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On the road with English: Truck Inscriptions as vernacular performance in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how Indonesian truck drivers creatively repurpose English through inscriptions painted on the backs of their vehicles. Based on 15 examples documented in photographs, the study shows how English – often blended with Indonesian or Javanese – is used less for grammatical correctness than for humour, emotional expression, social critique, and playful subversion. A qualitative, theme-based analysis reveals how these inscriptions destabilise conventional notions of competence, transforming apparent 'errors' into resources of creativity. Framed as vernacular literacy practices, the inscriptions demonstrate how global English is localized, felt, and made meaningful in everyday life. Ultimately, the study highlights language on the move as a vehicle for identity, resistance, and philosophy on Indonesia's highways.

1. From highways to hybridity: Locating English on the move

English in Indonesia has long existed beyond the classroom, appearing on billboards, T-shirts, advertisements, and increasingly, vehicles. Among the most intriguing examples are the inscriptions on freight trucks, often quirky, humorous or cryptic. While they may appear playful or linguistically 'incorrect,' these inscriptions reveal layered acts of creativity, identity performance and cultural commentary.

Within Indonesia's sociolinguistic landscape, English occupies a distinctive position in what Kachru (1991) terms the Expanding Circle: a foreign language without official status yet carrying significant social, economic and cultural weight. Its circulation is tied to education and class, with proficiency often marking urban prestige and mobility (Lowenberg 1991; Sneddon 2003). More recently, English has become a symbolic resource in youth culture, advertising and branding, indexing aspiration, cosmopolitanism and playfulness (Djenar 2014; Martin–Anatias (2018)). Thus, English is most often encountered in classrooms, professional domains and commodified urban spaces. Against this backdrop, its appearance on trucks crisscrossing highways between ports, industrial zones and rural communities emerges as an unexpected vernacular performance.

These inscriptions can also be understood as informal sites of language socialisation (Lantolf 2000; Widdowson 1994), where English circulates beyond classroom boundaries. Working-class drivers encounter, adapt and repurpose English in their daily routines, demonstrating both agency and ownership of the language. In this way, truck inscriptions highlight the dynamic, lived experience of English in peripheral contexts, complementing formal SLA studies with insights into creativity, identity and sociocultural embeddedness.

This study examines English inscriptions on Indonesian trucks, asking how they function as semiotic resources for working-class drivers to express emotion, assert presence and engage in playful or subversive discourse. It draws on research on the globalization of English (Pennycook 2007), linguistic landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010) and vernacular creativity (Jones and Hafner 2012). These inscriptions reveal not just how English is used but how it is felt, adapted and lived in mobile contexts. Drivers, often working long hours across distant routes, use their vehicles as public canvases. The messages they inscribe – from wordplay to emotional appeals – embody linguistic improvisation and cultural authorship. Here, English functions less as a marker of mastery than as a tool for storytelling, humour and symbolic resistance.

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Rather than evaluating these texts by normative standards of grammar or fluency, the study treats them as performative utterances embedded in everyday narratives, emotions and identities. It investigates:

- What meanings are conveyed through truck inscriptions in English?
- How do they reflect drivers' socio-cultural identities, emotional worlds and creativity?
- In what ways is English localized, reappropriated and transformed through these inscriptions?

By foregrounding the voices of a frequently overlooked group – truck drivers – this article contributes to understanding how English circulates, transforms and acquires local meanings beyond institutional domains.

2. Tracking meaning on the road: Data, ethics and analytical lens

This qualitative study draws on data collected from photographs of English inscriptions on the backs of Indonesian freight trucks. Eight out of 15 inscriptions were chosen to capture a broad thematic spread – from emotionally expressive to subversively vulgar – and to reflect a range of linguistic creativity. These inscriptions were not chosen for linguistic correctness but for their capacity to generate insight into how English is interpreted, repurposed and displayed in working-class Indonesian contexts. Selection aimed to maximize analytical richness and thematic diversity, ensuring that each example contributed distinct insights into social, emotional and performative meanings.

While many inscriptions rely on locally resonant humour and Javanese phonological play, their interpretation often requires at least partial competence in both Javanese and English. The wordplay is not universally accessible to all Indonesians or even all Javanese speakers. Instead, it is a selective performance, intelligible primarily to audiences who share familiarity with both linguistic repertoires. Acknowledging this selective accessibility highlights the situatedness of meaning-making in trucking culture and avoids assuming homogeneous comprehension.

