

Inaccurate Use of Honorifics in Indonesian Language in Communication between Students and Lecturers

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims investigated the inaccurate use of politeness and honorific Indonesian in oral and written communication between students and lecturers.

Methodology: The data source focuses on the use of polite and disrespectful sentences in communicating with lecturers via whatsapp or talking directly. Which explains how students can distinguish polite or disrespectful sentences in communication with lecturers. The Data was collected using classroom observation and the distribution of questions regarding politeness or impoliteness in sentences provided online using WhatsApp. By using polite and disrespectful sentences in questions, students are required to provide a reason why they choose the answer.

Results: The first results show that the factors of strength (P), distance (D), and placement position (R) strongly influence the interaction in the classroom between lecturers and student. This is reflected in the choice of greeting, politeness style, and speaking style. The second finding, a survey of students, showed that 85–86% of respondents refused to use "Saudara (*you*)" to teachers because it was considered rude, and 27–32% began to perceive "Anda (*you*)" as a form of disrespect.

Applications/Originality/Value: The total number of words in the abstract should not exceed 250 words. The findings of this study can help students understand the importance of politeness in academic communication and help lecturers understand the changes in communication patterns occurring among the younger generation.

Keywords; inaccurate, honorific, communication students and lecturer

Introduction Section

In sociolinguistics, language does not only function as a means of communication; it also reflects the status, social relationships, and cultural values of its speakers. In an academic environment, the relationship between students and lecturers requires the use of language that reflects respect and politeness. However, a phenomenon that often occurs in higher education environments shows that students do not use Indonesian words and honorific titles appropriately when interacting with teachers. The use of greetings such as "kamu (*you*)" or "ya Pak (*yes, sir*)" with an overly casual intonation demonstrates this inaccuracy. This does not reflect social distance and the formal academic context (Winiharti & Mubarak, 2025). Discretion, generosity, agreement, politeness, agreement, and sympathy are the six maxims of politeness, according to Leech's theory of politeness (1983). Effective communication also depends on literal meaning. Disputes in communication often arise due to violations of these maxims, especially between speakers of different social status. Mahas (2024) found that students who do not understand the social function of language tend to ignore proverbs of politeness, which makes their comments sound rude, even though they are not intended to be offensive. However, this change has created new problems in the field of education. Effendy, Munib, Rahman, and Izzah (2025) stated that the lack of proper language use in educational institutions affects the impression of professionalism and the relationship between teachers and students. Misunderstandings, lack of respect, and academic communication ethics can be disrupted if speech and honor levels are not used correctly. This can be considered a violation of the proverbs of respect and agreement in Leech's context.

The sociolinguistic concept explains how language choices reflect and construct social relationships, especially those involving respect and hierarchy, in student-lecturers communication. In the academic setting in Indonesia, students are traditionally required to use appropriate speech levels, markers of politeness, and honorifics to acknowledge the social status, age, and institutional authority of senior lecturers. Fisherman (1991), social domains and roles shape language behavior. Thus, interactions in the classroom and at the university require a more formal language code. According to Giles' (2016) Theory of Communication Accommodation, speakers modify their language according to whom they are interacting with; however, students today often over-accommodate by switching to digital communication styles such as

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WhatsApp that are overly casual or egalitarian. Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle states that cultural norms govern politeness, but these boundaries can disappear when situational boundaries become unclear. The phenomenon in this study is further complicated by the fact that younger generations are influenced by modern, egalitarian communication styles. Millennials and Generation Z learn to interact on the internet in a more relaxed and direct manner, such as through instant messaging or social media. This indirectly changes the way they interact with educators (Jawa, Yanti, & Hizbullah, 2025). Students often do not adjust their academic language to the social role of their interlocutors; for example, they often use informal sentence structures when writing messages or speaking to their teachers. This shows that sociolinguistics does not understand formal contexts, which require the use of very polite language. Therefore, it is very important to investigate the inaccuracy of speech levels and the use of honorifics in Indonesian. This study not only discusses the types of language errors but also the sociolinguistic factors that influence changes in students' language behavior.

