

Conversation as a curiosity

Performing autochthonous talk in the media of Banyuwangi (Java, Indonesia)¹

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In early 1999 a new employee of a radio station in Banyuwangi town, a young man who had recently moved there from another Indonesian island, was told by his colleagues that the station would be preparing a *lomba gesah*. He was flabbergasted. The phenomenon of *lomba*, Indonesian for ‘contest’ or ‘competition’, was familiar enough. As a means of promoting skills, pride, and good practice in a variety of fields and as a source of entertainment, contests are an established part of public life in Indonesia. Radio stations organize a good many of them. It was the second word that caused the amazement. The journalist misheard it as *desah*, which means ‘rustle’ and ‘sigh’. While many things can be ‘made into a contest’ (*dilombakan*), including such skills as peeling pineapples and putting eels tail first into bottles, a ‘sighing contest’ was not something he expected to be organized by the station he had joined, however suitable it might be for broadcasting.

I heard this anecdote from the station personnel during the first session of the contest, which was indeed held in July and August of that year. The misunderstanding was considered funny but the new employee was not blamed for his failure to recognize the word *gesah*. He was a newcomer to Banyuwangi, after all, and did not speak Osing. But even if one does know that *gesah* means ‘talk, converse’ in that language, it remains remarkable that it is made the subject of a contest. In its ordinary sense *gesah* is relaxed conversation, a practice that is not usually so performative that it is readily “made into a contest”, and one that tends to be less reflexive than other kinds of speech and music that are broadcast by Indonesian radio, whether as contests or in regular programmes.²

Things may become a little clearer when one realizes that *lomba gesah* is short for *lomba gesah cara Using*, a hybrid Indonesian-Osing expression meaning ‘conversing-in-the-Osing-language contest’, and that Osing is the daily language of at most half of the people in Banyuwangi—a minority, however, that is at the same time recognized as the “autochthonous” inhabitants of the region. A language tied to the land but spoken by comparatively few is perhaps a warranted object of interest, also among some of those

¹□ This short paper will, I hope, grow into a fully-fledged chapter in a study of the significance of the Osing language in Banyuwangi. It is based on fieldwork funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) in the framework of the PIONIER programme Verbal Art in the Audio-Visual Media of Indonesia, 1996–2001. I wrote the first version while a Fellow-in-Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS), 2001/2002.

²□ The notion of performance I invoke here is that described in, *inter alia*, Bauman 1984 [1977].

who live there but lack fluency in that language. Yet it remains puzzling what precisely it is that is performed and judged in a contest dedicated to “conversation in the Osing language”.

As a genre Osing conversation contests are media-bound and performed irregularly but recurrently. Every few years a radio station in Banyuwangi will organize one, typically with commercial sponsorship. The subsequent entries—each consisting of a conversation by the three to five people that make up a team—are broadcast live in the course of a few days or sometimes spread over several months. I have heard of four Osing conversation contests (one of which actually had to be cancelled) and two contests of a closely related kind (which I will mention below but cannot go into). These events were held between 1994 and 2001 by three radio stations, that is all stations in and in the vicinity of Banyuwangi town.³ The contests are open in principle to all and attract contestants from quite disparate social backgrounds. The contest of 1999 drew several teams composed of secondary-school pupils from a town about 15 kilometres to the south, several teams of peasant farmers from a village about 5 kilometres to the west, and at least one of middle-class people from various parts of Banyuwangi town itself. The contestants were both male and female and ranged in age from about 15 to about 65 years. It is true that Osing conversation contests are held only occasionally and with long intervals, but they do reverberate for a considerable time afterwards. During several of my visits to Banyuwangi I met people who talked about them, and during my visit in 2001 I finally heard a cassette recording that one of the participants had received from a radio station seven years earlier and which in the meantime had been taken to Lombok, another Indonesian island, by a relative and kept there for at least four years before it was brought back to Banyuwangi.

