

ADDRESS SYSTEMS AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN BATU BARA MALAY SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Received: 2025-05-03

Accepted: 2025-05-14

Published: 2025-05-28

Abstract

Language is more than a communication tool; it embodies cultural identity, social hierarchy, and shared values. In the Batu Bara Malay community, address systems function as structured linguistic expressions of age, rank, kinship, and familiarity, with respect and politeness being integral to interpersonal interactions—especially in addressing elders or individuals of higher status. However, the advent of globalization and social media has introduced new modes of communication among the younger generation, creating tension between traditional norms and emerging language practices. This study investigates the address systems and politeness strategies in the Batu Bara Malay community, focusing on how these are used and transformed in social interaction. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and linguistic ethnography, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving native speakers across varying ages and social strata. The findings highlight the complex variety of address terms and politeness strategies that reflect deep-rooted cultural values and social order. Despite generational shifts, the community continues to uphold linguistic traditions as a means of preserving cultural identity and maintaining social cohesion.

Keywords: *address system; Batu Bara Malay; cultural values; linguistic ethnography; politeness techniques*

1. Introduction

Human communication encompasses both verbal and nonverbal dimensions. According to Gordon and Druckman (2025), nonverbal communication is best understood within its social and cultural context, underscoring how deeply language is influenced by cultural norms—whether spoken or expressed through gestures, tone, or body movement. In the Batu Bara Malay community, these norms are reflected in verbal strategies such as indirect speech and respectful forms of address, often accompanied by culturally grounded nonverbal cues. Together, these modes of expression reinforce the role of language as both a communicative instrument and a marker of cultural identity.

Batu Bara Malay holds a significant place in Indonesia's rich linguistic and cultural heritage (Efrizah, 2023). Beyond its phonological and structural features, this language functions as a repository of local values and social codes. Notably, the systems

of address and politeness strategies reflect a deeply ingrained respect for age, kinship, and social hierarchy. These communicative practices are not only linguistic in function but are also key mechanisms for maintaining social harmony and cultural continuity.

In everyday interaction, the Batu Bara Malay community employs a nuanced address system grounded in relationships based on age, social rank, familial ties, and levels of familiarity. This is evident in how individuals address elders, respected figures, and those with close emotional connections. The use of specific terms reflects both reverence and interpersonal sensitivity. However, with the rapid pace of technological development and the pervasiveness of social media, traditional forms of address and politeness are increasingly challenged. As Panjaitan and Patria (2023) argue, digital communication has had a profound impact on language use, especially among younger generations, with broader implications for linguistic preservation and the negotiation of cultural identity.

This generational tension reveals a critical intersection between tradition and transformation, as more casual and flexible styles of communication challenge established norms. The shift highlights not only a linguistic evolution but also a sociocultural negotiation wherein younger speakers reinterpret politeness and hierarchy. In a culturally rich and hierarchical society such as that of the Batu Bara Malays, these changes prompt concern over the potential erosion of long-standing values expressed through language.

Given these dynamics, there is an urgent need to study and document the address systems and politeness strategies of the Batu Bara Malay community. Such efforts contribute to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and deepening scholarly understanding of how language evolves in tandem with social change.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the forms and functions of the address system used in social interactions within the Batu Bara Malay community?
2. What politeness strategies are employed in Batu Bara Malay speech practices?
3. How do generational and technological changes influence traditional address systems and politeness norms in this community?

2. Literature Review

The proverb "language reflects a nation" conveys that language mirrors personal and cultural identity, encompassing an individual's character, cognitive patterns, behavioral habits, and intellectual capacity (Rosida, 2024). This notion is strongly reflected in the sociolinguistic practices of Batu Bara Malay community, particularly in their systems of address and politeness strategies. These forms of linguistic expression do not merely facilitate communication but serve as markers of social hierarchy, familial ties, and respect for cultural values. Through specific address terms and polite utterances, speakers embody and reinforce social norms, thereby illustrating how language functions as a reflection of collective identity, as Rosida (2024) suggests. Thus, using address forms and politeness strategies in Batu Bara Malay can be understood as a linguistic representation of the community's cultural worldview and interpersonal ethics.