The analysis followed a qualitative, interpretive approach informed by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Each inscription was examined for its linguistic form, phonetic play and cultural references, particularly when English words encoded meanings from Javanese or Indonesian through sound resemblance. Rather than applying formal coding procedures, the themes emerged inductively through close reading and comparison across the examples. Recurrent motifs – such as masculinity, satire, spiritual reflection or veiled vulgarity – were identified and used to organize the findings. Attention was also paid to the visual layout of the inscriptions and their intertextual echoes with popular sayings, local proverbs or urban humor.

The analytical process was informed by frameworks from sociolinguistics, linguistic ethnography and discourse analysis. Blommaert's (2010) notion of 'semiotic repertoires' guided the interpretation of inscriptions as multimodal, socially situated signs that emerge from the complex interplay of language, culture and mobility. From the linguistic landscape tradition (Shohamy and Gorter 2009), the truck was viewed as a moving signboard, carrying messages not only about the driver's identity but also about broader sociocultural realities. Milani's (2014) work on masculinities and Butler's (1997) concept of performativity informed the analysis of inscriptions that enact or contest gender norms through linguistic choices. Additionally, Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual practice offered a lens for understanding how different linguistic resources – Indonesian, Javanese, English – are fluidly mixed to create new meaning. These inscriptions are thus treated not as linguistic mistakes but as deliberate semiotic strategies that respond to power, visibility and the speaker's position within social hierarchies.

The inscriptions analyzed in this study were drawn from public spaces and include photographs previously circulated on news portals and social media platforms, where they have become part of the digital public domain. Because these texts are already publicly visible and shared online, no formal consent was required. However, care was taken to obscure or omit identifiable details such as license plates, company names or driver faces. To enhance transparency and traceability, full bibliographic details of the online sources from which inscription images were retrieved are included in the reference list.

The study adopts a reflexive stance (Tusting 2019), recognizing the researcher's position as both outsider and interpreter. Acknowledging that the data were collected indirectly rather than through interviews underscores the limits of interpretation: the analysis cannot capture drivers' intentions firsthand, and meanings may vary across audiences. Reflexivity also involves being attentive to how interpretations of humour, gender or moral messaging may differ depending on linguistic and cultural competence.

By focusing on semiotic material circulating in everyday public space, this study acknowledges the creative agency of working-class individuals in shaping the meanings of English from below. The truck, in this case, becomes a *moving text*, a site where English is not only learned or borrowed – but made culturally meaningful.

3. Translingual expressions from the road: Themes from the inscriptions

This section presents a thematic analysis of truck inscriptions that creatively employ English, often blended with Javanese or Indonesian linguistic elements. Through 15 selected samples, the analysis explores how language operates not just as a means of communication, but as a vehicle for emotional expression, humour, critique and cultural memory. Each inscription, drawn from photographs taken on Indonesian highways, reveals how English is locally appropriated, stylized and imbued with meaning. The analysis is organized into eight themes that highlight recurrent semiotic and sociocultural patterns – from masculine reassurance and satire to coded vulgarity and supernatural references. These themes are supported by visual figures and interpreted within relevant sociolinguistic frameworks.

3.1 *Masculine vulnerability and emotional reassurance*

This inscription demonstrates how English and Javanese are blended to communicate emotional care and masculine

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Figure 1. Truck inscription reading *Don't mother think I am not father*. Through English–Javanese phonetic mapping, the inscription corresponds to *Gak usah mbok pikir, aku gak papa* ('No need to worry about me; I'm fine.'). Image source: Saifi 2021.



Figure 2. Truck inscription reading *Go like do it or @ go like ray*. Through English–Javanese phonetic mapping, the inscription corresponds to the expression *Golek duwit opo golek rai* ('Work hard for money or merely seek face?'). The phrase contrasts earning a living through honest labour (*golek duwit*) with pursuing social prestige or recognition (*golek rai*), a well-known Javanese idiom referring to seeking reputation rather than genuine achievement. Image source: Chaniago 2019.

vulnerability in a culturally specific way (see Figure 1). Each key word relies on phonetic approximation: *Don't* corresponds to *ga usah* (Bahasa Indonesia, 'don't/need not'); *mbok* is a Javanese term functioning here as an imperative with an implicit second-person 'you.' However, *mbok* also means 'mother' when used to address one's own mother or any other married mature female, particularly in Central and East Java. While *pikir* means 'think' in standard Indonesia, *papa* is more complex. In colloquial Indonesian, *papa* means 'father,' but in this context it works differently: when paired with the negation *gak* ('no' or 'don't'), the phrase *gak papa* means 'no matter' or 'no problem.' In everyday Javanese conversation, this is often pronounced *gak popo*, where the vowel shifts from *a* to *o*. Thus, the line *aku gak papa* is best understood as 'I'm fine / don't worry,' rather than a literal reference to 'father.'