In the *lomba gesah cara Using* we find the remarkable phenomenon of performance of a language through conversation. In this paper I inquire into two related sets of questions from among the many issues that this phenomenon raises. Why should a particular language (or lingual variety⁴) be made into an object of performance in the first place? And, given that other discourse registers or genres are more clearly designed for performance—and indeed Banyuwangi radio stations and other institutions also hold contests in Osing poetry recitation, the singing of Osing pop songs, and Osing storytelling—why should the Osing language be performed through conversation? Having explored these issues to do with the cultural conditions that make it feasible for a media genre to be dedicated to performing a language-through-conversation, I turn to a concrete case. A number of entries for the *lomba gesah* of July–August 1999 make it possible to examine the question how contestants from different sociocultural backgrounds

³Until 1999 there were six radio stations in the entire regency of Banyuwangi. After the abolishment of the Department of Information in that year, there was in effect no more supervision and the number grew considerably. In 2001, however, this department was restored in the less powerful form of a Minister without Portfolio for Communication and Information. The number of stations has fallen again since.

⁴It is a moot point among Banyuwangi literati whether Osing, as I refer to it here, is a “dialect” of Javanese or indeed a distinct “language”. This controversy is important but it does not affect my argument in this paper and I will only mention it in passing.

went about this task and to inquire into the considerations that underlay their approaches.

The extraordinariness of ordinary talk on Banyuwangi radio

To my knowledge the conversing-in-Osing contest is unique in and to Banyuwangi. The other languages spoken in Banyuwangi by sizable numbers of people are Indonesian, the national language which everyone is supposed to master, and two so-called “regional languages” (*bahasa daerah*), namely Javanese which is spoken by immigrants from further west and their descendants, and Madurese, the daily language of another immigrant group. Javanese has over 80 million native speakers outside Banyuwangi regency, Madurese about 9 million, Osing practically none. Although Osing is spoken by only about 500,000 to 750,000 people, that is a third to half of the regency’s population, these other languages are, as far as I know, not rendered the object of similar contests here, and I would be surprised if this kind of *lomba* has many counterparts elsewhere in Indonesia.

It is not that there are no other languages in Indonesia that are in a similar position to Osing. In Banyuwangi, however, a small but passionate group of culture activists with connections in the regional government and the regional media (newspapers, radio stations, recording studios) has managed, especially since the late 1970s, to draw special public attention to certain aspects of Osing culture and language. These activists are united in semi-governmental organizations, the Blambangan Arts Council (Dewan Kesenian Blambangan⁵) foremost among them. They develop or stimulate a range of activities such as research into local history, seminars on traditional performing arts, publication of literature in Osing, composition of lyrics for Osing popular music and issue of such music on cassettes and, since late 1999, on video compact disks, and various other initiatives to do with Osing discourse. The Osing language itself, too, is felt by these cultural activists to be in need of promotion. They perceive it to be under serious threat of becoming obsolete. They have managed, for instance, to get it recognized as *the* regional language of Banyuwangi in 1996. This official status allows it to be taught in primary and, in due course, lower-level secondary schools. Because until recently Osing was simply regarded as a dialect of Javanese, the regional language in schools used to be standard central Javanese. Alongside education, media too can play an important role in naturalizing certain ways of thinking and doing, in making one cultural option or another appear as the obvious thing to do given the circumstances. A conversation contest, broadcast throughout the Banyuwangi region, makes it possible to represent speaking Osing as something natural, done and indeed to be done by ordinary people in day-to-day life. The *lomba gesah*, then, was and is seen as one of a range of ways of publicly promoting the Osing language.