In line with Efrizah's (2023) findings on the role of accents in Batu Bara Malay communication, which highlight the urgency of preserving the region's linguistic and cultural heritage, this study expands the focus to other sociolinguistic elements, such as

address forms and politeness strategies. These aspects are vital in maintaining Batu Bara Malay community's cultural identity and social harmony.

The study of address systems and politeness strategies in Batu Bara Malay community is best examined through a multidisciplinary theoretical framework. At the core is the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which introduces the concept of “face” as a fundamental social need that individuals aim to preserve during communication. Their distinction between positive and negative face and the associated politeness strategies provides a valuable lens to understand how speakers in Batu Bara Malay community mitigate potential threats to social harmony through culturally appropriate language use. These strategies are not used arbitrarily but are embedded in a broader sociolinguistic structure. Azizova (2025) states that politeness is a universal element of human communication critical to maintaining social harmony and mutual respect. This principle resonates in the culturally informed interactions within Batu Bara Malay society. As Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) discussed, sociolinguistics explores how language reflects and shapes social structures such as age, status, and kinship. Within the Batu Bara context, specific addresses and polite expressions align with deeply rooted social hierarchies, reinforcing respect, seniority, and familial roles. This sociolinguistic behavior demonstrates that language in this community is more than a communication tool; it symbolizes cultural identity and social cohesion.

Cultural pragmatics further enriches this understanding by explaining how communicative acts are influenced by culturally constructed meanings and social expectations (Alexander, 2004). Batu Bara Malay people do not merely greet or address each other for functional purposes; their linguistic behavior carries symbolic meanings that reflect collective norms, values, and shared history. These speech practices are shaped by implicit cultural scripts, which determine appropriate conduct across various social contexts.

Finally, linguistic anthropology provides a holistic view of how language functions as a component of cultural behavior and identity formation. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004) emphasize, language is instrumental in constructing social identity and transmitting cultural values across generations. In Batu Bara Malay community, the system of address and politeness strategies serves as a cultural mechanism through which societal norms are upheld and the continuity of tradition is ensured.

Together, these theoretical perspectives show that the address systems and politeness strategies in Batu Bara Malay are not merely linguistic phenomena but are also key to understanding the community's cultural logic, social structure, and identity.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive linguistic ethnography method to explain the linguistic behaviors of Batu Bara Malay community, particularly the address system and politeness methods. This approach was chosen because it allows academics to comprehend language within the socio-cultural context of the community in question. According to Yahya, Arif, and Awan (2023), qualitative research in applied linguistics seeks a thorough knowledge of linguistic phenomena within a sociocultural framework. Linguistic ethnography, a popular approach in this discipline, combines ethnographic observation with detailed language analysis to reveal how communication works in everyday interactions. This concept applies primarily to investigating address systems and politeness techniques in Batu Bara Malay society,

where language is inextricably linked to cultural norms, social hierarchy, and interpersonal interactions. Linguistic ethnography allows researchers to analyze how specific address and politeness expressions are contextually ingrained in community members' experiences, revealing how language reflects and maintains traditional values and social harmony. This study was carried out at a village in Batu Bara, especially Batu Bara Malay community in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra. Traditional authorities, community leaders, youth, and community members of diverse ages and socioeconomic backgrounds participated in the study. The data collection method utilized was the first to use in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with key informants familiar with the community's address structure and politeness customs. Then, perform participatory observation. In this scenario, researchers interact directly with the community to monitor the use of address and politeness practices in real-world situations. Following that, documentation was completed by recording and collecting instances of using the address and polite language in various situations within the community. Data was analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) interactive analytic model. This model has three major components. The first step is data reduction. The data reduction process entails sorting, simplifying, and translating raw data into a more organized format based on the research topic. The second step is to present data. The reduced data is organized into descriptive narrative forms, tables, and thematic divisions to aid comprehension and analysis. The third step is verification. The third phase understands language patterns and cultural values repeatedly shown in the data and confirming the findings to assure their authenticity. The triangulation methodology of sources and techniques is utilized to ensure data authenticity, which entails comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation from many informants.