This study aims to explain how social and cultural values influence politeness practices in academic communication and offer solutions to improve politeness in language use in higher education settings. This study will do so using Leech's (1983) model. The decline in student politeness is mainly due to sociolinguistic factors such as age, digital communication habits, and the influence of egalitarian culture (Winiharti & Mubarak, 2025; Effendy et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates that social and linguistic values among adolescents are changing. Therefore, this study places inaccuracies in speech and honorifics as sociolinguistic phenomena, where violations of politeness maxims reflect changes in communication patterns and social values among students in the modern era. Jawas et al. (2025) in the *Journal of Language and Literature Teaching*, a study on the use of honorifics and speech levels in higher education, shows that students often do not adjust their language to the social status of their teachers. This is because students bring informal communication styles from social media into the classroom. This indicates that practical knowledge of wisdom, standards, and agreements has declined. Terms such as “Anda (*you*)” or “baik bu, saya akan kirim (*alright ma'am, will I send*)” have become common in online communication between students and teachers, according to Mahas (2024). Effendi et al. (2025) state that students know the appropriate type of respect, but they often do not use it due to close social factors. *Kembara Journal of Language Education* states that students feel more comfortable using informal language (ngoko or see This shows that politeness is not only a matter of language but also a reflection of flexible social relationships in the educational environment. Winiharti & Mubarak (2025) in the *Lingua Cultura Journal* investigated how teachers and students use WhatsApp to communicate with each other in several studies. They found that communicating via the internet tends to be less polite due to unclear formalities. Students consider it normal to send messages without opening or closing with greetings, but this can make lecturers appear impolite.

Studies such as Pratiwi & Anindiyarini (2021), Nurdiani & Sasongko (2022), Rahmi (2020), and Winiharti & Mubarak (2023) focus on student-friendly strategies when communicating with teachers via WhatsApp. According to the research, students often use inappropriate language, are overly informal, or do not adhere to academic ethical standards. Additionally, further research on gender and digital media, such as Munthe (2021), Risdianto et al. (2023), and Sudewi et al. (2023), shows that the normalized influence of digital culture on a more casual style of language often leads to violations of standards of politeness. Studies such as Pratiwi & Anindiyarini (2021), Nurdiani & Sasongko (2022), Rahmi (2020), and Winiharti & Mubarak (2023) have focused on how students use WhatsApp to communicate with their teachers. Other studies on gender and digital media, such as Munthe (2021), Risdianto et al. (2023), and Sudewi et al. (2023) show that the use of more casual language in digital culture often leads to violations of academic ethics. Hudson (2011) shows that, globally, students from various countries often face difficulties in using honorifics correctly when speaking with their teachers. This is in line with the findings of Azim et al. (2025), which show how this affects students' emotional relationships and social identities. As shown by Nuryantiningasih & Pandanwangi (2018) and Kholifah (2022), studies on language levels, especially Javanese, show a decline in respect, namely that young speakers are no longer sensitive to the differences between ngoko and krama. This is a phenomenon related to the formal use of Indonesian in academic environments. According to pragmatic studies such as Leech (1983), Giles (2016), and Fishman (1991), changes in the place of communication, cultural changes, and changes in the social identity of participants cause changes in their language choices. According to the findings of Jaya et al. (2024), Anugrawati et al. (2024), and Yuwono & Santoso (2024), students often choose the wrong words, greeting styles, and levels of formality when talking to their teachers, especially in digital messages.

Previous studies have investigated politeness, honor, and language shift in various contexts. However, the above studies have not specifically investigated the inaccurate use of politeness and honorifics in Indonesian in oral and written communication between students and lecturers from the perspective of Gen Z students. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining inconsistencies in the use of formal language, appropriateness of greetings, and level of speech in academic interactions. This study aims to provide a better understanding of changes in language standards in higher education.

Research Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Data was collected from observations of conversations between students and lecturers during class, and from students in semesters 3-7 who were born between 2000-2006 and who used WhatsApp to interact with lecturers and students in class during lectures. The data sources focused on the use of polite and

impolite sentences in communicating with lecturers via WhatsApp or speaking directly. This explains how students can distinguish between polite and impolite sentences in communicating with lecturers. Data was collected using classroom observation and the distribution of questions regarding politeness or impoliteness in sentences provided online using WhatsApp. By using polite and impolite sentences in the questions, students were required to give reasons for their answers. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2018), which consists of three main steps: filtering data relevant to the research focus, namely forms of honor inaccuracy and speech levels, organizing data in tables, conversation quotations, and error categories based on Leech's (1983) principles of politeness, and interpreting the social and cultural meanings of these inaccuracies and relating them to sociolinguistic theory. For data credibility and validation, the triangulation method was used, whereby expert lecturers re-examined and validated the sentences to be disseminated to students in the context of polite and impolite sentences. By applying this triangulation method, the study-maintained objectivity and reliability in identifying and analyzing honorific sentences in communication between students and lecturers.

