

Politeness in Indonesian as a Reflection of Students' Religious Character: A Phenomenological Study in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Linguistic politeness is a fundamental manifestation of a person's character, reflected in everyday communicative interactions. Linguistic politeness plays a vital role in shaping students' social and spiritual identities. Understanding how linguistic politeness functions as an indicator of students' religious character in the digital era, which is full of challenges to traditional values, is urgently needed. Therefore, this study aims to examine the phenomenon of Indonesian language politeness as a reflection of students' religious character in higher education. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study involved 40 students at As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University from various faculties. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of written communication documents. The findings indicate that students' linguistic politeness reflects the internalization of Islamic values using politeness formulas, the selection of appropriate diction, and communication patterns that respect social hierarchy. Factors shaping politeness include the religious environment of the campus, lecturer guidance, and the still-strong tradition of Islamic boarding schools. This study contributes to the development of a pragmatic theory of politeness in the context of Islamic higher education and provides practical recommendations for student character development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic politeness is a fundamental manifestation of a person's character, reflected in everyday communicative interactions (Nashruddin & Al-Obaydi, 2021; Agovino et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic higher education, linguistic politeness is not merely a matter of communication ethics but rather a reflection of the deep internalization of Islamic values. This phenomenon becomes even more relevant when linked to the formation of students' religious character, particularly in Islamic-based higher education institutions such as As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University. Politeness in Indonesian reflects how the nation's noble values and Islamic teachings are integrated into students' communication practices (Zakaria et al., 2022).

In general, linguistic politeness plays a vital role in the formation of students' social and spiritual identities. [Brown and Levinson \(2015\)](#), [Brown and Levinson \(2020\)](#) emphasized that linguistic politeness functions not only as a communication strategy but also as a mechanism for preserving cultural and religious values in society. In the context of Muslim students, linguistic politeness serves as a means of actualizing Islamic teachings on good manners and morals in everyday life. Research by [Wardaugh \(2018\)](#) shows that linguistic politeness among students in religious institutions has unique characteristics that reflect the integration of social norms, culture, and religious teachings.

From a pragmatic perspective, politeness is a communicative strategy aimed at maintaining social harmony with appropriate speech in a situational context ([Ningrum, 2025](#)). [Brown and Levinson \(2020\)](#) define politeness as a universal system of strategies employed by speakers to minimize threats to the face of their interlocutors in communicative interactions. In the context of Muslim students, politeness functions not only as a social strategy but also as a manifestation of Islamic morality, which prioritizes *ihsan* (goodness) in every interaction. This politeness theory has developed into a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how religious values are internalized in students' daily communication practices.

Religious character in the context of Islamic education is defined as the internalization of the values of monotheism, noble morality, and Islamic etiquette, reflected in individual behavior and communication. [Watts \(2019\)](#) emphasizes that religious character is not merely knowledge of religious teachings but also a spiritual transformation that influences all aspects of life, including communication. In Islamic tradition, students' religious character is reflected through etiquette in speaking, listening, and interacting with others, as taught in the concept of *akhlak mahmudah* ([Mahmudah et al., 2023](#)). This study adopts the definition of religious character as a manifestation of faith integrated into the practice of politeness in students' language.

The relationship between politeness and religious character has been the focus of various interdisciplinary studies in the last decade. [Culpeper \(2021\)](#) identified that students with a strong religious character tend to exhibit consistent patterns of politeness in both formal and informal communication. This is due to the internalization of spiritual values that view communication as a trust and a moral responsibility. Previous research has shown a positive correlation between students' levels of religiosity and their use of politeness formulas ([Prayitno et al., 2022](#); [Hidayat et al., 2024](#)), their choice of polite diction, and their avoidance of speech that could hurt the feelings of their interlocutors.

The context of Islamic higher education provides a unique dimension to students' politeness practices. [Mills \(2018\)](#), [Wardani and Shodiq \(2025\)](#) states that a religious academic environment creates a communicative ecosystem that supports the development of politeness through various mechanisms, such as the example of lecturers, Islamic academic traditions, and peer groups with similar spiritual commitments. In the context of As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University, the strong Islamic boarding school tradition significantly influences the formation of polite and religious communication patterns among students.

The challenge of maintaining politeness in the digital age is a crucial issue that requires special attention in this research. [Spencer-Oatey \(2017\)](#), [Yaqoob \(2024\)](#) identified that social media and digital communication have changed the landscape of politeness in students, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, technology enables students to learn and practice various politeness formulas from various sources. On the other hand, the informality of digital communication can erode sensitivity to traditional politeness norms. This research will explore how students at As'adiyah Islamic University, Sengkang, navigate these challenges while maintaining their religious character.

