

FELICITY CONDITIONS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING INCOMPETENT DISCOURSE: BRIDGING THE CONCEPTS OF *RUWAIBIDAH* AND *THE DUNNING–KRUGER EFFECT*

Aprili Yanti, Ely Ezir

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
E-Mail: apriyanti@sastra.uisu.ac.id

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Abstract

This study investigates how felicity conditions—a fundamental concept in speech act theory—serve as an analytical framework for understanding incompetent discourse, particularly at the intersection of *Ruwaibidah* (a prophetic term referring to unqualified individuals who speak on public affairs) and the Dunning–Kruger Effect (a psychological bias in which people with limited ability overestimate their competence). By integrating insights from Islamic ethics, pragmatics, and cognitive psychology, the research examines how violations of key felicity conditions—sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness—manifest as epistemic and moral failures in public communication. Drawing on case studies from Indonesian political discourse, the study reveals how such violations distort meaning, erode public trust, and contribute to the normalization of incompetent speech. Ultimately, the paper proposes that felicity conditions offer a comprehensive normative lens for evaluating the ethical legitimacy and epistemic integrity of speech acts, fostering a deeper interdisciplinary understanding of responsible discourse and communicative competence within social and political contexts.

Keywords: *Dunning Kruger Effect; felicity condition; Ruwaibidah,*

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it is a reflection of cognition, ethics, and authority. In the Indonesian political context, public statements often reveal how linguistic acts intersect with moral consciousness. As Elbah (2022) notes, the force of an utterance within the broader realm of human action lies in its capacity to accomplish things—words are not passive, but performative. Language thus serves as an instrument of power, persuasion, and social construction. Within the field of pragmatics, speech acts do not merely describe reality but actively shape it. Political and public discourse, in particular, demonstrates how language functions performatively—shaping ideology, influencing perception, and negotiating authority. This dynamic is especially visible in contemporary Indonesia, where the ethical and cognitive dimensions of speech frequently converge.

This study examines three representative cases in Indonesian public discourse: (1) Sri Mulyani's statement on zakat and taxation, (2) Adies Kadir's critique of parliamentary salaries, and (3) Ade Armando's controversial remark that "the voice of God is not Arab." These utterances provide valuable data for exploring how linguistic performance reflects sincerity, legitimacy, and awareness—concepts central to both Austin's speech act theory and Islamic ethical philosophy.

From a pragmatic standpoint, speech acts rely on *felicity conditions*—namely sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and propositional truthfulness (Searle, 1969). When these conditions are violated, an utterance becomes *illocutionarily defective*, producing miscommunication, ethical tension, or public outrage. For instance, Sri Mulyani's analogy between zakat and taxation was criticized for conflating theological and fiscal concepts. Adies Kadir's defense of legislative allowances appeared insensitive to social inequality, while Ade Armando's statement on divine language provoked theological objections rooted in the Islamic principle of *tanzīh* (the transcendence of God).

Beyond pragmatics, these utterances can also be interpreted through the lens of psychology, particularly the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), which describes how individuals with limited expertise often overestimate their understanding of complex issues. Politicians or public intellectuals may unintentionally display this bias when they speak authoritatively outside their domains of competence. The prophetic concept of *Ruwaibidah*—referring to unqualified individuals who speak on public affairs—offers a theological parallel to this cognitive bias, enriching both the ethical and psychological analysis of incompetent discourse.

The concept of *Ruwaibidah* thus provides a moral and theological foundation for understanding the dangers of unqualified speech, while the Dunning–Kruger Effect explains the cognitive mechanisms underlying overconfidence and epistemic failure (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). By applying felicity conditions as an analytical framework, this study bridges these two perspectives to evaluate the appropriateness and legitimacy of speech acts. It argues that sincerity, authority, contextual relevance, and truthfulness are not only linguistic requirements but also ethical imperatives. Integrating theological, psychological, and pragmatic frameworks offers a more comprehensive understanding of epistemic responsibility and communicative ethics.

