“All politics is local”:
Spatial Deixis as Rhetoric in an Eastern Indonesian Polity

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Following the 1998 collapse of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order regime, the
Indonesian government instituted IMF-led democratizing and decentralizing reforms.
One unexpected consequence of these reforms has been a widespread “renaissance
of local identities” (Meitzner 2014) in Indonesia’s new regional politics. Relatively
unnoticed within this revival is the emerging importance of local languages in district
level elections. Increasingly, politicians who had been accustomed during the New
Order to addressing their publics solely in a bureaucratic register of the Indonesian
language found it necessary to speak publicly in local languages that index local
ethnolinguistic identities. But which local language and which local identity is a
politician to choose when even a “single” local language comprises a heterogeneous
repertoire of enregistered (Agha 2007) and localized (Kuipers 1998) varieties?

Indonesia’s new political landscape exemplifies Blommaert’s (2010) notion of a
polycentric indexical field, in which speakers are subject to the constraints of differing
evaluative authorities. Drawing on ethnographic and linguistic data collected with
speakers of the Lio language in central Flores between 2006 and 2015, this paper
highlights directional pronouns as highly salient constitutive features of different
“orders of indexicality” (Blommaert 2010). Although Lio directional terms encode a
set of geocentric coordinates that are relatively stable across the area, their
pragmatic application is a matter of highly localized convention, in some instances
particular to an individual household but more generally subject to conventions
determined at the village level. Furthermore, directional terms encode higher-order
indexical authorizations (Silverstein 2003) operating at different “sociolinguistic
scales” (Blommaert 2015). This semiotic complexity is fertile ground for the
production of communicative blunders. Focusing on a mobile regional politician’s
infelicitous uses of directional terms, this paper considers how rhetorical
performances in local languages in a decentralizing Indonesia raise possibilities for
new, unpredictable forms of dialogic interaction between politicians and their
polycentric publics.