In fact one of the main grounds for calling the *lomba gesah* extraordinary is its multiple ordinariness in comparison with other genres of media discourse and performance in Banyuwangi. Several basic

⁵Blambangan is an alternative name for the Banyuwangi region that connotes a glorious past. Blambangan was once a powerful kingdom in the region. It fell to the Dutch East India Company in the late eighteenth century.

aspects of a *lomba gesah* are common in everyday face-to-face interaction but exceptional in media discourse and performance. All that an entry for the competition is supposed to consist of is a conversation among the members of the group of 10 to 15 minutes duration, with a title (*judhul*) or rather a topic (*topik*) that has been decided and announced beforehand. The participants are amateurs; they lack the star status of the DJs and pop singers whose voices dominate the airwaves. The roles they play in the conversations are those of “ordinary” people; some of them to a considerable extent represent themselves, projecting the same personas that they do in quotidian social life. The idiom they use is a “regional” language, not Indonesian which, however familiar it may be, retains the status of an outsiders’ language but which is paramount in broadcast talk. The speech style adopted in the contests is considerably more realistic than the strongly stylized speech of almost the entire gamut of drama genres in Indonesia—traditional rural genres, metropolitan avant garde inspired by western exemplars, and everything in between. The speech style of the contests is also less snappy and more multivocal than DJ talk. Finally, thematically the conversations centre on common but problematic events and circumstances in social life, contrasting with the kinds of Osing discourse that are usually heard on the radio, each with their concomitant limited range of themes, namely music programmes with amusing but rarely very consequential DJ talk, pop song lyrics (mostly to do with love), regional news (mostly about government programmes), and messages phoned or sent in by “ordinary people” (mostly greetings).⁶

The Banyuwangi culture activists’ desire to represent Osing as the natural idiom of the region was not the sole factor that led to the first *lomba gesah* (which was probably that of 1994). Most broadcasting is in Indonesian owing to government legislation. “Regional languages”, however, may be used in broadcasts of a “cultural” nature. Some local music programmes in Banyuwangi have been presented in Osing since at least the 1980s. When a conversation contest is held, it is usually slotted into such a programme. This embedding enables the national language to be cast aside fairly radically for the duration of these contests. Besides the government and its legislation, the main institutions involved in Banyuwangi radio broadcasting are advertisers and programme sponsors and the stations themselves. It is to the advantage of both advertisers and broadcasters occasionally to do something extraordinary, and to involve ordinary people doing an ordinary activity such as talking in that extraordinary thing. The advertisers get a bit more of the exposure that they want. In the case of the 1999 conversation contest the sponsor was as usual a brand of painkiller. The brand was mentioned by the DJs throughout the broadcast. An advertisement of the painkiller—which, somewhat unusually, was in Osing—was repeated several times. In a few of the conversations the painkiller was also named. This was not a requirement for participation and not done by all participating groups. The sole condition for registration—this was declared explicitly on-air before and after the entries—was that an empty packet of this painkiller had to be handed in for each team member. It was the sponsor that provided the prize money. (In 1999 the not inconsiderable sum of Rp. 500,000.) The radio station, in turn, was interested in this kind of broadcast because it pulled in advertising and because it allowed it to expand the social reach of the off-the-air activities connected with its Osing broadcasts. On the whole only a few dozen people were inclined to

⁶On the last kind of radio discourse in Osing, see Arps forthcoming.

participate in those activities, namely the members of the fan club of the station's Osing music programme. Through this programme the station hoped to attract new blood.

The cultural activists' desire, then, was fulfilled because the facilitating institutions—a commercial sponsor and the radio station—stood to profit from it as well and government regulations allowed it. This particular combination of circumstances is one of the two main explanations for the existence of this peculiar *lomba*.

Performing a language by conversation—Approaches from three backgrounds

Facilitating institutions are needed, but participants too. I witnessed six entries for the conversation contest held in late July and August 1999 at a radio station in Banyuwangi town, and I will use these to illustrate the various approaches to the problem of how to perform a language through conversation.