The problem of unqualified individuals assuming authority in speech and decision-making is hardly new. Islamic tradition has long warned, through the notion of *Ruwaibidah*, against the perils of incompetence masquerading as expertise. Similarly, modern psychology identifies the tendency of the unskilled to exhibit unwarranted confidence. Together, these perspectives expose the social and epistemic dangers posed by misinformation, superficial authority, and the erosion of public trust. Within the framework of felicity conditions, these challenges involve violations of sincerity, authority, and truthfulness in speech acts across various contexts.

Although the Dunning–Kruger Effect has been widely explored in psychology and education (Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Pennycook & Rand, 2017), few studies have connected this cognitive bias with theological constructs such as *Ruwaibidah*. Likewise, while felicity conditions (Searle, 1969) provide a powerful tool for analyzing communicative acts, their application to incompetent discourse remains underdeveloped. This study therefore situates itself at the intersection of theology, psychology, and linguistics to propose a more integrated model for understanding epistemic and ethical competence in communication.

The relevance of this research is heightened by the global proliferation of misinformation, populist rhetoric, and the misuse of authority by unqualified voices. In the digital era, individuals lacking expertise can easily attain visibility through social media, echoing dangers warned of in both prophetic traditions and cognitive studies. By examining *Ruwaibidah* through the lens of the Dunning–Kruger Effect and assessing it via felicity conditions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of epistemic incompetence and the moral criteria for legitimate communication. Integrating linguistic pragmatics, Islamic ethics, and psychological insight, the research investigates the performative, ethical, and cognitive dimensions of public speech. It argues that speech acts—especially those by public figures—must be evaluated not only for communicative efficiency but also for their moral and epistemic integrity.

Public statements made by officials and disseminated through the media serve as a form of governmental communication that should ideally uphold truthfulness and impartiality to maintain public trust and democratic legitimacy. However, the politicization of such communication can undermine these principles and distort its civic function (DePaula, 2025).

Accordingly, this study positions felicity conditions as an analytical bridge between Western pragmatic theory and Islamic ethical discourse. The conditions of sincerity (*ikhhlāṣ*), authority (*amānah*), and truthfulness (*ṣidq*) correspond closely with the Islamic moral framework governing speech. Violations of these principles constitute not only pragmatic infelicities but also ethical transgressions. Through this interdisciplinary synthesis, the study underscores that linguistic competence must coexist with moral consciousness.

Consequently, this research addresses the following questions: How are felicity conditions—specifically sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness—realized in the speech acts of public figures? In what ways do violations of these conditions lead to pragmatic failure, ethical distortion, and diminished communicative credibility? The objectives of the study are to identify the felicity conditions employed in public discourse, to analyze how their violations affect meaning and public perception, and to assess their broader implications for ethical and responsible communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pragmatics and Felicity Conditions

From a linguistic perspective, the urgency of this research lies in the growing misuse of language by individuals who lack the competence to use it responsibly. Language does not merely transmit information—it constructs authority, legitimizes identity, and shapes public perception. When unqualified voices dominate public discourse, rhetorical strategies and lexical choices can become instruments of persuasion that mislead audiences into accepting false expertise. Linguistics, therefore, provides a powerful analytical framework for examining how incompetent speakers employ language to gain legitimacy despite their limited knowledge.

Speech act theory, particularly within the pragmatic tradition, views language as a form of action. As Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) explain, speech acts do not only convey meaning but also *perform* social functions—promising, ordering, advising, or declaring. However, when such acts are carried out by unqualified individuals—such as issuing political judgments or interpreting religious texts without sufficient expertise—the act itself becomes invalid. The form of communication may appear legitimate, but its substance fails ethically and pragmatically.

Performative speech acts, within the framework of dynamic semantics, demonstrate how language both updates meaning and modifies social context. The *locutionary act* expresses a proposition; the *illocutionary act* represents the intended action; and the *perlocutionary act* produces effects on the listener. The success of these acts depends on the fulfillment of *felicity conditions*—the contextual and psychological requirements that make a speech act valid. When these are violated, the act becomes *illocutionarily defective*, meaning that it fails to perform what it claims to do (Austin, 1962).