4. Discussion

4.1 Address in Batu Bara Malay Community

The address system in the Batu Bara Malay community serves as a linguistic reflection of deeply held social and cultural values. Far beyond mere labels, these forms of address are embedded in complex layers of age hierarchy, kinship networks, and customary social roles. Individuals are addressed differently based on their position within the community, signaling both respect and relational proximity. Age-based terms such as *Mak Long*, *Tok*, *Awak*, *Kau*, *Abang*, and *Adik* function not only to distinguish age categories but also to articulate deference, familiarity, or endearment. For instance, *Mak Long* (aunt) or *Tok* (grandparent) are terms typically reserved for elders and convey a socially expected reverence, while *Awak* and *Kau* denote more informal interactions, with *Kau* being highly context-sensitive and potentially impolite if misused with superiors.

In the domain of kinship, forms such as *Andak*, *Iyong*, *Anga*, *Alang*, *Ido*, *Ucu*, and *Pak Uteh* signal blood relations, birth order, or clan affiliations. These terms are employed not only to identify individuals but also to maintain familial intimacy and uphold the traditional structure of lineage-based respect. The careful use of such terms reinforces emotional closeness while preserving inherited modes of social regulation within families and extended kin groups.

Meanwhile, in formal and customary contexts, titles like *Datuk*, *Tuan*, and *Yang Dipertua* are utilized to signify social rank, institutional authority, or ceremonial status. These forms are crucial in maintaining a polite distance and acknowledging the formal

roles individuals hold in religious, governmental, or communal spheres. Such titles function as performative linguistic tools—bestowing legitimacy and respect while organizing interactions according to established protocols.

These address forms collectively illustrate how language not only communicates identity but also constructs and sustains the social order. According to Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), variations in address forms are clear indicators of an underlying social structure, where language acts as a medium through which values such as hierarchy, respect, and belonging are encoded and reproduced. In the Batu Bara Malay context, the deliberate choice of address term is rarely arbitrary; it is a culturally ingrained strategy that aligns with both normative expectations and interpersonal dynamics. The persistence of these address forms in daily life signifies the community's ongoing commitment to preserving tradition while navigating evolving societal frameworks.

4.2 Politeness Strategy in Language

Politeness strategies in the Batu Bara Malay community play a pivotal role in sustaining harmonious interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. These strategies are culturally situated linguistic behaviors that reflect values such as respect, modesty, and deference. In line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which conceptualizes politeness as a means of managing face—the public self-image that individuals strive to maintain—Batu Bara Malay speakers employ a range of linguistic tactics to preserve both positive and negative face. Positive politeness strategies are used to express solidarity and affirm closeness, while negative politeness strategies aim to show respect by minimizing imposition or threat.

In everyday discourse, indirectness is a hallmark of politeness. Speakers frequently avoid direct commands or refusals, instead opting for softened expressions that reduce the risk of face-threatening acts. For instance, phrases like “*Boleh awak bantu...*” (Would you mind helping...) or “*Maaf nak tanyo...*” (Sorry, may I ask...) illustrate how speakers use hedging and modal verbs to frame requests or inquiries in a non-imposing manner. These utterances are carefully crafted to maintain the interlocutor's autonomy and dignity, aligning with the negative politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987).

In addition to indirectness, the Batu Bara Malay community relies heavily on ritualized expressions of politeness that mark the beginning and end of conversational exchanges. Greetings such as *Assalamualaikum*, apologies like *maaf yo*, and expressions of gratitude such as *terimo kasih banyak* are commonly used not only as formalities but as symbolic enactments of cultural values. These expressions reflect the community's emphasis on harmony, humility, and mutual respect. As Alexander (2004) notes in his theory of cultural pragmatics, communicative acts are not merely functional but are shaped by shared cultural expectations and social performance. Within the Batu Bara Malay context, such expressions carry layered meanings that reinforce communal norms of courteous behavior.

Moreover, politeness strategies are context-sensitive and vary depending on the interlocutor's age, status, and relationship to the speaker. For example, the same speech act—such as giving advice or making a request—may be linguistically restructured when addressed to an elder versus a peer. Younger speakers are expected to display deference through tone modulation, respectful address forms, and the use of mitigating

language. This reflects the deep interconnection between politeness and social hierarchy, where linguistic behavior is tailored to uphold community ethics.