The specific reason for focusing this research on students at As'adiyah Islamic University, Sengkang, is because this institution has the distinct characteristic of being an Islamic university that still maintains the Islamic boarding school tradition within its educational system. [Holmes \(2019\)](#), [Hastasari et al. \(2022\)](#) identified that students at Islamic boarding school-based higher education institutions exhibit different patterns of politeness than students at public universities, particularly in their use of religiously charged politeness formulas. The Islamic boarding school tradition, which prioritizes ta'dhim (respect) for teachers and others, provides a unique context for the formation of students' religious character through the practice of politeness ([Muttaqin et al., 2024](#)).

The importance of this research lies in the urgency of understanding how linguistic politeness functions as an indicator of students' religious character in the digital era, which is fraught with challenges to traditional values. [Leech \(2020\)](#), [Razzaq \(2023\)](#) emphasized that in the context of globalization and digital communication, linguistic politeness is the last bastion in maintaining the religious and cultural identity of Muslim students. The phenomenon of the degradation of linguistic politeness among students, as noted by [Yule \(2017\)](#), demands an in-depth study of the factors influencing politeness practices within religious academic communities.

This research's contribution to the development of knowledge encompasses several significant aspects. First, it fills a gap in the literature on the pragmatics of politeness in the context of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. [Searle \(2021\)](#) identified the lack of comprehensive research on Muslim students' linguistic politeness that integrates sociological, anthropological, and theological perspectives. Second, this research contributes to the development of politeness theory contextualized to Islamic culture and religion, as suggested by [Austin \(2019\)](#) in his study of speech acts in religious communication.

The novelty of this research lies in the phenomenological approach used to explore students' lived experiences in practicing politeness as an expression of religious character. [Grice \(2018\)](#) stated that a phenomenological approach in the study of the pragmatics of politeness can uncover experiential dimensions untouched by quantitative or structural linguistic approaches. This research also presents a new perspective on how Islamic higher education institutions can play a role in character formation through fostering politeness, consistent with [Thomas's \(2020\)](#) findings on the role of the academic environment in character building.

The expected outcomes of this research include the development of a theoretical model on the relationship between politeness and students' religious character. [Levinson \(2019\)](#) underscored the importance of developing a theoretical model that can be applied in the context of character education in Islamic higher education. Furthermore, this research is expected to generate practical recommendations for the development of curricula and character development programs for students based on politeness, in line with the holistic vision of Islamic education as proposed by [Coulmas \(2016\)](#), [Chanifah et al. \(2021\)](#).

This research is also expected to contribute to the development of an instrument for evaluating students' religious character through indicators of politeness. [Van Dijk \(2017\)](#), [Faiz et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasized that politeness in language can be a valid indicator for measuring the level of internalization of religious values in students. Therefore, the results of this study can serve as a reference for other Islamic higher education institutions in developing a comprehensive and objective student character evaluation system.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore students lived experiences in practicing politeness as a reflection of religious character. Creswell (2022) emphasized that a phenomenological approach is highly appropriate for understanding the subjective and experiential meanings of complex social practices such as politeness. The phenomenological design allows researchers to explore in depth how students experience, understand, and interpret politeness in the context of their academic and spiritual lives. This approach was chosen because it can reveal hidden dimensions of the relationship between politeness and religious character that cannot be accessed through quantitative approaches or superficial observations. The qualitative approach with a phenomenological design is presented in Figure 1 ([Osborne et al., 2022](#)).

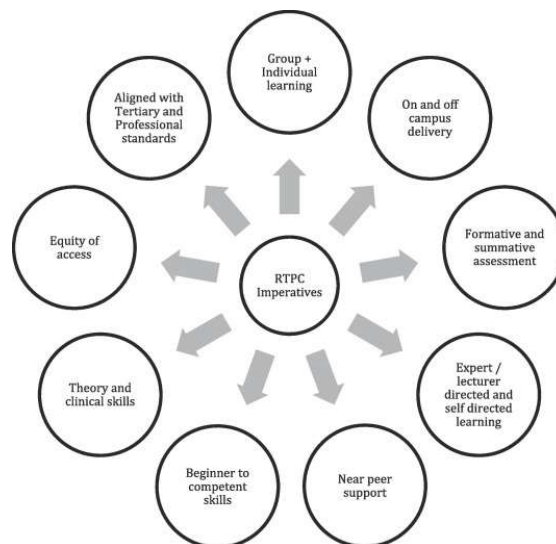


Figure 1. Qualitative Approach with Phenomenological Design

The research participants consisted of 40 students at As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University, selected using purposive sampling techniques with specific criteria. Van Manen (2018) suggests that in phenomenological research, participant selection should be based on the relevance of their experiences to the phenomenon being studied. The participant criteria included: active students in semesters 3-8 from various faculties, having diverse communicative interaction experiences on campus, and demonstrating a commitment to Islamic values through participation in religious activities. The diversity of faculty backgrounds and semester levels was intended to gain a comprehensive perspective on the practice of politeness in various academic contexts.

