even ‘optimalizing [their] aptitude’ (*ngoptimalin bakat saya*). This new

project of personal development and self-discovery has typically involved a rejection of regional styles perceived as *kampungan* (‘rural, unsophisticated’) and *feodal* (‘feudal, hierarchical’) (cf. C. Jones 2004). In their place, youthful proponents of the new middle class have adopted a more cosmopolitan style of speech and behavior to index a familiarity with “modern” trends and a capacity for communication across social groupings.

### **From the Margins to Middle class**

As I continued my research over the next several years, it became clear that *gaul* is not merely a term of social approbation used in reference to marginals and delinquents; in fact, I found it was increasingly referenced in youth interactions and in the print and electronic media in a strikingly positive manner. The term *kuper*, which has *gaul* as its root (an abbreviation for the phrase *kurang pergaulan* ‘unsophisticated, lacking in social experience’),<sup>3</sup> was ubiquitous in my conversations with college students, and also began to appear regularly in magazines and on radio and television programs as a focus of discussions on Indonesian youth. Being labeled or perceived as *kuper* (or worse, as someone who *nggak gaul* ‘doesn’t [know how to] socialize’) was clearly something students tried anxiously to avoid. *Kuper*, not unlike the English slang terms “loser” or “dweeb,” is widely identified as the antithesis of the self-confident, socially flexible, and cosmopolitan *gaul* image to which the newest members of the Indonesian middle class aspire.

Critical to *gaul*’s spread and popularity have been the expansion of the Indonesian media, a post-New Order publishing boom, and the general atmosphere of media liberalization which came with Suharto’s fall. As is true of youth culture in the U.S. and

3 The bolded elements of the phrase *kurang pergaulan* are combined here to make up the blend *kuper*.



elsewhere, the Indonesian media have been both an imitator and initiator of youth language.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1990s, MTV arrived in Indonesia under broadcast license to the local television station AN-TV (Swastika 2003:13; see also Sutton 2003). Even before that time, a significant proportion of middle and upper-middle class Indonesians living in urban areas had access to MTV programs through the use of parabola antennas to receive satellite broadcast. Although few of the young people I interviewed viewed MTV on anything resembling a regular basis, the informal, direct, and expressive style of the young announcers or VJs (video jockeys) who introduce songs and act as commentators on MTV quickly became the model for television and radio announcers on other stations. By the late 1990s, the cool speech style of popular VJs like Sarah Sechan, who mixes Jakartan Indonesian with English language borrowings and the latest hip expressions, had become a requirement for the MCs of programs for young audiences, rapidly increasing the spread and popularity of *bahasa gaul* (Swastika 2003:13).

Even more critical to *gaul*'s spread has been the spectacular increase in the numbers of publishing houses which has occurred since the fall of the New Order. These new publishers have created a flurry of youth publications which have flooded the market, all competing to establish a readership. In their attempts to appeal to a young audience, many of these books are written in casual *gaul* style—often with *gaul* items italicized and in some cases, with glosses provided.

In the summer of 2005, a computer search in the popular Indonesian bookstore *Gramedia* identified 47 books with the term *gaul* in their titles, a number of which were on prominent display. These titles included Debbie Sahertian's bestselling *Kamus Bahasa Gaul* ('The Gaul Dictionary') which first

appeared in 1999 and has since been reprinted twelve times, most recently in 2004. The majority, however, were inexpensive 'pocket books' (*buku kantong*) offering listings of *gaul* abbreviations and expressions for use in emails and phone messaging (*5M5* 'short message service'), and linking the cultivation of *bahasa gaul* to instant popularity. Among the titles on display was also *Gaul*, a glossy weekly television tabloid for young people which was launched in 2002. By 2005, *Gaul* claimed to have over 1,033,000 readers, the largest following of any popular youth media tabloid on the market (*Indosiar* 2005).

In its spectacular journey from the margins to the middle class, *gaul* has not jettisoned all of its earlier associations. Like slang more generally, *gaul* is used to refer to social styles identified as "cool," "trendy," and "fashionable," but can also reference a negative sociability (as *too* familiar, rude, or brash).<sup>5</sup> While some observers, for example, might describe a *gaul* headscarf for women (*jilbab gaul*) as an "inappropriately alluring/sexy headscarf," others would describe it as a "trendy, casual-style head covering." *Gaul* thus has multiple metapragmatic valences, linked to competing interpretations of youth and modernity.

