Between the lines: an analysis of the language of Indonesian reporting of military clashes in Aceh

Philip Kitley
University of Wollongong, pkitley@uow.edu.au
Between the Lines:
An Analysis of the Language of Indonesian Reporting of Military Clashes in Aceh.\textsuperscript{1,2}

Asian Studies Association of Australia
Bi-annual Conference 26-29 June 2006

Philip Kitley
University of Wollongong

\textsuperscript{1} Research for this paper was supported by ARC Discovery Project DP0343059. I am grateful to my colleague Elizabeth Thomson for her helpful comments in developing this paper.

\textsuperscript{2} This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.
Kompas Cyber Media is the online presence of the leading Indonesian daily Kompas and it was on the small screen that I first read about the kidnapping on 29 June, 2003 of television journalist Ersa Siregar, camera operator Ferry Santoro, their driver Rahmatsyah and two female passengers, sisters Safrida and Soraya. The online version of this drawn out story of reporters hostage to the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) stripped down the news stories that appeared in the broadsheet. I was struck by the more than usually limited information value of the hostage headlines and stories from June through to December 29, 2003, when Ersa Siregar was shot dead in a fire fight between GAM and Indonesian National Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia TNI). It was as if the web presence of the newspaper reduced both the size and the resonances of this tragic event, the most serious case of violence against the press since the military imposed martial law in Aceh on 19 May 2003 (Presidential Decree 28/2003).

Ironically, it was the highly abstracted, reductionist quality of the news on the guerrilla war that the web delivered in crowded and unsatisfying brevity that became the portal for an extended, detailed examination of the death of Ersa. In Jakarta, 2006 I put together a comprehensive collection of full-text clippings from eight Jakarta dailies, assembled mediawatch data from the Institute for the Study of the Free Flow of Information (ISAI) and interviewed two Indonesian journalists who had been directly involved in attempts to free the hostages. This detailed examination of the hostage incident provided a deeper understanding of the media and the ‘hearts and minds’ dimension of the integrated military operation in Aceh in 2003. But most readers do not have these opportunities to subject reporting of such events to extended scrutiny of this kind.
In Phillip Knightley’s history of reporting war, he makes the point frequently that often it is only after conflict has ceased that stark differences between what was reported to have happened, and what actually occurred becomes known (Knightley 2003, 485; 488; 495; 496; 497; 514; 521; 523; 545). But post hoc confirmation of the credibility of reporting on conflict is clearly unsatisfactory. If anything, it reinforces the suspicion that much of what we see or read in the mass media about military conflict is a highly managed version of events. What can everyday readers, many far away and reliant on stripped down web versions of news of distant conflicts do to probe the veracity and the framing of mass media reporting on conflict? In this discussion of one incident concerning media coverage of the martial law operations in Aceh, I show how a linguistic, grammatical approach to news about the hostages was highly productive in understanding the unfolding of the hostage situation and the dynamics of an information war every bit as significant in the conduct of the military operations as the conventional armed skirmishes and contacts that convulsed Aceh in the last six months of 2003.

**Journalists as Hostages**

On the 29 June, 2003 Ersa Siregar, a 52 year old experienced journalist with the Jakarta based television station RCTI, Ferry Santoro, Rahmatsyah and Safrida and Soraya were stopped by five armed men while travelling home to Lhok Seumawe where they were based during their assignment in Aceh. With eyes bound they were taken to a GAM hideout and interrogated. Although Ferry and Ersa had no difficulty in convincing the GAM soldiers that they were bona fide journalists, the presence of Safrida and Soraya in the vehicle complicated matters once it was discovered that their husbands were TNI officers. Forced to move from hideout to
hideout, GAM’s interrogation of the two women was long and drawn out and unable to be concluded until the regional Commander, Ishak Daud had satisfied himself that the women were not spies.

GAM held the RCTI crew and two women hostage for almost a year although the group was broken up early in July, with Rahmatsyah and Safrida and Soraya sent off in different directions. Ersa Siregar was tragically shot dead at noon on 29 December 2003 after TNI troops surprised Ersa, Ferry, Ayah, a civilian under GAM’s protection and a single GAM guard. Ferry, Ayah and the guard escaped, to be recaptured by GAM a day or so later.