What makes this inscription poignant is the affective weight it carries. It represents a masculine identity that is not afraid to reassure others, particularly loved ones at home. The word 'papa' (father) cleverly doubles in meaning, both as a reference to the speaker's role as a father and as a colloquial expression of being 'okay' (*gak papa*). This dual function underscores how truck drivers, often seen as rugged or emotionally distant, in fact participate in caring emotional labour. Rather than reinforcing toughness, this message humanizes the driver, revealing the quiet burden of emotional responsibility borne across long distances. It resonates with Milani's (2014) observation that working-class masculinities often involve emotional negotiation, and aligns with Blommaert's (2010) notion of linguistic creativity in marginalized contexts. Through translingual blending, the driver subtly communicates care, vulnerability and cultural identity – all painted onto the back of a moving truck.

3.2 Satirical hustle and the face economy

This inscription hinges on layered wordplay between English and Javanese. The word *golek* is a Javanese verb meaning 'to seek' or 'to look for.' It is produced here through phonetic blending: the English *Go* is combined with *Like*, which in local pronunciation is shortened to *lek*. Read together (*go-lek*), they form the Javanese word *golek*. Similarly, the English *Do* and *It*, when read together, form the Javanese word *duwit*, meaning 'money.' Lastly, the word *Ray* is pronounced as *rai* in Javanese, meaning 'face' – not in the literal sense, but as a metonym for reputation, honour or social standing. The full phrase *golek duwit opo golek rai* therefore translates as 'Seek money (through hard work) or just seek face.'

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This inscription is a striking case of linguistic satire, where Javanese moral commentary is camouflaged in pseudo-English. It critiques those who seek recognition without genuine work – akin to 'brown-nosing.' As shown in Figure 2, The use of English orthography, including the modern '@' symbol, lends irony in a trucking context where labour defines identity. The pairing of 'do it' (work) and 'ray' (face) captures the tension between effort and appearance, dignity and flattery.

Here Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia is at play: English becomes not prestige but a screen for satire, a code only insiders fully grasp. The idiom *golek rai* highlights performative behaviour in Javanese society, where 'saving face' often outweighs merit. The follow-up in Javanese script – *terangno pikirmu ... !* ('Make your thoughts clear!') – intensifies the provocation, almost like a public interrogation: Are you a worker (*golek duwit*) or just a performer (*golek rai*)? By mixing languages, scripts and satire, the truck becomes a site of everyday philosophy, critiquing hypocrisy while affirming honest labour.

3.3 Wordplay and phonetic camouflage

This inscription showcases elaborate wordplay where English words are phonetically reconfigured to camouflage

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Figure 3. Truck inscription reading *New fear the me is 3*. Through English–Indonesian phonetic mapping, the inscription corresponds to the expression *Nyupir demi istri muda* ('Driving for the sake of a young wife.'). The phrase is constructed through layered phonetic substitutions, with *NEW FEAR* approximating *nyupir* ('driving'), *THE ME* approximating *demi* ('for the sake of') and *IS 3* representing *istri* ('wife'), while the smaller word *muda* ('young') completes the humorous message. Image source: Prabandari 2022.



Figure 4. Truck inscription reading *Pra one are you the end tought so peer*. Through English–Indonesian–Javanese phonetic mapping, the inscription corresponds to the expression *Perawan ayu di entot sopir* ('A pretty virgin is claimed by the driver.'). The inscription disguises a sexually explicit phrase through a sequence of phonetic substitutions, allowing taboo content to be expressed indirectly while remaining intelligible to readers familiar with Indonesian and Javanese pronunciation. Image source: Saifi 2021.