### ***Bahasa Gaul***

*Gaul* style is fast, fluent, and self-confident. It is achieved through prosody, intonation, and gesture as well as pragmatics. *Kacihaaan deh lho* 'too bad/what a pity' is said with a lispy, singsong falling/rising intonation and accompanied by an S-like movement traced in the air with the index finger moving downwards. The response, *biarin* 'leave it/whatever', is accompanied by a similar gesture, but moving upward. *So what gitu lho* 'who

4 See, for example, works by Miyako Inoue (2002) and Laura Miller (2004).

5 See, for example, Miller's (2004) discussion of Japanese *kogal*, a female slang which indexes autonomy and cultural innovation but also gender deviant "misbehavior."

cares' and *Please deh, want to know* 'come on, tell me', are also pronounced with a characteristically playful prosody, often accompanied by a shrug or laughter.

For its speakers, however, the most salient element of *bahasa gaul* is its lexicon. *Bahasa gaul* has developed against the backdrop of a linguistic culture of multiple codes: elaborate social registers, honorific vocabularies, ritual languages, and extensive word games. There are reports of youth varieties or ludlings called *basa walikan* 'backwards languages', from across Indonesia (d. Chambert-Loir 1984:109). One such backwards language, identified with youth from the city of Malang in East Java, is created by literally "reading" words in their mirror image. *Gadis* 'young girl' thus becomes *sidag*, *manis* 'sweet' becomes *sinam*, and Malang becomes *Ngalam* (Dreyfuss 1983). In another "backwards" language, associated with the youth of Yogyakarta, new words are formed by reassigning pronunciations to the Javanese syllabary and applying these new pronunciations to the corresponding syllables of Indonesian words to effect a transformation (Chambert-Loir 1984:109; Swastika 2003: 16). Most well-known is the word play *dagadu* which is a transformation of the exclamation *matamu!* 'your eyes!' *Dagadu* is now the name of a successful tee shirt and poster enterprise in Yogyakarta. These youth languages based on word plays (like pig latin in English) are generally associated with high school (teenaged) groups and seem to have strong links to written forms.

While the slang of Indonesian college students has incorporated a number of words or expressions from these backward word plays, their associated word formation processes are largely non-productive in *gaul*. The vast majority of *gaul* words is formed either through processes of abbreviation or borrowing. Abbreviations include acronyms, blends, contractions, and clippings. Borrowings include words and phrases from informal regional and social dialects and foreign

language borrowings from English. In fact, the two categories (abbreviation and borrowing) overlap and borrowings are subjected to many of the same processes of abbreviation as Indonesian words and phrases.

### ● *Abbreviation*

The most productive word formation processes in *gaul* involve various forms of abbreviation. Many *gaul* words, for example, are acronyms, made up of the initial letters of each of the words in a phrase. For example, *JJS* (/jejeEs/) is an abbreviation of *jalan jalan santai* 'to walk around/hang out'. *PD* or *pede* (/pede/), is an abbreviation for *percaya diri*, literally 'to believe in oneself', 'self-confident'. *HTI* (/hatei/) stands for *hubungan tanpa ikatan* literally 'relations without [legal] connection' or 'illicit sex', also referred to as *HTS* (/hateEs/) *hubungan tanpa status* or 'relations without [legal] status'.<sup>6</sup>

Other *gaul* items are abbreviations created by combining the initial, or sometimes final, syllables or segments of two words to make up a single word, a word formation process called blending. Applying this process, *curahan hati* 'an outpouring of feelings' becomes *curhat*; *salah tingkah* 'a wrong or inappropriate move' becomes *salting*; and *telat mikir* 'slow thinking, dull' becomes *telmi*.<sup>7</sup>

Another common type of abbreviation involves clipping—the process of shortening a word by leaving off a part of the lexeme (typically the loss of one or more syllables). Applying this process, *restoran* 'restaurant' becomes *resto*. *Minimal* 'minimal' becomes *minim*. *Demonstrasi* 'demonstration' similar-

6 Other common *gaul* acronyms include *ABC* (/abege/) 'adolescent' from *anak baru gede* (literally 'a child just recently big/mature'); *PHK* (/pehaka/) from *putus hubungan kekasih* 'to break up with one's girl/boyfriend'; and *PDKT* (/pedekate/) from *proses pendekatan dan pengenalan* 'the process of approaching/getting to know someone'.