As Searle (1969) elaborates, felicity conditions encompass four key elements: (1) the *propositional content condition* (the utterance must have meaningful and truthful content), (2) the *preparatory condition* (the speaker must have the authority and context to perform the act), (3) the *sincerity condition* (the speaker must genuinely intend what they say), and (4) the *essential condition* (the act must be recognized as creating a commitment). Violations of any of these render the speech act defective. For instance, when a politician promises social welfare without genuine intention or legitimate authority, the act of “promising” becomes pragmatically and ethically hollow. Similarly, when someone without theological expertise comments on divine matters, the act violates the preparatory and sincerity conditions—an error that resonates with the Islamic concept of *Ruwaibidah*.

Felicity conditions, therefore, define the circumstances that make speech successful and meaningful (Azzahra, 2025). They require sincerity, authority, proper context, and truthfulness (Searle, 1969). In this sense, both *Ruwaibidah* and the Dunning–Kruger Effect exemplify violations of these conditions. Incompetent speakers often lack the recognized authority to speak, overestimate their knowledge, and present false propositions with unwarranted confidence.

Moreover, pragmatic competence depends on the speaker’s cultural and linguistic awareness. When this awareness is lacking, negative pragmatic transfer occurs—an error in appropriating social meaning. Developing *metapragmatic awareness*, or awareness of how language performs actions, enhances communicative appropriateness (Darong, 2024). Pragmatic motivation—the internal drive to communicate truthfully and respectfully—has been shown to improve speech act performance by aligning linguistic choices with social norms such as politeness, cooperation, and truthfulness (Hamzah & Nurdin, 2024).

Felicity conditions have long been used to evaluate the appropriateness of speech acts in linguistics (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), but they have rarely been applied to analyze the intersection of religion, psychology, and ethics. This study fills that gap by synthesizing these perspectives into a unified analytical framework. As Dunning and Kruger (1999) demonstrated, individuals often fail to recognize their own incompetence and therefore overestimate their performance. This cognitive limitation aligns closely with pragmatic failure: the inability to recognize when one’s utterance lacks authority, sincerity, or contextual appropriateness.

In operational terms, felicity conditions can be evaluated across several dimensions: whether the speaker has legitimate authority to perform the act, whether the intent is honest, whether the propositional content is factually or epistemically adequate, and whether the context—such as time, audience, and medium—permits the act. These contextual constraints determine how effectively communication fulfills its pragmatic goals. As Fetzer (2022) argues, participation frameworks, genre, and media influence

the felicity of discourse acts by shaping the conditions under which utterances can be successfully performed or interpreted.

2.2 Cognitive Bias and the Dunning–Kruger Effect

Cognitive dimensions such as intentionality, cooperation, detachment, and intersubjectivity are central to understanding how people perform speech acts. These dimensions influence one's ability to engage effectively in communication and to coordinate meaning with others (Hagemark, 2025). However, individuals are not purely rational communicators. Cognitive biases—systematic patterns of deviation from logical reasoning—often distort perception and judgment, leading people to construct subjective versions of reality (Kahneman, 2011).

Among these, the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) is particularly relevant. It describes how individuals with limited competence tend to overestimate their knowledge or skills, while highly competent individuals tend to underestimate their abilities (Yang, 2024). In public discourse, this bias becomes visible when speakers express confidence on complex issues they barely understand. Their rhetorical assurance masks epistemic inadequacy, resulting in the spread of misinformation and the erosion of intellectual credibility.

The Dunning–Kruger Effect offers a psychological explanation for why incompetence often coincides with overconfidence. Kruger and Dunning's (1999) foundational study revealed that people with lower competence not only perform poorly but also lack the metacognitive ability to recognize their limitations. Consequently, they assume they perform well. Later research confirmed this pattern across various fields, including medicine, education, and politics (Coutinho & Thomas, 2021).