The circumstances of Ersa’s death remain unclear, and there has been no official inquiry into his death. The TNI took the view that under conditions of martial law, accidents happen in combat, and they were under no obligation to hold an inquiry into the death of a civilian caught up in a shoot out between GAM and TNI. Whether Ersa was shot at close range, close enough to be recognised and to be heard shouting out his name and his status, or whether he was caught by stray bullets fired from a distance under conditions of poor visibility as the TNI reported, has never been resolved. An autopsy showed that Ersa was struck by TNI bullets, but whether from close range or not is disputed.

Rahmatsyah was freed by the TNI on 17 December, 2003. Safrida and Soraya were freed by TNI on 29 January 2004, and Ferry was released unharmed by GAM into the care of the International Red Cross on 16 May 2004, having been held as a hostage for 325 days.
Language as Tactics

In this account of the pressures of reporting war, I develop the analysis diachronically to explore the productivity of linguistic analysis in understanding a situation over time. Most linguistic analyses tend to develop their argument around synchronic data, relying on a limited sample of extracts in explication of the heuristic power of grammatical analysis (White 2004; Lukin, Butt and Mattheissen 2004). Here the analysis tracks the Cyber Media headlines from July through into December, examining the tragic imbrication of the information and guerrilla wars.

The Kompas Cyber Media (KCM) headlines represent the Ersa kidnapping as a series of events during which the subject shifts continuously, foregrounding issues of representation and agency in reporting conflict that Lukin, Butt and Matthiessen have analysed so effectively. Drawing on that approach I show that the dramatic events of the kidnapping of professional, accredited journalists became wrapped into a battle for the hearts and minds of the public in an ‘information war’ which can be understood as a struggle by the TNI, the GAM and the media to frame the reality of the hostage situation in ways that best suited their own political and ideological interests. In examining the representation of causation, agency, impact and semiotic distance over the KCM headlines, the tactics of the information war were revealed as the initiative shifted between GAM and the TNI.

We can understand an information war as a competitive, symbiotic exchange between political antagonists and the news media (Wolfsfeld 1997). In 2003 the Indonesian government recognised that its objective to win the hearts and minds of the Acehenese
depended to a large extent on the media providing favourable publicity and information about its aspirations for Aceh as an integral part of Indonesia and its efforts to restore law and order and resolve grievances the Acehenese harboured against the central government. To achieve these objectives, the government opened up access for the Jakarta based print and electronic media to the conflict in Aceh, providing the media with information opportunities which they could turn into ‘news’.

But if, as we have noted, an information war is a competitive symbiotic exchange, then the scope of the exchange needs to be carefully managed as media organisations know that the key asset they trade – news - is a risky currency for a political authority bent on ‘winning’. News, as distinct from propaganda, depends on providing audiences with an account that presents the views and aspirations of the full range of the antagonists involved, in an informed and fair manner. ‘Covering both sides’ was the shorthand expression that the Indonesian military elite used in acknowledging the media’s terms of engagement in Aceh.

But even so, the terms of media trade were definitely in Jakarta’s favour and compromised the exchange between the media and political authorities. International journalists’ access was limited to coverage of regency capitals and cities and was to be conducted together with TNI forces or the police (Proclamation, Regional Military Command 5/2003). Aceh based media organisations were forbidden to publish or broadcast news about the conflict beyond provincial boundaries and only Jakarta based, ‘national’ media organisations were permitted to report on the separatist conflict to Indonesian audiences. They were urged to keep the military authorities informed on their movements at all times, and reporting what seemed to give favourable coverage to GAM, was viewed with considerable suspicion. Shortly before being taken hostage by GAM, Ersa Siregar had apparently angered General Bambang
Dharmono, Commander of Operations Command, in a ‘hot debate’ about the separatist movement which might explain the General’s lack of enthusiasm in rescuing Ersa and associates (Personal interview Nezar Patria 17 May, 2006).

Lukin, Butt and Matthiessen argue that ‘in the case of reporting war, … [grammatical] choices are deeply involved in managing public opinion, even in the reporting of what might seem to be simply “the facts”’ (2004, 61). These choices are critical in the representation of events such as the kidnapping of a television reporter and cameraman. The representation of causation – of how the kidnapping happened and who might be to blame, of the impact of such an event in the struggle over the hearts and minds of the Acehenese and the Indonesian public, and the representation of the kidnapping as something closely linked to operational choices or as something unfortunate that ‘just happened’, can all be linked to the tactical use of language and more specifically, grammar.