7 Other blends include *ortu* from *orang tua* 'parents'; *jadul* from *jaman dulu* 'an earlier time/era'; and *jakin* from *jaman kini* 'the current time/ era'.

ly becomes *demo* and *eksistensi* ‘existence’ becomes *eksis*. These are all examples of clipping involving the loss of phonetic material word finally. Most clippings of this type are multisyllabic foreign words. A second category of clippings involves words that have lost an initial syllable through the process of apharesis. These forms are quite regular and predictable and are typically common, Indonesian terms. Examples include *gini* from *begini* ‘like this’; *gitu* from *begitu* ‘like that’; *dikit* from *sedikit* ‘a little’; *makasi* from *terima kasih* ‘thank you’; and *caya* from *percaya* ‘to believe’.<sup>8</sup>

None of these word formation processes is unique to *gaul*, though in *gaul* they may be applied to unique forms or in unique combinations. The linguistic processes of clipping and contraction are widespread in informal styles of spoken Indonesian and speakers of Indonesian generally have no difficulty recovering the full forms.<sup>9</sup> Acronyms and blends are also ubiquitous in standard official language and are associated in particular with the various government organizations and programs which proliferated during the New Order era (e.g., *PKK*, *SMA*, *UMPT*, *PUSKESMAS*, *HANSIP*, *GOLKAR*; see also Sneddon 2003:145-149). Some of the playful irreverence of *gaul* comes from the use of word formation processes identified with government officialdom to create a vocabulary which is anything but governmental, and which is used to talk about the everyday lives and experiences of particular interest to young people.

8 Other words in this category include *abis* (*habis* ‘finished, used up’); *emang* (*memang* ‘right, indeed’); *ama* (*sama* ‘same, together /with’); *udah* (*sudah* ‘already’); and *item* (*hitam* ‘black’). The popular *gaul* expression *ember* ‘really /it’s true’ from *memang benar* is derived via a combination of apharesis and blending.

9 Though in the case of acronyms, speakers may not always know or remember the exact wording of the original phrase, particularly if it contains English borrowings (see below).

### ● *Local Borrowings*

The other significant source of *gaul* vocabulary consists of borrowings. There are, for example, a significant number of word borrowings in *bahasa gaul* from the informal language level in Javanese known as *ngoko*. As Indonesia’s largest single ethnic group—comprising 40 percent of the country’s population—Javanese have always played a prominent role in national culture and politics, and borrowings from Javanese into Indonesian have always been common. The Javanese words borrowed into *gaul* include a large number of everyday expressions, particularly adjectives and adverbs, among them: *saking* (‘because/as a result of’), *pantes* (‘proper/fitting’), *banget* (‘very/excessively’), *gede* (‘large/big’), *bareng* (‘with/together’), *mepet* (‘tight/pressed’), and *rada* (‘sort of / rather’).<sup>10</sup> Rather than adding specific content to *gaul*’s lexicon, these words add to the immediacy and informality of student slang, as in the following comment on dating from a discussion with a first year college student.

***Saking*** enjoy-*nya*, kami nggak bisa putus.

‘**Because** we were so happy / having so much fun [together] we couldn’t break it off.’<sup>11</sup>

In this example not only is the adverb *saking* ‘because, as a result of’ borrowed from Javanese, but also the use of 3rd person possessive marker *-nya* (here following the pattern of the Javanese genitive marker *-e/-ne* in marking topicalization). Sneddon writes with regard to the use of this pattern in the Indonesian standard, “[i]n most of its occurrences, this construction is avoided and even condemned

10 Borrowings from Javanese can also undergo processes of abbreviation and blending. The popular expression *ge-er* ‘big headed, proud / conceited’ is a blend derived from Javanese *gede rasa* which has roughly the same meaning.

11 The *gaul* elements under discussion in this and subsequent examples are in bold along with their corresponding English translations.

by some non-Javanese” (2003:159). In *bahasa gaul*, informal Javanisms are an important element of the flavor of informal youth interactions. According to students they make *gaul* speech ‘smoother’ (*lebih luwes*) and ‘more relaxed’ (*lebih santai*), and as a result ‘more communicative’ (*lebih komunikatif*).<sup>12</sup>

The single largest and most significant source of local borrowings into *bahasa gaul* is the informal dialect of Jakarta (Jakartan Indonesian or Jakartan Malay).<sup>13</sup> Jakarta is the capital of Indonesia and is widely considered the center of Indonesian wealth and modernity. The Indonesian film industry is located in Jakarta as is the music industry. In imitating Jakartan speech styles, young people aspire to the hip, modern, and cosmopolitan lifestyle of those who live there (Swastika 2003:14; see also Oetomo 1990). Sneddon writes,