The effect involves two distinct dimensions: *unknown unknowns* (ignorance of one's ignorance, leading to overestimation) and *unknown knowns* (underestimation of one's competence). The unskilled face a double challenge—they make more errors and lack awareness of those errors—while the skilled tend to assume that others share their level of understanding, a misjudgment known as the *false consensus effect* (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Together, these mechanisms explain why incompetent discourse often appears with great confidence and persuasive energy, yet lacks epistemic substance.

2.3 Theological Parallels: *Ruwaibidah* in Hadith Studies

Islamic scholarship has long emphasized that authority in speech and governance should rest with those possessing competence and knowledge. The concept of *Ruwaibidah*, as narrated in prophetic traditions, symbolizes societal decline when the ignorant assume control of public affairs. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (1989) discusses the *hadith* on *Ruwaibidah* primarily in its moral and social implications, noting that it warns against the confusion of authority and ignorance. Although his analysis does not explicitly engage with psychology, the underlying concern aligns with modern understandings of cognitive bias—systematic and predictable deviations from rational judgment (Kahneman, 2011). Such biases are influenced by emotional states, framing effects, and environmental pressures (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), all of which can lead to overconfidence and misjudgment (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Al-Nawawi (1996) similarly interprets *Ruwaibidah* as a warning against moral and intellectual irresponsibility, emphasizing the ethical dangers of allowing unqualified individuals to dominate public discourse. His interpretation highlights the relevance of competence in leadership, governance, and community life—concerns that mirror the

Dunning–Kruger finding that unskilled individuals tend to overestimate their competence.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the speech of *Ruwaibidah* fails to meet the felicity conditions of truthfulness, authority, and appropriateness, leading to illocutionary defectiveness. Theologically, it represents a moral transgression; pragmatically, it exemplifies failed communication. Modern pragmatics and psychology thus provide empirical and theoretical frameworks that complement the theological warning, offering a comprehensive understanding of epistemic incompetence that unites moral, cognitive, and linguistic dimensions.

Taken as a whole, discussions of *Ruwaibidah* in hadith commentary, especially those by Al-Nawawi (1996), serve as a timeless critique of epistemic arrogance and communicative irresponsibility. By juxtaposing this theological perspective with the Dunning–Kruger framework, the present study situates the ancient warning within contemporary cognitive science, demonstrating that the ethical failure of *Ruwaibidah* parallels the psychological mechanisms of overconfidence and ignorance identified by Dunning and Kruger (1999).

3. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design grounded in pragmatic analysis, particularly within the framework of speech act theory as proposed by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). The qualitative approach is suited to the present study because it enables a nuanced exploration of language as social action, focusing on meaning, intention, and communicative ethics rather than on quantifiable patterns. Through this approach, the research examines how felicity conditions—sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness—are realized or violated in public discourse.

3.1 Research Focus and Data Sources

The study focuses on the public utterances of three prominent Indonesian figures: Sri Mulyani (former Minister of Finance), Adies Kadir (legislator), and Ade Armando (politician and independent commissioner of PLN). These figures were selected using purposive sampling because their statements represent influential speech acts that generated public discussion and moral debate. Each case illustrates distinct dimensions of pragmatic and ethical tension in public communication—ranging from fiscal-religious analogies to moral justification and theological commentary.

The data consist of recorded and transcribed public statements, media interviews, and press releases disseminated through credible Indonesian news outlets. These sources were selected to ensure authenticity and public accessibility. Supplementary materials such as news reports, public reactions, and expert commentaries were reviewed to provide contextual background for each utterance.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis is anchored in speech act theory, which interprets language as a form of performative action comprising three dimensions: locutionary (the act of saying something), illocutionary (the act performed through saying), and perlocutionary (the effect achieved on the listener). Within this framework, felicity conditions serve as diagnostic tools for determining whether a speech act is valid, appropriate, and

effective. The study evaluates the extent to which each utterance satisfies or violates these conditions, linking pragmatic performance to ethical and epistemic competence.