Indonesian meaning. The transformation occurs in stages. First, 'New' is pronounced *nyu*, and 'Fear' is altered to sound like *pir*. Together they form *nyupir*, a colloquial Indonesian word meaning 'driving.' Next, 'the' and 'me' combine as *demi*, which in Bahasa Indonesia means 'for the sake of.' The final sequence, 'is 3,' blends into *istri*, the Indonesian word for 'wife.' The inscription closes with the hidden add-on *muda*, meaning 'young,' thus completing the full phrase: *nyupir demi istri muda* ('driving for the sake of a young wife').

Several semiotic layers are at play here. The use of '3' to mimic *istri* (wife) draws on Indonesian slang conventions where numbers stand in for sounds, marking this not as broken English but as intentional coded play (Blommaert 2008). The small-font addition of *muda* ('young') at the bottom corner of the truck door works like a punchline (see Figure 3), completing the phrase *istri muda* ('young wife') and confirming the humorous boast. Its size and placement suggest layered addressivity: outsiders see nonsense, insiders decode the joke.

Beyond wordplay, the phrase performs masculinity. It frames gruelling labour not merely as economic survival but as fuelled by romantic or sexual ambition. Whether playful or serious, it affirms tropes of working-class resilience and virility (Milani 2014). This case also exemplifies Canagarajah's (2013) notion of code meshing: multiple linguistic and semiotic codes converge to create meaning that is humorous, boastful and translingual, fully intelligible only through cultural context.

3.4 Coded profanity and subcultural transgression

This inscription disguises a sexually explicit Javanese phrase through a series of phonetic approximations. The sequence 'Pra' and 'One' is read together as *perawan*, the Indonesian word for 'virgin.' The next two words, 'Are' and 'You,' approximate *ayu*, a Javanese word meaning 'pretty.' The word 'The' is pronounced as *di*, the Indonesian passive marker, while 'End' (pronounced *en*) merges with 'Thought' (pronounced *thot*) to form *dienthot*, a vulgar Jakarta dialect term meaning 'being sexually claimed.' Finally, 'So Peer' collapses into *sopir*, the Indonesian word for 'driver.' The resulting phrase, when read aloud by someone familiar with local phonology, reveals the concealed sentence *perawan ayu di entot sopir*.

This example walks the line between humour and taboo. The English phrase is deliberately written to be incomprehensible to outsiders yet phonetically approximates a sexually explicit sentence. It is a case of semiotic camouflage (Blommaert 2008), where vulgarity is encoded through English spelling and sound (see Figure 4). This maneuver achieves several effects: it allows drivers to signal rebellion and sexual bravado while avoiding censorship. At the same time, it resembles linguistic street art – obscene yet layered with cultural semiotics. It is both offensive and clever, hidden and hypervisible. Its presence unsettles assumptions about language learners and shows English used as a tool of subcultural identity.

From a broader sociolinguistic perspective, the inscription recalls Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the carnivalesque – humour, vulgarity and parody that destabilize hierarchies and norms. Phonetic distortion and innuendo invert polite, standardized English, offering instead a playful, transgressive alternative. While the phrase may offend, it also signals in-group belonging among drivers who share such codes. The act is less about sexual bravado than about performing linguistic resistance, using English not for upward mobility but for bottom-up rebellion.

This inscription also shows how English can be appropriated not as prestige but as a coded vehicle for taboo. Like graffiti, it inhabits the liminal space between public

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Figure 5. Truck inscription reading *Don't to milk*. The inscription represents a literal and phonetic rendering of the Javanese proverb *Ojo kesusu* ('Don't be in a rush.'). Rather than translating the proverb idiomatically, the writer breaks the word *kesusu* into its perceived components, producing the English sequence *TO MILK*, where *to* echoes the prefix *ke-* and *milk* translates *susu*. The result is a playful mistranslation that preserves local meaning while creatively appropriating English. Image source: Saifi 2021.



Figure 6. Truck inscription reading *Don't rich people difficult*. Through literal translation and phonetic approximation, the inscription corresponds to the Indonesian expression *Jangan kayak orang susah* ('Don't act like a poor person.'). The phrase deliberately manipulates English vocabulary and syntax to reproduce Indonesian pronunciation and meaning, transforming an apparently ungrammatical sentence into a humorous commentary on pride, social appearance and class identity. Image source: Chaniago 2019.

and illicit expression, where voice and visibility are negotiated creatively. By cloaking profanity in English orthography and rhythm, the writer avoids direct accountability while retaining impact. This aligns with Pennycook and Otsuji's (2015) metrolingualism, where mixing and stylistic play serve social as well as communicative functions. Here, English is not global prestige but streetwise camouflage for the unsayable.