To speak like a Jakartan is to be like a Jakartan: up-to-date, prosperous and sophisticated, whatever the reality might be. The speech of Jakarta is particularly popular with youth as a symbol of generational solidarity; using it sets them apart from the backward countryside and allows them to identify with the mystique of the modern metropolis. [2003:155]

Borrowings from Jakartan Indonesian include verb forms like *bacot* ‘to fuss/talk a lot’, *geber* ‘to push/spur on’, *demen* ‘to like’, *toyor* ‘to hit/beat up’, and *gaet* ‘to attract/interest’. They also include nouns, pronouns, and adjectives like *gue* ‘I’, (*e*)*lu* ‘you’, *cewek* ‘girl’, *cowok* ‘guy’, *bonges* ‘sexy’, *cemong* ‘dirty, smudged’, and *norak* ‘inappropriate’. Borrowings from Jakartan Indonesian are

12 This assessment is no doubt in part a reflection of the Javanese backgrounds of the majority of the young people in my study. There are *gaul* elements identified as originating from regional dialects other than Javanese in my corpus, but they appeared relatively rarely.

13 Also called *bahasa Betawi*. For a brief history and description of Jakartan Malay see Sneddon 2003:153-155. For a more detailed grammatical analysis see Grijns 1991.

sometimes difficult to distinguish from word borrowings from *bahasa prokem* (see discussion above). In his article “Those Who Speak *Prokem*,” Chambert-Loir (1984:111) identifies the infix *-ok* as a unique feature of *prokem* vocabulary. A number of items with the *-ok* infix appear in the *gaul* vocabulary of university students today. They include among others *gokil* from *gila* ‘crazy’; *mertoku* from [*calon*] *mertua* ‘[future] in-laws’; *bokap* from *bapak* ‘father’; and *nyokap* from *nyak*, Jakartan dialect for ‘mother’.

Certain pronunciations are also borrowed from the informal dialect of the capital (e.g., the replacement of syllable-final /a/ by the mid-central vowel (schwa) /ɨ/ in many words, such as *dalem* instead of *dalam* ‘inside’), as are some interjections, as well as the verb suffix *-in* which corresponds to the suffixes *-kan* and *-i* in formal Indonesian. Some of these features show up in the following examples. The first is from a male engineering student in a discussion of dating. The second is from a teen magazine for young males in an article on adjusting to college.

*Pantes, dong, cowok demen cewek.*  
‘It’s **fitting/proper, don’t you know, guys like girls**’.

*Elo bisa jadi target empuk buat ditoyor anak senior.*  
‘**You** could become an easy target **for a beating** by an older student’.<sup>14</sup>

### ● *English language borrowings*

The most distinctive feature of the slang of university students, however, is the number of English language borrowings. Over 30 percent of my corpus of *gaul* terms come from English. Notable by comparison—particularly in light of the recent resurgent interest in Islam—is the dearth of borrowings in youth slang

14 Example is from *Hai* magazine July 2003, 27(29):16, cited in Supriyanti 2004:64.

from Arabic (see also Supriyanti 2004:40).<sup>15</sup> English borrowings are not only significant in terms of their overall numbers but also in terms of the frequency of their occurrence. They were ubiquitous in my interviews and informal discussions with young people.

*Cowok suka hunting.*

‘Guys like **to cruise** for girls’.

*Hubungan kami itu nggak serius, lho!*

*Kami enjoy saja.*

‘Hey, our relationship wasn’t **serious!**

We were just **having fun**’.

*Itu disebut MBA, ‘marit because accident’.*

‘That’s called **MBA**, “**married because [of an] accident**” ‘.

*Doi betul-betul care buat saya.*

‘He really **cares** about me’.

A similar pattern of English borrowings is also common in the informal language of many contemporary magazines and novels targeted at a young adult audience, and in advice columns in newspapers which attract a youth readership. The following examples are taken from the letters of young people to advice columnists, the first from a magazine for young men (*Hai* ‘Hey’) and the second from a magazine for young women (*Kawanku* ‘My friend’).

*Soalnya, gue nggak suka klabing.*<sup>16</sup>

‘The problem is I don’t like **going clubbing [out to clubs]**’.

*Ada juga temanku yang sudah trendy, playboy pula.*<sup>17</sup>

‘I also have friends who are **trendy**, even **playboys**’.