Importantly, these strategies are not static; they are actively negotiated within the shifting socio-cultural landscape. As younger generations become more exposed to informal and direct styles of communication through digital platforms, there is an observable tension between traditional politeness norms and contemporary language use. While some youth continue to adopt inherited strategies out of respect or obligation, others may inadvertently deviate, leading to intergenerational misunderstandings or perceptions of rudeness. This dynamic demonstrates the evolving nature of politeness in response to broader sociolinguistic influences, raising questions about how core values are adapted or contested over time.

Thus, politeness strategies in the Batu Bara Malay community serve not only to avoid conflict or offense but also to affirm group membership, enact cultural scripts, and sustain the moral fabric of social life. As Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) affirm, such strategies are integral to sociolinguistic behavior, reflecting how language functions as a tool for negotiating social relationships within particular cultural settings.

4.3 Reflected Cultural Value

The address forms and politeness strategies employed by the Batu Bara Malay community are not merely pragmatic tools of interaction but are also emblematic of deeper cultural values embedded in daily life. These linguistic practices encapsulate key dimensions of the community's worldview, particularly in regard to social hierarchy, harmony, and collective identity.

The first and perhaps most prominent cultural value reflected in these practices is respect for hierarchy and seniority. The consistent use of age-specific and status-sensitive address terms, such as *Datuk* for leaders or *Mak Long* for older female relatives, signifies an entrenched belief in the importance of recognizing and honoring one's social position. This linguistic behavior mirrors a hierarchical worldview where age and rank are central to social organization. As Holmes (2013) and Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) observe, such practices are common in communities where language is not only descriptive but prescriptive—defining appropriate behavior in relation to others.

A second core value is the preservation of social harmony through politeness. The avoidance of direct confrontation, reliance on hedging, and frequent use of apologies and gratitude illustrates the community's collective emphasis on maintaining interpersonal equilibrium. These strategies are not incidental but are governed by implicit cultural scripts that prioritize relational balance and emotional sensitivity. Alexander's (2004) theory of cultural pragmatics helps explain this phenomenon: communicative acts are deeply tied to symbolic cultural meanings, and in Batu Bara Malay society, linguistic politeness becomes a ritual performance of social ethics.

The third value manifested in linguistic practice is communal solidarity. The frequent use of inclusive pronouns such as *kami* (we-exclusive), *kito* (we-inclusive), and *awak* (you) in various social contexts reflects a deep-rooted sense of togetherness and collective responsibility. This linguistic preference not only facilitates cooperation but also reinforces a shared identity. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004) note in their work on linguistic anthropology, language plays a constitutive role in shaping group identity and reproducing cultural norms across generations.

These cultural values, as realized through address systems and politeness strategies, function as a form of cultural continuity—preserving traditional norms amid a changing sociolinguistic landscape. Even as modern communication trends begin to alter linguistic behavior, these values remain embedded in language use, offering insight into the community’s efforts to balance heritage and adaptation.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that the address systems and politeness strategies of the Batu Bara Malay community are intricately tied to the social structures and cultural values that define communal life. The use of address terms is closely aligned with indicators of age, familial hierarchy, and social rank, demonstrating a linguistic reinforcement of social order. Likewise, politeness strategies—marked by indirectness, respectful greetings, and honorific language—function as tools for preserving interpersonal harmony and mutual respect. These practices are informed by, and in turn reinforce, broader cultural values such as reverence for hierarchy, social harmony, and collective identity. Drawing on theoretical insights from Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, sociolinguistic frameworks (Holmes, 2013; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015), cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004), and linguistic anthropology (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), this study underscores the multifunctional nature of language in sustaining social cohesion and transmitting cultural heritage. While modernization and digital communication continue to influence younger generations, potentially challenging traditional norms, the Batu Bara Malay community’s enduring use of address systems and politeness strategies illustrates an active negotiation between continuity and change. These linguistic traditions serve not only as communicative conventions but also as cultural mechanisms for maintaining identity, fostering solidarity, and articulating respect in an evolving world. Therefore, beyond its descriptive scope, this study offers broader implications for cultural preservation efforts, language education policy, and intergenerational dialogue, encouraging further inquiry into how traditional linguistic practices can be meaningfully sustained in contemporary societies.

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