The data collection technique used triangulation methods, consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of students' written communication documents. Smith and Osborn (2019) emphasize that triangulation in phenomenological research enhances the credibility and depth of understanding of participants' experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their experiences freely and naturally. Participant observation was conducted in various communicative settings on campus, such as classrooms, the campus mosque, and informal areas. Document analysis includes students' written communications on social media, academic assignments, and formal correspondence with university lecturers and staff.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Politeness Patterns in Academic Interactions

The research results show that students at As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University exhibit distinctive patterns of politeness in academic interactions, reflecting the integration of Islamic values with formal communication ethics. In communicating with lecturers, students consistently use politeness formulas such as "Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh" as an opening, followed using respectful pronouns "Sir" or "Madam" and appropriate academic titles. The use of formal diction and complete sentence structures demonstrates students' awareness of academic and spiritual hierarchies within Islamic tradition.

Positive politeness strategies emerge using expressions of appreciation such as "*I apologize for disturbing your time, Sir/Madam,*" "*Thank you for your guidance,*" and "*Barakallahu fiikum,*" reflecting the respectful attitude inherent in Islamic boarding school traditions. Students also demonstrate negative politeness by avoiding direct statements that could be considered impolite, such as using "*I beg your permission to ask*" before asking a question or "*Excuse me, may I ask for an explanation*" when seeking clarification. This pattern is consistent in both oral and written communication, indicating a deep internalization of religious academic politeness norms.

In the context of classroom discussions, students demonstrate politeness through the use of hedging devices such as "*according to my understanding,*" "*perhaps,*" or "*as far as I know*" to convey opinions without appearing domineering or claiming absolute truth. This phenomenon reflects the principle of tawadhu' (humility) in Islamic

teachings, which teaches the importance of expressing opinions politely and being open to correction. Students also acknowledge the opinions of their discussion partners with phrases such as "*I agree with you, brother/sister*" or "*that's an interesting point from our friend*" before offering additional or rebuttals.

Variations in politeness are also evident in the use of Indonesian interspersed with religious Arabic terms, such as "*insyaAllah*," "*wallahu a'lam*," and "*fi sabilillah*," demonstrating the integration of religious identity into academic communication practices. This use of code-switching is not arbitrary, but rather appropriate to specific contexts and communicative functions, such as using "*wallahu a'lam*" (*God knows best*) to end an interpretive explanation or "*insyaAllah*" (*God willing*) to express commitment to a task or promise.

Prosodic and paralinguistic aspects also demonstrate unique politeness characteristics, with students using softer intonation and controlled volume when speaking with lecturers or in formal forums. A slower speech rate and appropriate pauses reflect careful consideration of each word, in accordance with the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) about the importance of careful speech.

These findings indicate that students' linguistic politeness in academic interactions is not simply an application of formal communication rules, but rather a manifestation of religious character internalized through an understanding of the etiquette of seeking knowledge in Islam. This politeness pattern demonstrates students' spiritual maturity in integrating Islamic values with the demands of modern academic communication (Mujahid, 2021; Santoso, 2024).

Manifestation of Religious Character in Interpersonal Communication

Students' interpersonal communication outside of formal academic contexts demonstrates a more natural and spontaneous manifestation of religious character, while still maintaining elements of politeness that reflect the internalization of Islamic values. In interactions with fellow students, the use of the greeting "*assalamu'alaikum*" remains consistent, both in person and through digital media, demonstrating that religious politeness has become an integral part of their communicative identity. A complete response of "*wa'alaikumussalam warahmatullahi wabarakatuh*" also indicates an understanding of Islamic etiquette in responding to greetings.

Politeness strategies in students' interpersonal communication demonstrate a balance between emotional closeness (solidarity) and respect, with students using familiar terms such as "*akhi*" (*my brother*) and "*ukhti*" (*my sister*), reflecting the concept of Islamic brotherhood. The use of these religious kinship terms creates a warm yet polite communication atmosphere, contrasting with the more informal and individualistic communication patterns of students in secular institutions. This phenomenon demonstrates how religious character shapes distinctive social relationship patterns among Muslim students.