Some English borrowings in slang have undergone a process of assimilation to the sound system of Indonesian. Others remain in their original forms. As is evidenced in the examples above, the level of assimilation of English borrowings is also reflected in the spelling of words as they appear in print; with some words spelled as their English originals (like *trendy* and *playboy* above) and others reflecting Indonesian pronunciation. ‘Married’ for example is written *marit* or *merit* and is pronounced /mErIt/. ‘Clubbing’ may be written *clubbing* or *klabing*, and is pronounced /klabɪŋ/. And ‘enjoy’ is written *enjoy* (sometimes *enjoi*) and pronounced as in English but with the accent on the initial syllable /En’joi/.

English language borrowings are subject to the same derivational processes that affect other *gaul* lexical items. English phrases, for example, may be reduced to acronyms, like *MBA* (pronounced /Embea/) ‘married because accident’ in the sentence above. Other English-derived acronyms include *ML* (/EmEl/) ‘making love’ and *BT*, also written as *bete* (/bete/), ‘bad mood’. *BF* (/beEf/), the acronym for ‘blue film’ (pornographic film), has undergone further transformation through *-ok* infixation (see discussion of *bahasa prokem* above) to become *bokep*; in the process its meaning has expanded to mean ‘pornography’ more generally.

There are also English phrases which become blends in *gaul*, sometimes in combination with an Indonesian word. [*H*]ilang *feeling* ‘to lose interest/ feeling for someone’, for example, is *ilfil*. *Jaga imej* ‘to guard/protect one’s image’ is *jaim*, and *salah kostum* ‘an inappropriate outfit (costume)’ is *saltum*. Yet other English borrowings undergo clipping. ‘Aggressive’, for example, is *agre*; ‘America’ is *amrik*; ‘temperamental’ is *tempra*; and ‘sensitive’ is *sensi*. Examples of these types of constructions appear in the quotes below taken from an advice column in a magazine for young men.

15 A possible exception is *tajir* meaning ‘rich’, which may be related to an Arabic term for ‘merchant’.

16 Example is from *Hai* magazine December 2003, 27(52):19, cited in Supriyanti 2004:56.

17 Example is from *Kawanku* magazine April 2003, 32(43): 33, cited in Supriyanti 2004:60.

*Satu lagi tipe orang yang bikin orang lain gampang ilfil ya ini, sensi dan tempru.*<sup>18</sup>  
'Another type of person who makes others quickly *lose interest*, is [lover] **sensitive and temperamental**'.

*Abis mereka nggak mau disebut kelompok cewek jaim.*<sup>19</sup>  
'Because they didn't want to be put in the category of girls who **worry/obsess about their image**'.

The presence of so many English borrowings in *bahasa gaul* raises a number of interesting issues. Connie Eble (1996) has argued that borrowing from foreign languages is not a feature of slang in general or of American college slang in particular. The reason, she says, is the general insularity of slang, its primary function being to bind together people of similar persuasions. "By its very nature," Eble writes, "slang is not outreaching and cosmopolitan" (Eble 1996:39). In American college slang she finds little evidence of foreign language borrowings. The exceptions are borrowings which enter slang as word plays on phrases learned in introductory language courses. These borrowings poke fun at students' attempts to pronounce simple foreign phrases. So French *s'il vous plait* ('please') is rendered *silver plate* or *seafood plate* and *merci beaucoup* (French for 'thank you') becomes *mercy buckets* or *mercy buttercups*. Forcing foreign sounds to approximate words in English, Eble argues, is for many college students a source of humor; at the same time it expresses an attitude which is basically anti-intellectual (See also Hill 1998 on "mock Spanish"). In this way American college students use foreign language borrowings to strengthen their own group ties which are based on shared attitudes

and experiences and ways of seeing the world (Eble 1996:79).