Finding and Discussion

Observation of Student and Lecturer Interaction in the Classroom

The factors of strength (P), distance (D), and placement position (R), as described in the sociolinguistic framework, are strongly influenced by language choice, form of greeting, and speech style, based on observations of interactions between students and lecturers in the classroom. Students usually use more polite, formal, and deferential language, such as "Pak, apakah saya boleh bertanya ? (*sir, may i ask ?*)" or "Izin menjawab, Bu, (*permission to answer, ma'am,*)" which shows a recognition of the power structure in the academic world. However, lecturers use a more institutional authoritative style of speech, but they still maintain their commitment by using signs of politeness such as "silakan, (*please*)" "coba perhatikan, (*try to pay attention*)" or "bagus, tetapi perlu diperbaiki. (*good, but needs to be fixed*)" In addition, the observed interactions showed various speech functions. These functions include asking for clarification, providing explanations, correcting, asserting class rules, and providing feedback. These functions all reflect pragmatic functions in the classroom. Overall, these findings show that students' and lecturers' use of language is shaped by social contexts, role relationships, and academic goals, so that speech patterns are not only asymmetrical but also mutually helpful, in accordance with sociolinguistic concepts of language use.

Polite and Disrespectful Sentences in Questions

The findings in this study involved active students of the one University in Surakarta, who assessed 10 sentences of communication via WhatsApp to lecturers. The results provide a very clear picture of the norms of decency that apply among students today (with $n = 100$ mores convincing) the word "Saudara (*you*)" was rejected by (85–86%) of respondents as a statistically significant marker of disrespect to lecturers. The word "Anda (*you*)" is still accepted by the majority (68–73%), but there are already (27–32%) who consider it to be rude/disrespectful indicates a generational shift. Sentences that contain the opening of politeness, asking for permission, humility (numbers 5 and 8) received 99–100% approval. Sentences without an opening (numbers 4 and 6) are still opposed by about a quarter of respondents (24–26 %) with a total of 100 respondents, these results are very suitable for thesis and journal articles because they have met the minimum sample size for generalization at the university level. The data can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Data questioner polite and disrespectful.

No	Question	Polite	Disrespectful	% Polite	Dominant Conclusion
1	Selamat siang Pak/Bu, apakah Bapak/Ibu ada waktu sebentar? Saya ingin menanyakan tentang tugas yang kemarin. Apakah anda memiliki waktu? (<i>Good afternoon Sir/Madam, do you have a moment? I would like to ask about yesterday's assignment. Do you have time ?</i>)	92	8	92 %	Very Polite
2	Pak/Bu, izin bertanya. Apakah materi minggu depan tetap sesuai yang di informasikan oleh anda? (<i>Sir/Madam, permission to ask. Will next week's material be as you have been informed ?</i>)	68	32	68 %	Quite Polite (controversial)
3	Maaf mengganggu Pak/Bu. Untuk pengumpulan laporan, apakah boleh dikirim melalui email anda? (<i>Sorry to bother you, sir/ma'am. For report collection, is it allowed to be sent via your email ?</i>)	91	9	91 %	Very Polite
4	Pak/Bu, saya ingin memastikan. Apakah format makalahnya menggunakan apa edisi terbaru? (<i>Sir/Madam, I</i>	74	26	74 %	Polite (lots of notes of clarity)

No	Question	Polite	Disrespectful	% Polite	Dominant Conclusion
	want to make sure. What is the format of the paper used in the latest edition?)				
5	Permisi Pak/Bu, apakah saya boleh konsultasi besok pagi terkait penelitian saya? (<i>Excuse me, sir/ma'am, can I consult tomorrow morning regarding my research ?</i>)	100	0	100 %	Most Polite
6	Pak/Bu, untuk pertemuan hari ini, apakah dilakukan secara offline atau online ya? (<i>Sir/Madam, for today's meeting, will it be done offline or online?</i>)	76	24	76 %	Polite
7	Mohon maaf Pak/Bu, apakah anda bisa memberikan contoh outline yang benar untuk proposal? (<i>Sorry Sir/Ma'am, can you give an example of the correct outline for the proposal?</i>)	73	27	73 %	Polite (controversial because of "you")
8	Pak/Bu, apakah saya boleh meminta klarifikasi mengenai instruksi tugas nomor tiga? Saya agak kurang memahami. (<i>Sir/Madam, may I ask for clarification regarding the instruction of task number three? I don't understand it quite a bit.</i>)	99	1	99 %	Most Polite
9	Selamat malam Pak/Bu, apakah saya boleh mengirim draft saya untuk diperiksa kepada saudara? (<i>Good evening Sir/Ma'am, may I send my draft for review to you?</i>)	14	86	14 %	Impolite
10	Maaf Pak/Bu, apakah revisi saya sudah sesuai dengan arahan saudara sebelumnya? (<i>Sorry Sir/Ma'am, is my revision in accordance with your previous direction?</i>)	15	85	15 %	Impolite

1. The word that is most often considered problematic is in the sentence “saudara (*you*)” Almost 100% of respondents considered it disrespectful to lecturers (numbers 9 & 10) and in the words “anda (*you*)” It is often criticized (especially in sentences 2, 3, 7), although it does not make a sentence but is considered "disrespectful" in the majority because there is no opening word (permisi/maaf) Therefore, many students often consider these sentences to be "impolite" (examples numbers 4 and 6).