In situations of conflict or disagreement, students demonstrate polite language that reflects religious character through the use of diplomatic strategies such as "*excuse me, I may differ*," "*perhaps there's another perspective we need to consider*," or "*let's*

discuss this calmly." Using the phrase "astaghfirullah" when realizing a verbal error or "sorry, I was wrong" demonstrates internalization of the values of repentance and self-reflection taught in Islam. Students' ability to acknowledge mistakes and sincerely apologize reflects spiritual maturity and good religious character.

Communication in the context of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) displays characteristics of politeness that reflect the Islamic value of ta'awun (mutual assistance). Students use phrases such as *"let's help together," "jazakallahu khairan for your help,"* or *"barakallahu fiika" to express gratitude and foster a collaborative spirit.* The use of short prayers such as *"may Allah make it easy" or "bismillah, here we go"* to begin a joint activity demonstrates the integration of spirituality into everyday social activities.

Sensitivity to the feelings and circumstances of others also manifests religious character in students' interpersonal communication (Sahertian et al., 2021; Negara et al., 2024). The use of empathetic expressions such as *"Innalillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un"* in situations of grief, *"Alhamdulillah rabbil 'alamiin"* in response to good news, or *"La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah"* in the face of difficulties demonstrates students' ability to provide spiritual support through communication. This politeness in the form of emotional support reflects an understanding of the function of communication as a means of da'wah (preaching) and fostering brotherhood.

The use of humor and jokes in interpersonal communication also demonstrates students' religious character by avoiding humor that is offensive, demeaning, or contains elements that conflict with Islamic values. Students tend to use humor that is positive, educational, and does not harm others, in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad's guidance on the etiquette of joking. The ability to create a pleasant yet polite and dignified communication atmosphere demonstrates maturity in integrating religious character with students' natural social needs (Abubakar, 2024; Firdaus & Suwendi, 2025).

Factors Shaping Politeness in Religious Language

An in-depth analysis of the factors shaping students' religious language politeness reveals the significant role of the campus environment as a communicative ecosystem conducive to the development of religious character. The religious atmosphere created through routine activities such as congregational prayer, religious studies, and Islamic boarding school traditions provides a natural context for students to practice politeness in accordance with Islamic values. The presence of the mosque, as the center of campus spiritual and social activities, serves as a laboratory of communication where students observe and imitate the polite communication patterns of their religious teachers, lecturers, and seniors.

The role model of lecturers and educational staff in shaping students' language politeness cannot be ignored, as the consistent use of politeness by educators creates a strong modeling effect. Students tend to adopt the communication patterns of their lecturers, especially those they respect spiritually and intellectually. This phenomenon reflects the concept of ittiba' (following) in Islamic educational tradition, where students learn not only from the material taught but also from the character and behavior of the

teacher. Personal interactions between lecturers and students outside of class, such as academic guidance or spiritual consultations, are crucial for the internalization of politeness patterns.

The strong Islamic boarding school tradition at As'adiyah Sengkang Islamic University contributes uniquely to the development of students' linguistic politeness through a value system that prioritizes respect for knowledge and religious scholars. The "*ngaji*" (Quran recitation) culture, which focuses not only on the transfer of knowledge but also on the development of morals, creates a communicative setting where linguistic politeness becomes an integral part of the learning process. Students are accustomed to typical pesantren politeness formulas such as "*I ask permission to ask the kyai,*" "*Barakallahu fikum for the knowledge that has been given,*" or "*Astaghfirullah if there is any misunderstanding,*" which are then internalized in their daily communication.

Peer group influence also plays a significant role in the development of students' religious linguistic politeness, where a system of positive social pressure encourages individuals to maintain good communication standards. Students who are members of religious communities such as da'wah organizations, tahfidz groups, or Islamic study clubs demonstrate more consistent levels of linguistic politeness than those who are less active in religious activities. This peer reinforcement phenomenon creates a positive cycle where linguistic politeness becomes a social norm that is maintained and promoted by the student community itself (Rahmawati & Utomo, 2024).

Family background and previous education are also determining factors in the development of students' religious language politeness. Students from religious families or alumni of Islamic boarding schools demonstrate a stronger foundation in the practice of politeness, while students from secular backgrounds experience a more gradual adaptation process. The process of religious socialization within the family, including the habit of using greetings, praying before meals, and using religious terms in everyday communication, provides a basic vocabulary and patterns that later develop in academic contexts.

