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Leadership Prescriptions and Proscriptions on Clarity: A Case from Indonesia

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Abstract. This article describes the pros and cons of clear communication by national leaders.

Indonesia is a country in significant transition. Of special note is the recent accession to the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid. In contradistinction to both his predecessors--B.J. Habibie and Suharto--Mr. Wahid is both a voluble and confusing interlocutor. Many recipients of series of his pronouncements view them as tangential, contradictory, confusing, ambiguous, incomplete, and incomprehensible--sometimes all at once. Other recipients perceive series of his pronouncements to be but many-varied, clear pathways to the same ineluctable conclusion. What (if anything) does such a perceived difference in Mr. Wahid's utterances among the citizens of Indonesia augur?

In a simplistic analysis, one might assume that the former set of perceptions induces political stagnation, inefficiency, even a paralysis of action along with a breakdown in respect for authority. One might also assume that the latter set of perceptions induces action-oriented governance and a populace characterized by shared values and an explicit road map for the future.

Less simplistically, one might note that the former set can serve to mask intent, to keep adversaries off balance, to employ indirection to very direct goals. One might also note that the latter set can serve to telegraph intent to adversaries, to form a point of attack for adversaries, and create adversaries out of supporters who had believed that the leader was as one with them.

In fact, it is quite common (if not an unbreakable rule) that leaders' utterances are differentially perceived as to denotation and connotation--and from there to political support. However, leaders do seem to differ in the size of the standard deviation around some mean perceived meaning. So, are there times when the smallest standard deviation is desirable? Others when larger degrees of deviation are?

To help answer such questions, one must differentiate the received meaning of an utterance, a meaning assumed from an utterance based on knowledge of the communicator or situation regardless of the utterance's received meaning, and the assumed consequences respectively of the received or assumed meaning. Based on this differentiation, one quickly appreciates the complexity of making general attributions as to the political value of the size of the standard deviation around some mean meaning.

Back to Mr. Wahid: there can be near certainty in clearly concluding that both positive and negative events to follow will be causally ascribed to both clear and less than clear presidential utterances. (See Bugental, D.B., et al. (1999). Children "tune out" in response to the ambiguous communication style of powerless adults. *Child Development*, 70, 214-230; Eisenberg, E.M. (1998). Flirting with meaning. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 17, 97-108; Murai, J. (1998). Perceived deceptiveness of verbal message: An examination of information manipulation theory. *Japanese Journal of Psychology*, 69, 401-407; National security policy and toleration for ambiguity: Israel, Northern Ireland, North Korea, and the world. (September 4, 1998). *IBPP*, 5(10); Nordentoft, K., & Fredsted, E. (1998). On semantic and pragmatic ambiguity. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 30, 527-541; The Deployment of Ground Forces to Kosovo:

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