3.5 Proverbs and mistranslation as moral messaging

At first glance, the phrase *'don't to milk'* seems grammatically broken, even nonsensical. Yet beneath its awkward form lies a phonetic and literal attempt to render a familiar Javanese proverb: *ojo kesusu*, meaning 'don't rush' or 'take your time.' The translation proceeds almost word for word: *ojo* becomes 'don't,' *ke* (the Indonesian preposition 'toward') is mapped onto 'to,' and *susu* (milk in Indonesian) is carried over as 'milk.' Notably, the original single word *kesusu* is split into two English words – 'to' and 'milk' – showing both a literal-minded approach to translation and the playful distortion of form that produces the hybrid expression.

As shown in Figure 5, this hybrid form, though incorrect by normative English standards, demonstrates localized semiotic fluency. Choosing to express traditional wisdom in English – however broken – signals aspiration toward visibility, wit and symbolic authority. As Jones (2013) notes, the affordance of English in public inscriptions often lies in its perceived cultural capital, even when grammar is subversively 'incorrect.'

Beyond its linguistic form, the proverb itself conveys values of patience, humility and thoughtfulness – traits central to Javanese social conduct. Recasting it into English symbolically amplifies its reach, asserting a modern identity while remaining rooted in tradition. It may also suggest an ironic juxtaposition – encoding old wisdom in a new linguistic shell – which heightens the performative wit of the inscription. This blending embodies a sociolinguistic duality: respect for heritage alongside a savvy grasp of English's symbolic power in public discourse.

The grammatical disjuncture, far from being a flaw, invites curiosity and interpretation, drawing attention precisely because it 'fails' in conventional English. This reflects Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual practice, where communicative success rests not in standard forms but in creative negotiation of meaning across languages.

3.6 Social distance and economic pride

This inscription exemplifies a literal translation of an Indonesian phrase into English. *Jangan* maps directly onto 'Don't.' The word *kayak* (meaning 'like' or 'as if') is rendered here as 'rich,' though in Indonesian the word for 'rich' is *kaya* without the final *-k*. The extra consonant reflects a cross-linguistic appropriation, bending English spelling to approximate Indonesian pronunciation. *Orang* is literally 'people,' and *susah* translates as 'difficult,' together producing 'orang susah,' a colloquial expression for the poor or less fortunate.

At first glance, the inscription seems nonsensical – perhaps telling rich people not to be difficult. Yet, read through phonetic mimicry and colloquial Indonesian syntax, it echoes *'Jangan kayak orang susah'* ('Don't act like a poor person'). The phrase critiques performative poverty – those who display hardship unnecessarily – while asserting pride in distancing oneself from the appearance of poverty. In this way, it works as coded class commentary, blending humour, aspiration and irony (see Figure 6).

At the same time, the use of English – however 'incorrect'— adds a semiotic layer. English here signals wit, cosmopolitanism or independence. The awkward syntax doesn't weaken the message; it strengthens it, marking the speaker as outside elite norms yet boldly playing with them. This resonates with Errington's (2014) discussion of class friction in Java, where mobility is negotiated through speech and style. The truck body becomes a class stage, where the

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Figure 7. Truck inscription reading *To you like go like do white*. Through English–Javanese phonetic mapping, the inscription corresponds to the expression *Tuyule golek duwit* ('The tuyul seeks money.'). The inscription encodes the name of the mythical *tuyul* – a supernatural being believed to steal money for its master – together with the Javanese phrase *golek duwit* ('to seek money'), blending folklore with playful linguistic camouflage. Image source: Chaniago 2019.



Figure 8. Truck inscription reading *I don't care your kitchen*. The inscription reflects the Indonesian expression *Aku ora peduli urusanmu* ('I don't care about your business.'). In Indonesian discourse, *kitchen* functions metaphorically to refer to another person's domestic affairs or private concerns. By replacing *business* with *kitchen*, the inscription creates a culturally grounded expression of emotional detachment while preserving its distinctive vernacular character. Image source: Garjito and Hani 2020.

driver asserts pride, however modest, and resists being read as suffering or dependent.

The sentence also aligns with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism, anticipating and rebutting an imagined social gaze. 'Don't rich people difficult' might be addressed to oneself, to peers or to the public. Its ambiguity is part of its force. The roughness of its English deflects easy reading while demanding critical attention. This is not simply broken English – it is a performance of class positioning and a refusal to be pitied, an ethos of pride written on the road.