Media and information technology have an ambivalent influence on the development of students' religious language politeness (Wardani & Shodiq, 2025; Siswanto et al., 2025). On the one hand, access to religious content through social media, Islamic podcasts, and Islamic learning apps enriches students' religious communication skills. On the other hand, exposure to informal and sometimes crude communication patterns on social media can erode sensitivity to traditional language politeness. Students who are proficient in digital literacy demonstrate the ability to adapt religious language politeness to digital platforms without losing its spiritual essence, such as using appropriate emoticons, choosing appropriate posting times, and avoiding controversial or offensive content.

Challenges and Strategies for Maintaining Politeness in the Digital Era

The digital era presents complex challenges for students in maintaining politeness in religious language (Sugianto, 2024). The informal, fast-paced, and multitasking nature of digital communication has the potential to shift traditional, more reflective and

careful communication patterns. The phenomenon of digital disinhibition, where individuals tend to have more freedom and less control in online communication, poses a threat to the consistency of students' politeness practices. The speed of responding to messages, character limitations on certain platforms, and the inherent informality of digital communication often lead students to forget the politeness formulas they typically use in face-to-face communication.

Specific challenges arise in the use of social media, where students must navigate the desire for authentic self-expression with the maintenance of religious character in public communication. Pressure to go viral, gain likes, or follow popular communication trends often conflicts with the principles of politeness in religious language, which prioritize caution, simplicity, and avoiding *riya'* (showing off). Students face dilemmas in choosing what content to share, what language to use, and how to respond to comments or criticism from netizens who may disagree with their religious perspectives.

The adaptive strategies developed by students to maintain polite language in the digital age demonstrate creativity in integrating traditional values with modern technology (Cladis, 2020; Selfa-Sastre et al., 2022). The use of religious disclaimers such as "*Allaah knows best*" in interpretive posts, "*Please correct me if I'm wrong*" when sharing religious knowledge, or "*Hopefully this is useful*" when sharing educational content demonstrates an awareness of moral responsibility in digital communication. Students also developed distinctive digital etiquette, such as using appropriate emojis to replace facial expressions, pausing before responding to sensitive messages, and avoiding potentially inflammatory discussions.

Implementing time management in digital communication is also a crucial strategy, as students allocate specific time for digital communication, allowing them to be more thoughtful and careful in their speech. The practice of "*pause before posting*" or "*think before sharing*" has become a cultivated habit to maintain a consistent religious character in the digital world. Students also developed self-monitoring mechanisms such as rereading messages before sending, considering the impact of each post, and periodically reviewing their digital footprint.

The use of technology to strengthen polite religious language also demonstrates student innovation in using reminder apps for *dhikr* (remembrance) and prayer (Paradisa et al., 2025), following Islamic preaching accounts that exemplify polite communication, and joining well-moderated religious discussion groups. The use of scheduling features for posts allows students to prepare more mature content that aligns with religious values. Collaborating in creating educational religious content through digital platforms also provides a means to practice polite language while preaching (Mannerfelt, 2022; Zhang, 2025).

The phenomenon of digital detox, which some students periodically engage in, demonstrates an awareness of the need for balance between digital and spiritual life. The practice of fasting from social media, especially during Ramadan or special days, provides an opportunity for reflection and resetting their digital communication patterns. This strategy helps students return to essential values in communication and develop a deeper appreciation for traditional polite language that is more personal and meaningful.

The digital era presents both challenges and opportunities for students in maintaining religious politeness, as they develop adaptive strategies to integrate traditional values with modern technology. Students' ability to maintain consistency in politeness practices across communication platforms demonstrates a deep level of internalization of religious character. This research contributes to the development of a pragmatic theory of politeness in the context of Islamic higher education and provides practical insights for developing student character development programs. Recommendations for further research include the development of a politeness-based religious character evaluation instrument and a comparative study with other Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the politeness of Indonesian language among students at As'adiyah Islamic University in Sengkang is a concrete manifestation of religious character internalized through socialization within an Islamic higher education environment. The politeness patterns demonstrated by students include the use of religious politeness formulas, communication strategies that respect socio-spiritual hierarchies, and the integration of Islamic values into daily communication practices. Factors shaping politeness include the religious campus atmosphere, the role models of lecturers, Islamic boarding school traditions, peer group influence, and a religious-minded family background. These findings confirm that politeness is not merely a matter of communication ethics but a reflection of students' spiritual maturity and religious character, which can be observed and measured through their communicative practices.

As a suggestion, the results of this study can provide recommendations for educators and students regarding the importance of implementing politeness in Indonesian as a reflection of religious character. This research can help improve the quality of education in higher education by emphasizing the importance of religious character and politeness in Indonesia. Further research can be conducted to develop more effective and contextual methods for learning religious character by integrating politeness into Indonesian. Furthermore, further research can be conducted to develop a more effective religious character measurement tool to measure the level of religious character in students.

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