Lukin, Butt and Matthiessen (2004, 61f) illustrate the critical effect of choosing a particular grammatical form or ‘voice’ to report an event. Consider these three (fictional) headlines:

*Coalition Forces Dropped Bombs on Baghdad* (Active voice; Coalition as agent)

*Bombs Were Dropped on Baghdad by Coalition Forces* (Passive voice; Coalition as agent)

*Bombs Were Dropped on Baghdad* (Passive voice; implied agent)

All three headlines acknowledge causation: the bombs did not fall by themselves, they were deliberately dropped by military forces. But in the headline *Bombs Fell on Baghdad* the idea
of agent and causation disappears and the bombing appears to be what Halliday called a ‘self-engendered process’ (1994 sect. 5.8). This headline employs the ‘middle voice’ and is fundamentally different in grammatical form from the first three headlines. We have entered a different reality. It is a situated reality, but it is a place where things happen without being effected by anyone or anything.

In Aceh, the agent/s involved in armed conflict might be human (‘our troops’, ‘GAM separatists’) or technological as in news items of the kind which report that ‘bullets killed a hostage’. In reporting armed conflict, grammatical choices that make technology (‘bullets’, ‘a landmine’, ‘high altitude bombing’) the cause of events ‘soften the reality of violent conflict’, inscribing a perception that human agents are hardly involved in modern warfare, only military technologies or machines (Knightley 2003, 495; Lukin, Butt and Matthiesen 2004, 64-5).

In the headlines below the middle voice is used strategically to manage events that had unpredictable and dangerous ramifications in the information war. Over the six months of headlines the middle voice is used to report that the RCTI journalists are ‘mysteriously missing’ (Kompas 1/7), to report that the hostages are at GAM headquarters (Kompas 4/7) and finally to report that Ersa has died accidentally (Kompas 29/12). Two days later, we read that it was Army bullets that killed Ersa in a headline that re-frames the fatal accident, making military technology the agent responsible for Ersa’s death. All the other headlines are in the active voice and the TNI is represented as making every effort to rescue the hostages. The active voice is deployed to represent the TNI as concerned, responsible and in charge of events. The middle voice is the ‘bad news’ voice, a linguistic device that attempts to absolve or at least distance the TNI from anything negative associated with the hostage situation.
Table I Kompas Cyber Media Headlines Concerning the RCTI Crew Kidnapping, July 2003. Verbs are shown in bold, and the English translations at right preserve the abbreviated character of news headlines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>01/07</td>
<td>Wartawan dan Kameramen (sic) RCTI Hilang di Aceh</td>
<td>RCTI Reporter and Cameraman Missing in Aceh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>01/07</td>
<td>Sejumlah Penduduk Melihat Kendaraan Wartawan RCTI</td>
<td>A Number of Locals Saw the RCTI Reporter’s Vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>02/07</td>
<td>RCTI Kerahkan Seluruh Upaya Temukan Ersa dan Ferry</td>
<td>RCTI Makes Every Effort to Find Ersa and Ferry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>02/07</td>
<td>TNI Keluarkan Perintah Khusus Pencarian Wartawan RCTI</td>
<td>The Indonesian Armed Forces Issue Special Instructions for a Search for the RCTI Reporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>03/07</td>
<td>TNI Siapkan Penjemputan Wartawan RCTI</td>
<td>The Indonesian Armed Forces Organise Someone to Pick up the RCTI Reporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>04/07</td>
<td>Kru RCTI Berada di Markas GAM</td>
<td>RCTI Crew are at GAM Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>05/07</td>
<td>Pangkoops Ultimatum Warwan RCTI</td>
<td>Commander of the Operations Command Gives an Ultimatum to the RCTI Reporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>19/12</td>
<td>TNI Bebaskan Sopir RCTI</td>
<td>The Indonesian Army Frees RCTI Driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>29/12</td>
<td>Ersa Siregar Tewas Tertembak</td>
<td>Ersa Siregar Dies From Being Accidentally Shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>29/12</td>
<td>Jenazah Ersa Siregar Segera Dievakuasi</td>
<td>Ersa Siregar’s Body To Be Evacuated Immediately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>29/12</td>
<td>Pangkoops: Ersa Tewas Dalam Kontak Senjata</td>
<td>Commander of Military Operations: Ersa Died in a Fire Fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>30/12</td>
<td>Ersa Siregar Tewas Dalam Kontak Tembak</td>
<td>Ersa Siregar Died in an Exchange of Fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>31/12</td>
<td>KSAD: Peluru TNI yang Tewaskan Ersa Siregar</td>
<td>Chief of Army Staff: An Army Bullet Killed Ersa Siregar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six months between the kidnapping of the journalists and Ersa’s death are bracketed by headlines in the middle voice. News that the nationally accredited RCTI journalists were missing was obviously worrying news for RCTI, the crew’s families and the TNI, which represented itself as the protector of media representatives operating in Aceh under the Integrated Operation (Operasi Terpadu) which had winning hearts and minds as a major
objective (Rizal Sukma 2004, 23). TNI Commander General Endriatono was explicit about the important role of the media in Aceh:

‘… the media’s role is very much needed to shape opinion that the military operations this time are different from previous operations. “However what we want is the safety of journalists and news that is not held back from the facts” he said’ (Suara Karya 25 July 2003).

The *Kompas* headline of 1 July 2003, two days after the crew had gone missing is understandably cautious. Just what had happened was not known, but equally, the disappearance of the journalists is represented in a way that denies the possibility that their disappearance was attributable to any human agency. That said, the TNI took the opportunity to suggest without any evidence that the disappearance was ‘mysterious’, raising the spectre of a kidnapping by GAM. Mixed motives then, were inscribed in the 1 July headline, but it is important to note that the choice of the middle voice is a choice, and that that choice has tactical significance in an information war.

The middle voice speaks again to report Ersa’s death, almost six months after the journalists were first reported missing. *Ersa Siregar Tewas Tertembak* (Ersa Siregar Dies From Being Accidentally Shot). In this four word headline there is a remarkable compression of meaning which depends on a grammatical form which is not part of English grammar. In English ‘shot’ may be understood as a deliberate or accidental act, and we rely on the context to make it clear what is meant. *The Australian’s* headline ‘Reporter Killed in Skirmish’ (31 Dec. 2003), for example, leaves it open as to whether Ersa was killed accidentally or deliberately. In the body text of *The Australian* article, however, the circumstances of Ersa’s death are
explicitly opened up for examination with the TNI reporting that the shooting was accidental. But in Indonesian language the distinction between the action as deliberate or accidental is made explicit through the affix ter-. The ‘ter-’ form of the transitive verb tembak (to shoot someone) is described as the ‘accidental’ form of the verb where the action can be understood as uncontrolled, unintended or agentless, involuntary or sudden (Snedden 1996, 113). In the context of the civil war in Aceh, this grammatical construction serves multiple purposes. It avoids blaming either GAM or the TNI for Ersa’s death, and signifies through the ambiguity inherent in the ‘ter-’ form that the headline describes a state of affairs rather than an act which may be attributed to an agent – in this case one or other of the warring parties. Tertembak, then, is highly strategic, a verb form which in the conflicted and dangerous circumstances of reporting on Aceh, steps self consciously between blaming either side for what happened.

The carefully crafted flat affect of the tertembak construct was followed a few days later by headlines and comments which maintained the fiction that in war, things ‘just happen’. The headline ‘Ersa Siregar Tewas Dalam Kontak Tembak’ (Ersa Siregar Died in a Firefight) (Kompas 30 Dec. 2003) describes a state of affairs and stops short of describing exactly how Ersa died and whether anyone was responsible. The next day, when it became known that Ersa had been killed by TNI bullets, the press relied again on a grammatical construct that erased any suggestion of human agency being involved and, quoting the military, attributed Ersa’s death to technology in the headline ‘KSAD: Peluru TNI yang Tewaskan Ersa Siregar’ (Chief of Army Staff: An Army Bullet Killed Ersa Siregar) (Kompas 31 Dec 2003). Chief of Staff Ryamizard Ryacudu reinforces this representation of events when in the body of the article he describes bullets as blind, a kind of impartial, capricious power, incapable of identifying or differentiating one man from another. The technology-as-agent construct
would have us believe that bullets are independent of the weapons and the fingers that pulled the triggers. ‘Bullets cannot see who [is who]. Can’t know whether this is Ersa or not can they? (‘Peluru enggak bisa lihat siapa. Kan tidak tahu ini Ersa atau bukan’).