The teams participated under unrevealing ad hoc names like 'Oriole Group' (*Grup Kepudhang*), 'Red Durian Group' (*Grup Dur_n Abang*), and 'Tall, Lean, and Light-Skinned Group' (*Grup Lencir Kuning*) and their backgrounds were not explicitly stated. However, knowledgeable listeners will have noticed that this contest, like the others that had preceded it, was a mediated arena for a competitive meeting between representatives of three Osing discourse cultures in Banyuwangi. These cultures are constituted, *inter alia*, by shared ways of speaking (Hymes 1989 [1974]).⁷

The first is that of middle-class townspeople, especially in Banyuwangi town. These people are not necessarily native speakers of Osing. They are Banyuwangians, however. Those who participated in the *lomba* were all connected to a club of listeners of a radio programme with Banyuwangi pop music called DLB (*D_ndang Lagu Banyuwangi*, 'Singing Banyuwangi Songs'). This club included, for instance, the owner of a successful batik workshop, a civil servant, the owner of a hairdressing salon, a former miner, and the owner of a prawn cracker factory.⁸ The second Osing discourse culture represented in the contest was that of schoolchildren of Osing parents. Their environment is school and youth culture, which is officially dominated by standard Indonesian but in practice by all sorts of other languages, while Osing is even taught there on primary-school level (though it had not been to these particular performers; they were too old for that). The third Osing discourse culture present in the contest was that of people from Osing-speaking villages and predominantly Osing-speaking urban neighbourhoods. In contrast with that of the preceding category their talk was referred to by a presenter as 'old-style conversation' (*gesah*

⁷ Although such matters as age, place of residence, and profession play a role as well, an individual can participate in different such "discourse cultures" (a term, incidentally, that I would be happy to give up for a better one). In fact, as the fieldwork I have conducted in Banyuwangi, with intervals, since 1983 suggests, these three Osing discourse cultures are the main Osing discourse cultures that exist. I am unable to go into this matter here.

⁸ Another way in which people from this discourse community are involved with radio stations and programmes is discussed in Arps forthcoming.

tuw_k).⁹ Their speech actually forms the source of the lingual standard that is in the process of being defined by cultural activists. Since the juries of conversation contests are drawn from the ranks of these same cultural activists, participants in this category have an advantage over those in the other two.

While the contestants came from different backgrounds, they also shared a cultural common ground. This was composed of their presence in Banyuwangi, their ability to speak a form of Osing, their interest in Banyuwangi public culture (they listen to the same radio programmes, they own the same albums and sing the same songs), and most importantly the fact that they enjoy talking: the background of each of the teams that participated was a network of people who meet regularly to talk. After the social contexts in which they normally interact—the fan club, the school, the village—I will refer to the three categories of contestants in the *lomba* of 1999 the DLB fans, schoolkids, and villagers. I will first give a brief impression of their contributions and then discuss the strategies they used to perform the Osing language while engaging in conversation.

The DLB fans

I was told that several teams from the DLB fan club would take part in the contest, but I heard only one, a group consisting of one man and three women. I also attended one of the rehearsals for that entry. It took place at the radio station a week before the broadcast, in part with a different line-up from that which was eventually used. (Example 1: rehearsal by the DLB fans, 31 July 1999.) The title—called *topik*—of the entry was ‘A Misunderstanding’ (*Salah Tampa*). A man complains to his mother-in-law that every day at three o’clock his wife is over at a neighbour’s house. He goes to look for her and finds his neighbour, a woman. At the moment his wife is on the phone there. He accuses his neighbour of being a go-between between his wife and her lover. The neighbour denies this and explains that the man’s wife is singing karaoke over the telephone. When his mother-in-law arrives as well, they all decide to join the DLB club and the man promises to have a telephone line installed in their home.