In addition, the study draws on cognitive psychology—particularly the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999)—and Islamic ethical concepts such as *Ruwaibidah*, to interpret the relationship between communicative confidence and actual competence. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a richer understanding of how linguistic, moral, and psychological factors intersect in public discourse.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018), which involves three iterative stages:

1. Data Reduction: Relevant utterances were selected and categorized according to Searle’s (1969) four felicity conditions—sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness. Redundant or contextually irrelevant statements were excluded.
2. Data Display: The categorized data were organized into thematic matrices and visual charts to illustrate relationships between types of felicity violations and their public effects (e.g., controversy, misinterpretation, ethical critique).
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpretations were synthesized to construct theoretical insights, connecting pragmatic failure with epistemic and ethical irresponsibility. Verification involved reviewing consistency across cases and revisiting raw data to ensure interpretive accuracy.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study implemented triangulation across three levels:

1. Theoretical triangulation, by integrating frameworks from linguistics, psychology, and Islamic ethics;
2. Data triangulation, through the use of multiple media sources; and
3. Researcher triangulation, involving peer debriefing with linguistic and religious scholars to validate analytical interpretations.

3.4 Coding Process

Each utterance was coded according to key analytic markers—*felicitous act*, *illocutionary defect*, and *ethical implication*. For instance, statements that demonstrated valid authority and sincerity were marked as “felicitous,” while those lacking epistemic adequacy or moral awareness were coded as “defective.” The coding process was iterative and reflexive, allowing emerging themes to shape subsequent analysis. This systematic coding ensured internal consistency and transparency in identifying patterns of competent versus incompetent discourse.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Although this study analyzes statements made by public figures in open media, ethical responsibility remains essential. All data used were drawn from publicly available sources to protect privacy and avoid misrepresentation. Interpretations were made with academic objectivity and respect for differing perspectives. The analysis refrains from personal judgments and focuses on the *speech acts* as linguistic and cognitive phenomena rather than on individuals as moral subjects.

In summary, this methodology integrates linguistic pragmatics, psychological insight, and Islamic ethical reasoning within a qualitative framework to examine how felicity

conditions reveal epistemic competence—or its absence—in public speech. The approach combines rigorous textual analysis with ethical sensitivity, ensuring that findings are both theoretically grounded and socially meaningful.

4. Discussion

Public figures—including government officials, media personalities, and influencers—often make authoritative statements on subjects outside their professional expertise. Although their utterances may appear linguistically convincing, they frequently lack epistemic depth. From a pragmatic standpoint, such speech acts may fulfill the *locutionary* dimension (producing an apparently authoritative statement) and the *illocutionary* function (intending to persuade, justify, or reassure the public). However, they often fail at the *perlocutionary* level, producing unintended consequences such as public confusion, distrust, or misinformation. These instances reflect the intersection of pragmatic failure and ethical irresponsibility in public communication.

4.1 Sri Mulyani: Taxation and Zakat

In one of her public statements, Sri Mulyani, the former Indonesian Minister of Finance, declared:

“In every fortune and wealth you gain, there are other people’s rights. The way those rights are given is through zakat, waqf, or taxes, and taxes are returned to those in need.”

She further elaborated that taxes collected by the state are redistributed through social programs, education, subsidies, and public infrastructure—activities that, in her view, fulfill the ethical and social purpose of justice. Public reactions, however, were divided. Some commended her attempt to harmonize fiscal policy with Islamic values, while others criticized the statement for conflating two fundamentally distinct moral and legal domains: divine obligation (*zakat*) and state-imposed levy (*tax*).