Between these bracketing headlines in the middle voice there is only one other headline which relies on the middle voice. *Kru RCTI Berada di Markas GAM* (RCTI Crew at GAM Headquarters). Once again it is deployed to report on a development in the disappearance of the journalists that has strategic implications for all parties involved. For the sake of argument, let us rehearse the possibilities. If the journalists had been captured and held hostage by GAM, then that might be represented as a failure by the TNI to protect media representatives. On the other hand, if GAM had indeed taken the journalists hostage, then they were in breach of Geneva Protocol II which requires combatants to respect the independence of journalists (Suara Pembaruan 3 July 2003; Kompas 5, 11 July 2003; Bisnis Indonesia 9 July 2003). The RCTI crew might, however, have acted ‘unilaterally’ and ignored TNI media operational rules in an attempt to report the ‘inside story’ of GAM. Even more worrying was the possibility that the RCTI crew was not just intent on getting both sides of the story in line with professional practice, but was sympathetic to GAM’s aspirations and might undermine the hearts and minds objectives of Operasi Terpadu.

Whatever the truth might be, ‘unilateral’ action was a threat to the TNI’s management of media operations and obviously required careful management. The middle voice has an obvious appeal for both the press and the TNI under such circumstances as it represents the missing journalists’ location at GAM headquarters as simply a state of affairs. It speaks over the whispered deferral of representing the journalists’ situation as a breach of international
convention, a failure by the TNI to protect the journalists, a betrayal by the RCTI crew to uphold professional standards of balanced reporting, or as a rejection of TNI rules of practice.

**Operasi Terpadu, Hearts and Minds Objectives and the Media**

The rules of engagement for the media in Aceh during Operasi Terpadu were well known but highly inconsistent and, at the field level, often intimidatory (Personal interviews with Nezar Patria and Imam Wahyudi, 17 and 18 May, 2006). According to Ersa’s colleague and supervisor Imam Wahyudi, RCTI journalists assigned to Aceh during the military emergency period were not embedded with TNI. They resisted embedding but requested military authorities in Jakarta provide training designed to protect their personal security when assigned to Aceh and give them some experience of what it might be like to operate under conditions of armed contact. Imam pointed out that the journalists wanted to know what different classes of weapons sounded like so they would be able to recognise what was going on in contacts. It was after the training at Gunung Sanggabuana, West Java, that the rumour began to circulate that the RCTI journalists and other Jakarta based journalists were embedded with the TNI.

Rizal Sukma states categorically that ‘for the first time the military … allowed its operation to be covered by the media through the same method – “embedded journalism” – employed by the United States in the war against Iraq in 2003’ (2004, 23). Atmadji Sumarkidjo, Deputy Chief Editor, RCTI, also states that after the training Jakarta based journalists were embedded with a number of TNI troops across Aceh (2003, 9). United States military authorities gave embedded journalists training prior to entering battlefields in Iraq, and provided them with
uniforms, equipment, transportation and accommodation with the troops in the field (Tumber 2004, 196, 197; Knightley 2003, 531). It is easy to understand, then, why claims about journalists being embedded in Aceh got going, but Ferry Santoso’s comment that the RCTI crew took ‘tons of gear and supplies’ on a commercial flight to Aceh and leased their own accommodation in Lhok Seumawe suggests that the RCTI team was more independent than journalists embedded with the United States military in Iraq (Jusuf Suroso & Jaumat Dulhajah 2006, 4). In a long article reflecting on journalists in the midst of danger (Wartawan di Tengah Kecemasan, Kompas 22 July 2003), the writers report that after Ersa and Ferry were taken hostage, journalists’ routines changed and that while it was their sense of professionalism and responsibility that kept them working, they now preferred to meet up at a hotel before going into the field, to cover stories in groups of at least three, and to keep each other informed throughout the day of their whereabouts. This suggests that journalists in Aceh had greater freedom of movement than their embedded colleagues in Iraq, and suggests that while military authorities preferred to have the media embedded, they were not able to achieve the level of control over the media that US authorities did in Iraq. TNI Chief, General Endriartono Sutarto urged journalists to ‘stick to the TNI’ when going into the field and added ominously that ‘It will be difficult for us to protect journalists if they do not join the TNI embedded program’ (Jakarta Post 3 July).