2. The sentence that is most agreed to be polite (100%) is (Sentence 5) because there is a word “permisi (*excuse me*)” or ask for permission that the majority of students consider polite when interacting with lecturers. In (Sentence 8) it is considered polite to be in the sentence there is a request for clarification or a reason for humility by using the word “saya agak kurang paham (*i am a bit misunderstood*)” Literally, many students consider this sentence polite.

3. The most controversial sentence is in (Sentences 2 & 7) split because of the use of the word “anda (*you*)” There are some students who think the word is polite and some who think the sentence is rude when talking to the lecturer. Furthermore, in (Sentences 4 & 6) because most of them still consider polite, but there are those who consider it "too direct/casual" because it is still considered inappropriate when contacting lecturers for lecture problems.

4. The pattern of politeness according to the majority of respondents must have a greeting / excuse / apology interrupt when interacting with the lecturer, and also must ask permission “boleh (*can*) ” or “apakah saya boleh (*what can i do*)” When asking for permission before doing something. Many respondents avoided the word “anda (*you*)” and especially “saudara (*you*)” because it is considered disrespectful. sentence by showing humility “saya kurang paham (*i don't understand*)” is highly appreciated by respondents because they are considered to be polite. and consistent in using greetings such as “Bapak/Ibu (*sir/ma'am*)” Throughout the sentence, it can improve the sentence politely in the use of language to interact with the lecturer.

Discussion

The first results show that the factors of strength (P), distance (D), and placement position (R) strongly influence the interaction in the classroom between students and lecturers. This is reflected in the choice of greeting, politeness style, and speaking style. Students use more formal and deferential phrases, such as "Bapak/Ibu, izin untuk mengajukan pertanyaan. (*Sir/Madam, permission to ask questions.*)" This is in line with the research of Anugrawati et al. (2024) that in an academic context, hierarchical relations demand high politeness as a representation of respect for authority. This is also in accordance with research conducted by Hudson (2011), which found that students use honorariums to maintain social distance and control power relations. Instead, lecturers maintain institutional authority but remain polite by using words such as "Tolong (*please*)" or "Bagus (*good*)". It was also found in teacher to students interactions by Karimnia & Khodashenas (2017) and Sudewi et al. (2023).

In the second finding, a survey of 100 students showed that 85–86% of respondents refused to use "Saudara (*you*)" to lecturers because it was considered rude, and 27–32% began to perceive "you" as a form of disrespect. This corroborates the research of Andini (2021), Egilistiani et al. (2025), and Menggo (2024) who assert that honorific choices are very

sensitive to cultural norms and power contexts. The concept of politeness Leech (1983) and the model of politeness by Anwar et al. (2021) are in line with the high acceptance of students to sentences that contain the opening of politeness (99–100%). This suggests that the strategy of asking permission and humbling is a strong indicator of politeness orientation. In addition, the shift in perception of "Anda (you)" reflects a trend of declining respect, as noted by Effendy et al. (2025) and Kholifah (2022), in which the younger generation is increasingly disrespectful, but remains strategically polite. When compared, both results show that students still place lecturers in the top positions of strength both in direct interaction (observation) and explicit perception (survey). These results are in accordance with the theory of communication lodging (Giles, 2016) and the pattern of academic politeness in Indonesia (Mahas, 2024) and Rahmi (2020). The results show that students' honorific choices and pragmatic strategies in communicating with lecturers are influenced by socio-cultural structures, academic norms, and generational perceptions.

Conclusion

Social distance (D), and institutional role (R) greatly influence language use in academic communication, according to classroom interaction observations and survey analysis conducted on one hundred students. As a way of respecting lecturers, students regularly use greetings and polite, formal, and hierarchical words. Lecturers maintain academic authority but still show politeness by using mitigating markers. The survey results show that perceptions of politeness are changing among the younger generation. For example, 85–86% of respondents consider terms such as "brother (you)" to be impolite, and 27–32% of students consider the use of "you" to be incorrect. Conversely, words with polite openings such as "izin bertanya" (may I ask) or "mohon maaf sebelumnya" (please excuse me) are almost universally accepted (99 to 100%), indicating that politeness strategies are still the standard in academic communication. Overall, the results show that the principle of politeness remains the basis of lecturer-student interactions, even though some forms of greeting have changed due to generational differences that have caused some students to change old habits into something new. These findings are in line with previous research findings on the importance of politeness, honor, and social hierarchy in higher education.

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