From the perspective of speech act theory, Sri Mulyani’s statement can be interpreted as a *commissive act*—an utterance expressing commitment to a reformative social vision. Yet, from the lens of felicity conditions, the statement risks ethical tension by merging theological and fiscal discourse without appropriate authority or contextual sensitivity. While she possessed institutional authority in economic policy, she lacked the *religious authority* necessary to redefine the theological framework of zakat. This mismatch produces what Austin (1962) termed an *illocutionary defect*: the act is performed, but it fails to accomplish what it purports to do.

Religious scholars responded critically, urging clearer distinctions to prevent theological misunderstanding. They argued that zakat is an *‘ibādah mahḍah*—a form of worship governed by strict jurisprudential rules (*fiqh*)—whereas taxation is a civil obligation instituted by the state. Confusing the two could mislead the public and potentially erode trust in both fiscal and religious systems. Some critics, such as Ubaidillah Amin (as cited in *detik.com*, August 2025), emphasized that zakat and taxation differ not only in purpose and origin but also in the nature of their recipients. Zakat is a divinely mandated duty defined by *niṣāb* (minimum threshold), *ḥawl* (time period), and designated beneficiaries (*mustahiq*), while taxation is a legal construct subject to state policy and secular law.

From the perspective of felicity conditions (Searle, 1969), Sri Mulyani's utterance partially fulfilled the *authority condition*—she spoke as a government official within an institutional context—but failed to satisfy the *sincerity* and *propositional* conditions. The statement disregarded the theological and emotional sensitivity of equating two systems with divergent epistemic and moral foundations. This semantic distortion and contextual insensitivity rendered the utterance pragmatically *infelicitous*, leading to widespread public rejection.

Although Sri Mulyani's intention may have been to emphasize shared ethical principles—such as social justice and redistribution—her analogy blurred the boundaries between spiritual obligation and civic duty. The conflation suggests an overextension of administrative authority into religious discourse, inadvertently aligning with the Dunning–Kruger framework (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), in which individuals overestimate their competence in areas beyond their specialization. While the context of a “Sharia Economy” forum may have encouraged the integration of fiscal and moral narratives, the statement's theological implications exceeded her epistemic domain, risking misinterpretation among both economists and religious scholars.

The controversy surrounding this statement thus reveals a conflict between religious and state discourses. From a pragmatic standpoint, it represents an act that is *institutionally authoritative* yet *semantically defective*. The proposition's failure lies not in linguistic inaccuracy but in its ethical and epistemic imbalance. It underscores how violations of felicity conditions—particularly those of truthfulness and sincerity—can erode the credibility of speech acts and destabilize public trust.

In essence, Sri Mulyani's case exemplifies the broader challenge faced by public figures in navigating interdisciplinary boundaries. The attempt to merge theological symbolism with fiscal rationality, while rhetorically appealing, becomes ethically precarious when the speaker's authority does not encompass both domains. Such cases affirm the need for epistemic humility in public discourse and demonstrate how felicity conditions can serve as a framework for diagnosing communicative competence and ethical integrity in political communication.

4.2. Kadir: Parliamentary Salary and Moral Accountability

In another illustrative case, Adies Kadir, a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives, publicly stated:

“Perhaps because the Minister of Finance felt sorry for the legislative members, the allowances were increased. The basic salary of DPR members has never increased—only the allowances have been adjusted, such as housing allowances, since DPR members no longer occupy official state residences” (Kontan Nasional, 2023).

At first glance, the utterance appears to be an attempt at justification, explaining an administrative decision regarding parliamentary compensation. However, when viewed through the framework of speech act theory, this statement functions as a *representative* and *expressive* act—an effort to express personal opinion and defend institutional decisions before the public. From the standpoint of felicity conditions (Searle, 1969), while Adies Kadir's institutional position grants him the *authority* to comment on internal parliamentary affairs, his utterance fails to fulfill the *appropriateness* and *sincerity* conditions required for communicative legitimacy.