Indonesian college students also create humorous word plays involving English borrowings in *gaul*. These word plays take the form of literal translations of common Indonesian phrases into English. A common leave-taking in standard Indonesian, for example, is *hati-hati di jalan* which means 'be careful on the road'. *Hati*, however, literally means 'liver (heart)'; in college student slang the phrase is thus rendered *heart-heart on the road*. Similarly, the common Indonesian phrase *tidak apa-apa* 'it's nothing (don't worry about it)' in literal, word-for-word English translation is rendered *no what-what*, while *terima kasih* 'thank you' becomes *receive love*, and *kembali [kasih]* 'you're welcome' becomes *return love*. Word plays like these, however, involve only a very small number of the English borrowings which occur in *bahasa gaul* and are hardly representative of the role English plays in Indonesian student slang.<sup>20</sup>

The use of English borrowings in *gaul* is less about poking fun at English or at English speakers than about signaling the speaker's identification with a fashionably cosmopolitan youth style widely identified with Western and East Asian print media, films, radio and television. Western, even global, youth culture emphasizes the positive value of cool nonchalance and casual informality (cf. Bucholtz 2007; Kiesling 2004). English borrowings show up in many of the *gaul* words which express this hip, laid back orientation: *cool*, *keren* 'cool'; *mellow*, *casual*, *cuek* 'to not care'; *cuek bebek* 'to not care [at all]'; *fresh*, *funky*, *friendly*; and *ngtren/trendy* 'trendy'. Related terms have to do with a carefree attitude of having fun and being happy: *relak/releks* 'relax'; *hang out*,

18 Example is from *Hai* magazine February 2004, 28 (5):27, cited in Supriyanti 2004:44.

19 Example is from *Hai* magazine July 2003, 37(26):11, cited in Stlpriyanti 2004:33.

20 These and similar word plays seem to be a more central element in *bahasa gay*, the language associated with the Indonesia's gay community (cf. Boellstroff 2004).

*refreshing* ‘relaxing’; *having fun, funny, enjoi/enjoy* ‘enjoy’; *hepi* ‘happy’. English borrowings also figure prominently among those words in *bahasa gaul* which reflect the new concern among youth with the articulation of individual wants, needs, and desires, and with the formulation of new types of social relationships. These terms include: *care, concern, sharing, support, first love, cute, charming, date, soul mate, macho, mood, don juan, playboy, jeles/jealous, bossy, killer, agre* ‘aggressive’, *sensi* ‘sensitive’, *tempra* ‘temperamental’, *petting* and *ML* ‘making love’, among others.

Students regularly describe borrowed English emotion terms as “more expressive,” offering as an example, the new “in” expression *Bete-in banget!* ‘It’s so annoying!’ *Bete* is an acronym derived from the English ‘bad mood’<sup>21</sup>; *-in* is the causative affix borrowed from Jakartan Indonesian. *Bete-in* is therefore ‘to cause to be in a bad mood; annoying’. Conversely, students say that English word borrowings which have sexual referents are emotionally “distancing,” allowing young people to talk about embarrassing or taboo topics with less discomfort. A group of female students explained that it would, for example, “hypothetically” be much easier for a young woman to say to her partner, *Beli safting, dong!* ‘Buy protection!’ than to use the (older Dutch/English) Indonesianized term *kondom*.<sup>22</sup> (Here, *safting*, *save thing*, or *safe thing* is apparently derived from English ‘safe sex’. A condom is thus a ‘safe thing’.)

A contrasting pattern of English borrowing has been described as characterizing the formal Indonesian of newspaper editorials, academic writing and lectures, and political speeches and publications. The use of English in these contexts often involves technical

or specialized vocabulary. This pattern of borrowing has sometimes been criticized as obscuring rather than adding meaning to the language as exemplified in the following quotation from an Indonesian professor emeritus of law.

*Postmodernism telah melakukan dekonstruksi terhadap dominasi atau hegemoni negara.*

‘Postmodernism has already deconstructed the domination or hegemony of the state’.<sup>23</sup>

Similar usages involve the use of English words or phrases for ideas or concepts that can easily be expressed in Indonesian. The redundancy of English in these contexts may even be signaled overtly by the use of the equivalent Indonesian term parenthetically after the English word (or the equivalent English word parenthetically after the Indonesian term). This practice in particular has been decried by language purists as eroding the integrity of the national language. The citation below is a quote from a prominent Indonesian newspaper, commenting on the relationship between the Indonesian army and political parties.

*Banyak pula mantan Pati TNI yang bergabung dengan parpol yang lulus threshold. Tetapi, hal itu dapat juga berarti peringatan (warning) kepada kalangan parpol. Tampaknya persoalan dikotomi sipil-militer politik di Indonesia hanyalah materi percakapan di meja perjamuan kaum scholars saja.*

‘There are likewise many former high ranking army officers who have joined together with political parties and have breached the **threshold**. This can also constitute a **warning** to political groupings. It appears that the dichotomy between the military

21 In this case the final / d/ of ‘mood’ is pronounced and spelled as /t/ and transposed for more “pleasing pronunciation.”