Schoolkids

I saw two entries by pupils of an upper-level secondary school in Rogojampi, about 15 kilometres south of Banyuwangi town. The entries were titled ‘Banyuwangi Songs’ (*Lagu Banyuwangi*) and ‘Notched Hoe’ (*Pacul Guwang*). The former was a discussion that involved two girls and three boys—playing a married couple, their son and daughter, and the son’s friend—about the contrast between western and Banyuwangi popular music. The son first went along with his friend in preferring “western music”, but in the end was won over by the others to Banyuwangi songs. This conversation was very difficult to follow, because the speakers often spoke all at the same time. (Example 2: from ‘Banyuwangi Songs’, 31 July 1999.) The second entry was performed by a different team that also consisted of two girls and three boys. They played a husband and wife and her younger brother, a female neighbour and, near the end of the playlet, her husband. Most of the play consisted of a vicious dispute between two parties, the wife and

⁹ A distinction between *tuw_k* ‘old’ and *nom* ‘young’ is also drawn between variants of certain performing arts in Banyuwangi (Arps 1992:49, 311). The adjectives connote both age of participants and age of the genre.

her brother versus the husband and the female neighbour. The latter was accused of being the husband's secret lover. When the neighbour's husband arrived, the truth came to light. The younger brother was a liar.

Villagers

I saw and heard three conversations by teams from a village near Banyuwangi. Two of the teams had three members (two men and a woman and two women and a man), the other consisted of two women and two men. The speakers used their own names. The entries bore the titles of 'Cherishing *Gandrung*' (*Nguri-Nguri Gandrung*),¹⁰ 'An Entrusted Letter' (*Surat Titipan*), and 'A Broken Promise' (*Luput Janji*). 'Cherishing *Gandrung*' was about a young woman who wants to become a *gandrung* and visits a musician to ask for help. Her mother comes looking for her and objects vehemently because, she says, a *gandrung* is not something that a decent girl wants to be. Her father arrives as well and supports his daughter against his wife. In the end the daughter is entrusted to the musician's care. In 'An Entrusted Letter' a letter drops out of a man's wallet and his wife accuses him of having a girlfriend. A neighbour, an elderly woman, arrives and it turns out that the letter is for her. It was given to the man when he came past the home of her son, who plans to visit tomorrow. The wife is ashamed and asks for forgiveness for her rash accusation. (Example 3: from 'An Entrusted Letter', 25 July 1999.) Of all the entries that I heard, the third in the present category, 'A Broken Promise', was the most relaxed and conversational. A husband reports to his wife that he ran into a fellow villager, a woman, who mentioned a bracelet. The wife confirms that this woman offered her the (golden) bracelet for sale. She is eager to buy it, but thought she should discuss the matter with her husband first. The husband says that they might not have the money because their child will soon have to take an exam (and examination fees in Indonesian schools are high). Then the husband of the woman who wants to sell her bracelet comes to visit. They need the money to buy a rice field from a relative; they want to keep this field in the family. The guest is disappointed when it turns out that the deal has fallen through, but he accepts the change of heart. There are several digressions in the dialogue.

The pool of strategies

How then did these groups perform Osing conversation? What features of the language variety and discourse genre did they highlight in their contributions to the contest? Four strands were common to their approaches.

All the teams applied the same method of making the dialogues represent proper conversation (*gesah*). This was to choose a setting and participants that obviously suited the discourse genre being represented. An evident setting for *gesah* is a reception room in someone's home, and that is where all the playlets took place. The interactants represented family members, neighbours, and friends—because these are the categories of people one most commonly engages in *gesah* with.

A second strategy stressed the performative. It was to incorporate well-established performance

¹⁰ *Gandrung* is a traditional music-and-dance genre treated as emblematic of Osing culture and Banyuwangi.

genres into the conversation. In most of the entries, stanzas were declaimed in the verse form known in Osing as *basanan* (or *wangsalan*). This verse form is popular and appears, besides in the radio messages I have discussed elsewhere (Arps forthcoming), in several Osing performance genres including pop music, *gandrung* lyrics (Arps 1994), certain types of traditional drama. It may also be used in ordinary speech (though in my experience not very frequently) as a kind of saying and as a means of making a sensitive point in an artful manner and indirectly. It was thus that it was used in the conversations. An example pronounced in ‘An Entrusted Letter’ by the elderly woman to the wife is:

<i>Ngumbaha gundha u ng grojogan</i>	Rinse <i>gundha</i> [a vegetable] at the water spout
<i>Dinawa ring Bangeran</i>	The village constable in Bangeran
<i>Nyandra-nyandra hira sing kecocogan</i>	You vent your suspicions but turn out to be wrong
<i>Ndaquwa ya sing kebeneran</i>	Make accusations that fall wide of the mark

Another verbal art genre that was used by some was *wangsalan* (also called *basanan*), which is more complicated and which I will not go into. A further kind of performance that was inserted into some of the conversations was music. Parts of Osing pop songs were sung in two entries, and one entry had a little violin playing of a song from the *gandrung* repertoire. Finally, some of the contestants attempted to make jokes (though this was less prominent than in the 1994 competition).

The incorporation into the conversation of genres that are established as performative shades into the third approach to performing Osing conversation that can be detected. This involved bringing into practice certain “speaking Osing” stereotypes, first of all making *celathu* a central component of the conversation. *Celathu* ‘to scold’ has a performative streak in it. It is a way of speaking for which, in multilingual Banyuwangi, the Osing language is considered particularly suitable.¹¹ There was a certain degree of sensationalism in the *lomba gesah* playlets. In most entries the actors tried to give their conversation allure by means of *celathu* and, more generally, *tukaran* ‘arguing, quarrelling’. The six plays from this contest all centre on interpersonal tension: especially between spouses, but also between brothers-in-law, between parents and child, between neighbours. The schoolkids in particular were rather rude and used offensive words, although they avoided the terms of abuse par excellence in Osing, namely *c_l_ng* ‘boar’ and *asu* ‘dog’, which are often cited by Osing people expressing pride in the straightforwardness of their manners but which were probably just too rude for public broadcasting in this

¹¹ Besides *lomba gesah cara Using* at least two radio stations in Banyuwangi have held a ‘scolding in Osing contest’ (*lomba celathu cara Using*). This genre may, ironically, have been born from the very threat it was designed to help overcome. I suspect that the phrase *lomba celathu cara Using* was coined as ‘speaking Osing competition’ with *celathu* meant to mean ‘talk, speak’ as in most Javanese dialects—so as a kind of *lomba gesah* and perhaps nothing but an alternative designation for it. However, in Osing *celathu* actually means ‘scold, malign’. Participants in the first contest of this kind (which seems to have been in 1997) may then have taken its label in its Osing sense and produced a sketch with scornful dialogue. Irrespective of how this kind of *lomba* came about, it has met with popular approval.

self-consciously Islamic region. The entries that featured no overt argument did at least display the interactional attitude that is called *cemeplos* ‘be to the point, spontaneous, direct’, another characteristic that is considered typical of Osing discourse and those who engage in it.

A fourth strategy for performing Osing conversation was obvious and easy in principle: underlining the Osing aspect by using typically Osing vocabulary and pronunciation. This approach also entailed, of course, an avoidance of loan words from Javanese and Indonesian, which are quite common in everyday discourse. Some of the teams also consciously applied archaic, rare, or rustic Osing words and expressions; by emphasizing them they gave them a performative quality. And finally, all groups made liberal use of certain characteristically Osing features of pronunciation. For the schoolkids and villagers using Osing accents was not a problem, but the DLB fans had to pay conscious attention to this when rehearsing, first because some of these features are subdued in the variants of Osing associated with the regency capital where most of them lived, and secondly because not all members of the team habitually spoke Osing in their day-to-day environments.

Ways of speaking as a cultural theme

None of the four approaches had explicitly been prescribed by the contest organizers. By 1999 the *lomba gesah* had already acquired a set of generic conventions—even my bare-bone sketches above should have made this clear—while at the same time it left considerable room for creativity. In 1994, when the phenomenon was new, this had been different. Then the participating teams were given a list of instructions. Relevant here are the instruction to do with the fact that the conversations were to be audio-mediated, and those to do with the desire that the entries should really be like conversations. As to the first point: contestants were told to make reference in their dialogue to the place and time of their meeting. The place and time of the conversation were not the studio (or in the contest’s final, the stage erected in the parking lot in front of the studio) during the broadcast. And as to the second point: it was stressed in particular that *gesah* should not be comedy (*pelawaq* or *dhagelan*). This warning was necessary because some participants might conceive of *gesah* in a *lomba* precisely as such, given that comedy contests in Osing (*lomba lawak bahasa Osing*) have on occasion been held by Banyuwangi radio stations since at least 1980!