3.7 Ghosts, wealth and mythology

This inscription encodes the phrase *Tuyule golek duwit* through playful phonetic camouflage. A *tuyul* is a mythical goblin in Javanese and Indonesian folklore, believed to steal money for its master. The final *-e* marks definiteness, turning the word into 'the tuyul.' The sequence 'To' + 'You' + the final 'l' from 'Lhe' approximates *tuyule*, with *lhe* signalling specificity. The Javanese verb *golek* ('to seek, look for') is split into 'Go' + 'Like,' where 'like' is pronounced *lek*. Similarly, *duwit* ('money,' in Javanese) is fragmented into 'Do' + 'White,' with the vowel in 'white' shortened to mimic *wit*.

This inscription is a rich case of phonetic wordplay drawing on Javanese folklore. Sounded out, it approximates *tuyul golek duwit* - a supernatural child-like spirit (tuyul) believed to bring wealth by stealing money. By encoding this myth through English orthography, the inscription both masks and amplifies its meaning. As seen in Figure 7, the clever use of 'To You Lhe' for *tuyul* and 'Do White' for *duwit* (money) reflects a hybrid literacy practice that taps English's global visibility while rooted in local cultural knowledge. The driver's choice suggests both fascination with the mystical and ironic commentary on the lengths people go to in pursuit of wealth.

Beyond folklore, the inscription invites layered readings. It may serve as a cautionary tale about materialism or a satirical nod to shadowy ways of acquiring money – supernatural or unethical. Here, the *tuyul* becomes a symbolic stand-in for modern anxieties around survival, competition and mobility. As Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) note, urban linguistic creativity often fuses the spiritual, the playful and the critical. This blending of myth and money shows how truck inscriptions entertain yet also carry meanings that blur tradition and modernity, belief and skepticism, humour and critique.

3.8 Defiant attitudes and domestic dismissal

This inscription first reads as a grammatical oddity. Yet its semantic strangeness invites closer analysis. Unlike the terse 'I Don't Care,' the addition of 'your kitchen' introduces a metaphor reflecting interpersonal tension, class commentary and gender roles (see Figure 8). In Indonesian discourse, *dapur* (kitchen) is more than physical space – it's a metaphor for domestic life. Saying *urusan dapurmu* ('your kitchen business') implies private problems or household affairs. In this light, 'I Don't Care Your Kitchen' signals refusal to engage in others' drama, complaints or gossip – a masculine declaration of distance from feminized spaces and responsibilities.

The phrase exploits gendered divisions of space: road (public, masculine) versus kitchen (private, feminine). Broken grammar intensifies the defiance. By dropping the preposition, the sentence becomes sharper, even aggressive. This minimalism aligns with Milani (2014) and Bakhtin (1981) on ideological performativity – language that asserts identity and stance. Thus the phrase is more than quirky: it's a moving declaration of autonomy, refusing domestication while contrasting public masculinity with private life. The truck becomes a canvas of boundary-drawing, where the driver asserts where his concerns end and others' begin.

4. Linguistic creativity, masculinity and cultural positioning

The truck inscriptions examined in this study are more than ornamental or humorous additions to vehicles – they are rich, mobile texts that reveal the everyday politics of language, identity and cultural negotiation among Indonesia's working class. They demonstrate how English, far from being

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the domain of formal education or elite discourse, has been appropriated and indigenized in playful, critical and often emotionally resonant ways.

4.1 English as expressive resource and cultural currency

What emerges clearly from the data is the creative reworking of English for expressive and symbolic purposes. This supports Pennycook's (2007) argument that English, as a global language, becomes 'glocal' – reshaped by local voices, practices and ideologies. In the case of Indonesian truck drivers, English is not used for grammatical correctness or communicative precision, but for its *symbolic capital*, as a language associated with modernity, wit, masculinity and defiance.

Yet the use of English is not merely aspirational. It is often ironic, critical and layered. As seen in the inscriptions like *'Pra One Are You The End Thought So Peer'* or *'To You Lhe Go Like Do White,'* drivers construct what Blommaert (2010) terms 'semiotic repertoires' – hybrid resources drawn from multiple linguistic systems to generate new meanings. These creative formations resist linguistic gatekeeping and reflect a distinct working-class agency.