22 Students were anxious to impress upon me that this was a “hypothetical” utterance, not something one of them had ever said.

23 Citation is from the online news journal of Airlangga University *Warta Online Airlangga University*, <http://www.warta.unair.ac.id> (Tim Media Kerjabudaya 2004).

and politics in Indonesia is only material for discussion at meetings of scholars'.<sup>24</sup>

In the example above the use of English seems superfluous to the meaning of the passage in the sense that there are common and easily available Indonesian equivalents (*ambang pintu*, *peringatan*, *sarjana/ilmiawan*) for the borrowed English terms. J. Joseph Errington (2000:216) calls such usages "communicatively gratuitous" and argues that the use of English language borrowings in such contexts serves to underscore the "exemplary" status of the speaker in a pattern not unlike the use of the status marked speech levels of Javanese. These patterns of the use of English borrowings in formal Indonesian add to the stereotyped opacity and formality of the standard. Such usages are particularly widespread among academics, politicians, and bureaucrats and have the effect of identifying the speaker as a person who is able, due to his experience or education, to use language forms which are beyond the expertise of the majority of speakers (Errington 2000:216; see also Lowenberg 1994; Tanner 1972). In this sense the use of superfluous English borrowings in formal Indonesian, as the use of technical and abstract terminology, is a demonstration and reinforcement of status differentials.

### Articulating Modernity

In contrast to formal Indonesian, *bahasa gaul*, with its popular, youth culture focus, indexes a more inclusive ideology of *gaul* sociability. It assumes a shared orientation toward the values of informality and commensurability and an attitude of self-confident cosmopolitanism. As it is used by urban, educated youth, *bahasa*

*gaul* articulates a "modern," interactional flexibility which emphasizes the expression of individual needs and desires, and distances the speaker from old styles and hierarchies. Not surprisingly, the particular values expanded upon in *gaul* ideology reflect the social position of its upwardly aspiring speakers (Kroskirty 2000:8). Students have appropriated elements from the speech styles of people at the social margins (gangsters, criminals, street kids), and use them along with other local and foreign borrowings to declare their independence of traditional expectations and established social convention. Through a process of enregisterment "whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (Agha 2005:38), the language of *gaul* sociability has become widely identified with contemporary middle-class youth culture. In the process, *gaul* has taken on new associations, becoming a linguistic emblem of the cool, hip, educated, and connected.

Agha (1998) and others have emphasized the reflexive relationship that patterns of linguistic usage have to social status; that is, that patterns of linguistic usage both respond to independent status distinctions and promote status valorizations themselves. As *bahasa gaul* has become increasingly associated with the upwardly mobile and trendy, it has developed its own kind of coercive appeal linked to the assumed (stereotyped) status of its speakers-as revealed in this comment by a third year student attending Gadjah Mada University,

Sometimes when I meet up with some kids from Jakarta and they're really *gaul*, I feel like I have to adjust to their style and be like them and talk like them even though I'm not that used to using *bahasa gaul*. But when I'm with them, I do that so that they all think, "She's really advanced (*maju*), you know, she's really modern." So, I have to use *bahasa gaul* in that situation.

24 Citation is from the online news journal of Airlangga University *Warta Online Airlangga University*, <http://www.warta.unair.ac.id> (Tim Media Kerjabudaya 2004).



Just as might be expected, as *gaul* style has been drawn up from the world of social marginals to the world of self-realizing, self-fulfilling, upward-aspiring individuals, it has become responsive to the sorts of pressures and concerns that animate the new Indonesian middle class. As it has moved from informality and solidarity at the margins to informality within a new and more flexible system of differentiation and hierarchy, *gaul* has also come to express a new form of linguistic status and identity. After all, if you're not *gaul*, you're not cool, you're not modern, and you just don't belong.

Complicating the development and trajectory of *gaul* even further, during its transition from dark and rebellious periphery to the well-heeled and hip new center, the speech style has also come to be mediated by a variety of new social actors, among them: professional managers and media talk show hosts, Dale Carnegie-like self-help authors, and sexual advice columnists.<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to both capitalize on and domesticate the new youth subcultures, these experts have expanded on *gaul*'s concern with the individual and with a more flexible sociability to articulate a whole new catalogue of directives and warnings concerning the proper formulation of cool (but careful) modernity (cf. Miller 2004). These *gaul* experts use the language of youth sociability to caution young people about the dangers of uncritical acceptance of Western models of behavior and the need to adjust them to an Indonesian value system and social reality.