It is obvious, then, that the people who let their voices be heard in the conversation contest did so in ways that were constrained and guided by generic models of various kinds, and some of these models were genres of drama. The conversations that were produced were rather far removed from the traditional theatre known as *Damar Ulan*, which, though well known in Banyuwangi and regarded as typically Osing, is spoken in a variety of Central Javanese. The conversations resembled in particular the above-mentioned genre of comedy, the genre called (among other things) *macaan*, that known as *sosiodrama*, and finally radio drama (*sandiwara radio*). All of these can be performed in Osing and some of them

usually are. *Macaan* is basically comedy larded with song (using the verse form sketched above).¹² This kind of musical drama is performed up to the present by semi-professional actors and singers for rites of passage. In the 1970s and 1980s it was also brought out locally on audio cassettes, but since then it has virtually disappeared from the mediascape, though it is still performed live. Like in most of the *lomba gesah* contributions, in *macaan* the characters bear the names of the actors and also in other ways the characters in the drama and the personas that the actors' produce in everyday life are close. *Sosiodrama* is the kind of drama performed in schools. Since the late 1950s or early 1960s there have been a few amateur groups working in Indonesian, Javanese, and Osing in Banyuwangi, both in towns and certain villages. These groups were sometimes enlisted by the regional government for instructional campaigns (*penyuluhan*). Radio drama in Osing, finally, has been broadcast by the station that belongs to the Regency Government (Radio Khusus Pemerintah Daerah, 'Special Radio of the Regional Government') since 1971 or 1972, officially once weekly for 45 minutes but in fact irregularly and with intervals of sometimes several years duration. The performers are an amateur group, if necessary supplemented by a few people who happen to be in the studio at the right time and who are willing to join. They are unlike other amateur drama groups in that they can avail themselves of the services of an experienced author who outlines plays for them and sometimes performs as well.

Although the *lomba gesah* conversations border on these kinds of drama in various ways, they are clearly different to each of them as well. As one of the participants in the 1999 contest told me on another occasion, when he performed any kind of drama—*sosiodrama* for *penyuluhan* had been one of his hobbies in the past—he could not prevent what he called a 'western melody' (*lagu kulon*), that is a Javanese tone or mode of speaking, from entering his performance. It was only in a *lomba gesah* and *lomba celathu*, he said, that an 'Osing melody' (*lagu Using*) was fully attainable. He insisted that conversation (and scolding) contests were not *drama*. I doubt whether the DLB fans saw this in the same way; their contribution was certainly close to a radio play. It was for instance the only "conversation" that involved a change of setting, and the only one where some participants had their parts written out.

Drama, then, lurked in the background of the conversations, albeit in different ways for different participants. But at least as important for the feasibility of *lomba gesah* is the fact that languages and dialects—ways of speaking regarded as local and even locality-bound—are common themes of talk in Banyuwangi. What is more, ways of speaking are also performed in ordinary talk. Often but not always this is done for comical effect and involves some exaggeration of another village's brogue or certain unusual intonation contours that are used there. There is ample occasion to exercise this interest in ways of speaking. Apart from the fact that most Osing speakers know at least Indonesian, often a great deal of Javanese and some Madurese, and sometimes a bit of Balinese too, it is simply true that there can be striking differences between the Osing vocabulary or accent of one village and the next. Though ways of speaking are thus treated as a curiosity in ordinary talk as well, it is normally idiosyncrasies in *another* village's dialect that are so performed. One's own way of speaking, after all, is "unmarked" by default. In

¹²Arps 1992 contains some information on this kind of *macaan* (though the focus is on a radically different kind which does not involve comedy).

the conversation competition this was different. The contestants performed their own ways of speaking.