The playful bricolage visible in truck inscriptions extends Crystal's (2003) notion of a global English 'common currency.' Yet here that currency is continuously devalued and revalued by local actors. When drivers recast *ojo kesusu* as *'Don't to Milk,'* they flaunt grammatical deviance while gaining symbolic leverage – demonstrating what Blommaert (2010) calls 'orderly disorder,' where communicative effectiveness is measured by social resonance, not by prescriptive norms. In this sense, drivers utilize English as a tool for both resistance and satire through clever phonetic mimicry.

4.2 Time–space mobility and rolling literacies

The truck functions not only as a mode of transport but as a mobile platform for inscriptional literacy – what we might call 'rolling literacies.' These are forms of expression that emerge from the truck's embeddedness in both motion and place. As trucks travel across islands, cities and villages, their rear inscriptions encounter thousands of eyes from varying socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. In this sense, the truck becomes a 'circulating text' (Blommaert 2010), enabling its messages to move beyond the author and across different interpretive communities. These rolling literacies are shaped by long journeys, isolation, fatigue and a driver's inner monologue – yet they are also performative, written for an imagined audience of fellow drivers, pedestrians and highway authorities. The inscriptions serve as acts of self-branding, cultural assertion or emotional ventilation. This spatial mobility also destabilizes conventional ideas of literacy as stationary, schooled or elite. Instead, it aligns with 'mobile literacies' (Tusting 2019), which emphasize how meaning-making travels with people, adapting to roads, moods and routes.

4.3 Performance of masculinities and emotional negotiation

A key thread across many inscriptions is the performance of gendered identity. Contrary to stereotypes of working-class masculinity as emotionally stoic or hypermasculine, messages such as *'Don't Mother Think I am Not Father'* express tenderness, vulnerability and familial care. At the same time, inscriptions like *'New Fear The Me Is Three'* and *'I Don't Care'* draw on more combative or boastful scripts of masculinity, framing driving as a space of pride, autonomy and even sexual potency.

This fluid negotiation of emotion and identity echoes Milani's (2014) work on masculinities and discourse, where public texts reveal complex gendered performances – often contradictory, but always meaningful. The truck surface thus becomes not only a public signboard, but a *site of gendered storytelling*, loaded with affect, humour and social commentary.

Building on Milani (2014), the inscriptions reveal a push-and-pull between tenderness (*'Don't Mother Think I am Not Father'*) and bravado (*'New Fear The Me Is Three'*). Such oscillation aligns with global studies of trucker discourse (Hanauer 2012), where long-haul drivers craft public selves that are simultaneously protective and playful. The emotional labour of reassuring loved ones blends seamlessly with caustic humour that polices in-group masculinity. English, in these moments, acts as both shield and spotlight – masking intimate sentiment under linguistic novelty while broadcasting wit to passing motorists.

4.4 Local wisdom, myth and the spiritual

Several inscriptions also point to a continuing role of traditional beliefs and moral codes, even when expressed in (broken) English. Phrases like *'Don't to Milk'* and *'Meet Your God Before Meet Your Boss'* repurpose local proverbs and spiritual reminders using English as a platform. Others, like *'To You Lhe Go Like Do White,'* invoke Javanese mythology, embedding references to the supernatural (*tuyul*) into everyday discourse.

These examples support the idea that English in peripheral contexts is not merely a tool of globalization, but a medium through which local knowledge and folk traditions are made visible (Canagarajah 2013; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). The interplay between traditional belief and modern expression underscores how Indonesian truck drivers live at the intersection of shifting cultural tides – navigating both the past and the present on the move.

Re-casting folk proverbs and ghost stories in English situates truckers within overlapping moral universes. *'To You Lhe Go Like Do White'* juxtaposes modern hustling with animist caution, echoing Errington's (2014) observation of 'linguistic fluidity' in Javanese-modern life. By invoking the *tuyul* myth, drivers dramatise anxieties about quick wealth and unseen forces—turning translingual play into moral storytelling on wheels.

4.5 Subversion through play

Finally, the inscriptions frequently exhibit a playful, subversive stance. Through phonetic mimicry, intentional grammatical 'errors,' and hidden vulgarity, they challenge linguistic norms and moral decorum. In this way, the drivers participate in what Bakhtin (1981) calls *'carnivalesque discourse'* – a language of inversion, humour and irreverence

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that undermines authority while offering a release from the pressures of everyday life.