It is particularly ironic that *gaul* has emerged at more or less exactly the same time that the Islamic resurgence has led many, especially urban, Indonesians to a more religious orientation and pious lifestyle. Perhaps most surprising, a significant number of the new self-help experts and social commentators who have adopted the language

of youth sociability identify themselves as devout Muslims. Books like *Zaman Gaul: Tips Menjadi Gaul bagi Remaja Islam Tanpa Kehilangan Identitas Keislamannya* ('The Gaul Era: Tips for Muslim Youth on Becoming Sociable without Losing Your Muslim Identity') (Salim 2004) and *All About Gaul!* ('All About [the New] Sociability!') (Kurnia 2005) are written in casual, *gaul* style. Their authors do not condemn *gaul* ideology but instead intersperse their texts with Qur'anic quotations and passages taken from the *hadits* (traditions of the life of the Prophet) to emphasize a carefully measured and acceptably Muslim style of *gaul* social interaction. Even many Muslim youth preachers (*ustadh*) have begun to appropriate *gaul*'s informal style and casual exchanges in an attempt to reach out to and engage a youth audience. This is especially true, not surprisingly, of those who are most involved in the glamorous world of radio and television preaching—among them the enormously popular AA Gymastiar and Jefri Al-Buchori, who are often referred to by the media and by their youthful followers as *ustadz gaul* ('*gaul* teachers/preachers').

### **Gaul Community**

*Gaul* then is the product of a particular type of community increasingly identified with the educated and "mass-mediated" landscapes of modern Indonesia. It is not a community defined by common residence or territoriality. Nor is it based on the shared experience of political struggle like that which characterized the early nationalists of the *Sumpah Pemuda* of 1928, the revolutionary youth of the 1945-1949 independence war; the activist students of the generation of 1965-1966 (*Angkqtan* 65-66), or even the moderate Islamist youth engaged in the struggle for democratic reform (1998). Although it has rebellious undercurrents, the culture of *gaul* is increasingly defined by lifestyle and consumer aspirations, themselves originating, not so much in formal

25 See, for example, Alatas 2006; Astuti 2005; Rachman and Omar 2004; Rohani 2004.

politics, as in the educational and mass-media experiences of the new middle class (cf. Liechty 2003). This orientation is toward, not a political project, but a *way* of being Indonesian in the post-traditional landscape of multiethnic, urban Indonesia. While *gaul* is very much at home on Indonesian campuses, then, it would be a mistake to view it as just a byproduct of educated youth. That community is itself as much an aspiration and lifestyle as it is a fixed social category. Moreover, the styles and sociability of *gaul* have now extended well beyond the more promising segments of the new middle class. This is all the *more* the case inasmuch as pop media and popular consumption styles have themselves become carriers of *gaul* culture.

*Gaul* is above all an “open” linguistic variety, a style marked by its porousness and enjoyment of new linguistic and lifestyle flows. It is a work in process, unfinished and fast changing—as evidenced, for example, by the recent incorporation of elements of the language of gay culture into its lexicon (cf. Boellstorf 2004). But it is also selective in its appropriations. The cultural logic of its selectivity reflects at its core the aspiration of urban middle-class youth to styles of social identity and interaction profoundly different from those of their parents and the New Order era. The new styles do not constitute a radical and highly politicized counter-language/ counterculture to the establishment center. They instead reflect middle-class youth’s heightened concern *for* casual informality, greater emotional expressivity, and the communication of a new and constantly evolving popular Indonesian culture.

The analysis of language and culture in Indonesian society has frequently been conducted with reference to the idea of the crowning or singular importance of exemplary centers; that is, certain axial points of reference that provide a model and standard for the evaluation of all else (cf. Anderson 1972; Errington 1985; Geertz 1960). In their language styles and social conventions,

contemporary members of the Indonesian middle class show that they are still keenly responsive to the estimations of others. However, if there is an exemplary center informing the language choices of middle-class youth today, it has less to do with the centers and standards of Java’s courts or other indigenous aristocracies than it does with the example provided by a diverse array of new media and institutions, among them: the educational system, MTV, a plethora of youth publications, international films and fashions, computers and the internet. In this sense there is not just one settled center invoking the traditions and received conventions of venerated ancestors, but a variety of media and social fields themselves highly permeable to outside influence and continuing cultural change.

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