Yet this aspect of the *lomba gesah*, too, has its precedents in Banyuwangi cultural life, albeit not in the realm of relaxed speech. Some of the performing arts of Banyuwangi, especially orchestral music (*angklung*) and frame-drum music accompanying female group dance (*kuntulan*), are often practised according to the *caruk* or ‘meeting’ pattern.¹³ At a celebration two groups from different villages play in turns, each demonstrating its own repertoire and trying to give a more impressive performance than the other group. Each group has brought its own supporters and such events can lead to fights. Though it is particularly obvious in some performing arts, in other realms of Osing culture, too, a certain degree of inter-village (or inter-ward, inter-neighbourhood) rivalry can be detected. It was no coincidence that in a radio broadcast preceding a conversation in the 1999 contest, the presenter suggested that people in the villages of Bakungan, Banjar, Licin (perhaps, she added), Banjarsari, and if possible also Banyuwangi town should register for the contest as well: “they should be represented” (*kudu ana wakil*). The presenter appealed to local pride in these settlements, which except Licin and Banyuwangi town are commonly recognized as predominantly Osing.

Performing certain of one’s own ways of speaking on the radio was not a strange step to take also for a number of other reasons. The contestants were well aware that an audience—not least the jury—was listening to the *lomba*. Furthermore, although relaxed conversation is not usually a performative affair in everyday life, some conversations are better than others. Ideals that I have heard mentioned repeatedly for conversation are *inak* ‘pleasant, absorbing’ and *manteb* ‘robust’. By trying to maximize the ideal qualities of a conversation one may render it performative. Moreover, as I already pointed out above when discussing the approaches applied in the contest, many people feel that certain modes of expression—I mentioned scolding, quarrelling, and reacting spontaneously—are a good match for the Osing language, and it is also widely recognized that certain ways of speaking or verbal forms are themselves performative or have performative connotations.

Those ways of speaking did, of course, vary with the team and the Osing discourse culture from which it came. While *basanan* were used by most of the teams that I heard, the stanzas produced by the villagers and the DLB fans were simply better-formed than those made by the schoolkids. The villagers also intentionally and prominently used a number of Osing words and expressions which they expected the audience would rarely hear. The schoolkids, by contrast, highlighted the pugnacious potential of the language. Their contributions might as well have been part of a *lomba celathu*. The DLB fans, finally, went for drama more than for language.

Who won

I am not sure who triumphed in the conversation contest of July–August 1999. I had to leave Banyuwangi before the final was held. On my next visit, a year and a half later, a member of the DLB club told me that

¹³ For a description of an *angklung caruk* performance see Wolbers 1987.

the first prize was won by a group from a village, the second by one from the high school in Rogojampi, the third by him and his people. All three of the Osing discourse cultures I have mentioned were represented among the finalists.

I have put stress on the fact that the *lomba gesah cara Using* is extraordinary, and then tried to show why it is feasible nonetheless, in the context of Banyuwangi cultural politics. But the contests were held not only because it is advantageous to media and media-related institutions to do something out of the ordinary by supporting the organization of these *lombas*, because they can help regional culture activists to achieve their ideals, and because they are interesting and amusing for the participants and audiences. Certain features of the *lomba*, I think, are also part of a global trend in the realm of discourse mediation, although I cannot yet pinpoint how, historically, the influence was and is being exerted. Banyuwangi is not alone in having the two basic cultural conditions that I have identified as making it feasible for media genres to be dedicated to performing a language, namely a match between certain institutional needs and facilities and a situation in which talk is performed across cultures, so that speakers recognize systematic difference between the speech they put on display and the speech habits or expectations of at least part of their audience. But in precisely what respects the *lomba gesah* phenomenon—mediated, competitive performance of conversation in a particular language—conforms to trends in mediation and performance elsewhere in the world is a question for further comparative research.

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