Several inscriptions operate through phonetic disguise, such as '*Don't Rich People Difficult*' or '*New Fear The Me is 3*,' which fuse English with local phrases that are intelligible only to those culturally and linguistically 'in the know.' This echoes Bakhtin's (1981) idea of the *carnivalesque* – where language becomes a site of laughter, irreverence and inversion of social norms. The playfulness is not innocent; it is a linguistic form of resistance, allowing drivers to critique elitism, flirt with obscenity and poke fun at societal expectations under the radar.

4.6 Intertextual humour and carnivalesque play

Many of the inscriptions employ humour through layered intertextuality – blending languages, pop culture and idiomatic structures in playful, unexpected ways. This humour is often carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1981), mocking authority, reversing social roles and turning the sacred or serious into the comic or obscene. For example, phrases like 'Don't Rich People Difficult' may appear absurd, but they invite the audience into a moment of cultural decoding that often results in laughter, recognition or discomfort. The 'pra one' example does this even more provocatively, transforming vulgar commentary into a cryptic linguistic puzzle. The humour often operates through deliberate mistranslation, not as a flaw but as a form of coded resistance. These 'errors' function as creative tools that invite insiders to laugh while keeping outsiders guessing – what Bakhtin would consider part of a populist, bottom-up challenge to elite language norms. Through this carnivalesque lens, truck inscriptions become sites of linguistic rebellion and cultural survival, where humour masks critique and laughter becomes subversion.

4.7 Moral polyphony and hidden transcripts

Several inscriptions suggest a form of moral polyphony – a coexistence of conflicting voices, values and ethical orientations. 'Meet Your God Before Meet Your Boss' places divine accountability above professional duty, while 'Don't to Milk' gently promotes patience using traditional wisdom. Even vulgar phrases, when decoded, reveal undercurrents of loneliness, longing or masculine bravado rather than mere obscenity. These inscriptions embody what James Scott (1990) calls **'**hidden transcripts**'**— messages that subtly critique dominant power structures from the margins. The truck drivers may not directly confront authority, but they carve out spaces for irony, complaint or moral counsel. English becomes the shield and the sword – encoding personal truths in ways that pass through censors but resonate with peers. This moral layering creates what Bakhtin (1981) describes as dialogism: a plurality of voices speaking simultaneously through the same utterance. Through these inscriptions, truck drivers articulate their position in society – not by shouting, but by painting quiet philosophies onto the moving walls of their livelihood.

The phrase '*Go Like Do It or Go Like Ray*' encapsulates this tension. At face value, it reads as playful gibberish. But through a Javanese lens, it phonetically maps onto 'Golek duwit opo golek rai' – a sharp critique of people who seek personal gain through flattery or sycophancy. The juxtaposition of monetary labor (*golek duwit*) and performative self-image (*golek rai*) presents a moral crossroads that many drivers may identify with. The truck thus becomes a site of ethical reflection as much as of humor. These inscriptions are not random expressions – they are *hidden transcripts* (Scott 1990), coded critiques shaped by lived realities of economic precarity, moral tension and institutional power.

5. Everyday Englishes and the politics of representation

This study has explored the creative, humorous and culturally resonant ways Indonesian truck drivers use English inscriptions on their vehicles to express identity, emotion, social commentary and resistance. Far from being merely decorative or linguistically naïve, these inscriptions demonstrate rich semiotic play and reveal the complex ways in which English functions outside institutional or elite domains. The drivers' use of English reflects not only linguistic improvisation but also an assertion of agency – constructing meaning through a localized, hybrid form of English that draws on Javanese, Indonesian, urban slang and myth. These inscriptions blur the boundaries between languages, genres and social registers, allowing ordinary people to participate in public discourse on their own terms.

By focusing on these truck inscriptions as mobile, street-level texts, this study contributes to broader discussions in sociolinguistics and critical applied linguistics on how English is appropriated in peripheral contexts. It also underscores the importance of recognizing everyday language practices as legitimate forms of meaning-making – rich with affect, humour, wisdom and critique. Ultimately, the back of the truck becomes more than just a metal surface; it becomes a space for storytelling, for signaling masculine vulnerability, for referencing folklore, for navigating socioeconomic struggles and for poking fun at authority. This is not English as mastery – it is English as *improvisation, resistance and lived performance*.

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