GAM’s attitudes to the new media arrangements were inconsistent and made journalists feel uncertain about what they could report without risk. After all, it was GAM that had taken Ersa and Ferry hostage. While Ishak Daud, Commander of GAM in the Peureulak region declared that it was GAM’s view that journalists wherever they were from should be given freedom to cover events in Aceh (Kompas 2 July 2003), GAM was suspicious of press moving about Aceh as it had evidence that TNI intelligence had fraudulently used vehicles
with press and Red Cross markings to enter areas under GAM control and capture people (Kompas 4 July 2003). Nevertheless, given that martial law prohibited the provincial media from reporting nationally, GAM was aware of the value of ‘perception management’ (Webster 2003, 64) and was as determined as the TNI to use the national media to win support for its cause (Personal interview Nezar Patria April 2006). But press relations are hard to manage, and GAM had had the experience of being ‘backed into a corner’ at times by a few journalists and reminded them to be conscientious in reporting both sides (Kompas 22 July 2003). But journalists found it difficult to meet the ideal of covering both sides in an environment where communications with GAM personnel was limited and risky and constrained by highly subjective martial law regulations which prohibited journalists from publicizing statements from GAM that were judged ‘likely to disrupt military operations’ (Martial Law Authority Declaration 06, 2003; Kompas 22 July 2003).

The United States’ embedding practices in Iraq in 2003 were an outcome of years of experience and reflection on how the media might be best integrated into conflict situations so as to advance military objectives (Knightley 2003, 531f). In Indonesia, the principles behind embedding were new to military authorities and not well publicized nor appreciated by field level commanders. High ranking military officers such as Endriartono Sutarto maintained that the TNI did not want to limit news of whatever kind about the TNI (Media Indonesia 26 July 2003). Balanced and fair reporting in line with journalists’ professional code of practice was publicly supported. In the field, however, attitudes were different and TNI field officers took the view that journalists should not write sympathetically or approvingly of GAM, and that if they did they would be understood to be GAM sympathizers. Journalists were required to inform authorities of any change in address, and were restricted in their movements, forbidden to enter GAM controlled or unstable areas.
Language and Judgements

At the elite level, both the TNI and GAM subscribed to the principle of objective reporting and endorsed the practice of ‘covering both sides’. I have shown, however, that both sides differed over what ‘covering both sides’ meant in practice, and that opportunities for journalists to seek out the contacts and stories they wanted were heavily constrained by the dangers of conflict, the lack of access they had to the separatist movement, regulations which tended to favour the military authorities, a ‘rule of thumb’ that required all reports to include reference or a quotation from military authorities, and intimidation by TNI personnel who took the view that any news that was favourable to GAM was a betrayal of Indonesian sovereignty.

The difficulties of negotiating these competing priorities takes a toll on truth and on journalists’ well being. The tactical use of language in these circumstances can be understood as a survival strategy, a way of carrying on under circumstances when the odds are stacked against professional practice. When journalists are exposed to the brutalising suspicion of military authorities in going about their work it has lasting depressing effects. Research under these circumstances introduces difficult ethical concerns. Interviewing Imam Wahyudi for this discussion was disturbing because although Imam had agreed to discuss the Ersa case with me, it was not long before the questions brought back painful memories of loss and feelings of personal failure to the extent that Imam broke down and was unable to speak for extended periods. What is the ethical responsibility of the researcher under such circumstances? To press on in the interest of finding out as much as you can, or to break off and assist one’s participant to overcome their stress. When I found it difficult to continue
with the interview and suggested to Imam that we finish up, he insisted on continuing. In front of colleagues who had been with him in Aceh, who now sat, silently witnessing his grief and sense of failure in being unable to rescue Ersa, he said ‘I want to tell you ….’.

Reading between the lines has been accepted practice in Indonesia where indirection was the only safe way throughout the New Order period of communicating anything that was politically critical. In the post-Suharto period, grammar provides a way of picking through the minefield of balanced reporting when journalists are required to bed down with one side. But the middle voice steps around more than the facts, it muffles the stress and fear that shadow journalists every day in Aceh, and satisfies no one.

References