The timing and context of the speech proved problematic. The statement was delivered amidst widespread public dissatisfaction over economic inequality, rising living costs, and concerns about political privilege. Consequently, the utterance was perceived not as transparent communication but as self-serving rationalization. It violated the *contextual appropriateness* condition by disregarding the emotional and social climate in which it was received. Although Kadir may have intended to clarify facts, his phrasing conveyed insensitivity toward the financial struggles of ordinary citizens, creating a dissonance between institutional authority and ethical awareness.

In pragmatic terms, the speech act fulfills the *illocutionary* intention of defending parliamentary policy but produces a negative *perlocutionary* effect—public anger, cynicism, and diminished trust in political elites. This gap between intention and outcome exemplifies what Austin (1962) describes as *infelicity*, where an utterance fails to achieve its intended force because the surrounding conditions undermine its moral and social acceptability.

Moreover, when examined through the psychological lens of the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), the utterance reveals a cognitive distortion common among individuals in positions of authority: the overestimation of one's communicative adequacy. Adies Kadir appeared confident that his reasoning would be persuasive, but the reaction suggests a lack of metacognitive awareness regarding public sentiment—a form of epistemic miscalibration. As Coutinho and Thomas (2021) note, such overconfidence often leads to misjudgment in how messages are framed and perceived.

From an ethical standpoint, Kadir's statement also highlights a form of moral displacement—a situation in which the speaker's focus on institutional justification overshadows empathy and social accountability. His utterance can therefore be seen as *illocutionarily defective* because it prioritizes defense over truth-sharing and fails to engage in cooperative dialogue with the public. The act violates Gricean principles of relevance and sincerity, as the justification lacked acknowledgment of social realities and moral proportion.

Applying felicity conditions as an analytical lens reveals that Kadir's authority as a legislator fulfilled the *preparatory* condition but that the *sincerity* and *appropriateness* conditions were compromised. The utterance was not insincere in a deceptive sense but lacked moral resonance and contextual tact. By neglecting the audience's emotional and ethical expectations, the act became pragmatically hollow, its communicative force weakened by moral dissonance.

This case demonstrates how linguistic performance and ethical perception are intertwined. In public communication, authority alone does not guarantee felicity. A speech act achieves legitimacy only when it aligns institutional truth with social empathy and moral proportion. Adies Kadir's remarks, though institutionally sanctioned, failed the pragmatic test of *felicitous speech* because they disregarded the ethical obligation to communicate with sensitivity to the audience's lived experience.

Ultimately, the controversy surrounding Kadir's comments reinforces the importance of epistemic humility and contextual awareness in political discourse. When speech acts prioritize defense of status over acknowledgment of public hardship, they lose not only pragmatic efficacy but also moral credibility. Within the combined frameworks of felicity conditions, cognitive bias, and Islamic ethics, this case underscores that communicative competence in governance must rest on sincerity,

empathy, and social responsibility—principles that safeguard the moral integrity of public language.

4.3. Ade Armando: the voice of God is not Arab

Another case of epistemic and pragmatic tension appears in the public remarks of Ade Armando, a political figure and social commentator, who stated:

“God is not Arab. Of course, He is not bound by Arab culture or ethnicity. God would be pleased if His verses were recited in Minangkabau style, Ambonese style, hip-hop, or blues.”

Armando’s statement was intended to emphasize that divinity transcends ethnicity and cultural boundaries. His *illocutionary* act can be interpreted as *expressive*—conveying personal belief—and *declarative*, attempting to redefine a theological concept by asserting universality. On a surface level, the utterance advocates inclusivity and diversity within religious expression. However, from a pragmatic and ethical perspective, the speech violated several felicity conditions: it lacked the *authority* condition (as he is not a qualified theologian), breached *contextual appropriateness* by addressing a sensitive doctrinal issue outside his disciplinary scope, and risked *truthfulness* by oversimplifying theological nuance.

Linguistically, the statement challenges the *symbolic authority of sacred language*. In Islamic thought, Arabic is not considered sacred due to ethnicity but because it was divinely chosen as the linguistic vessel of revelation. The Qur’an’s Arabic form is both a communicative and theological medium—its linguistic precision and rhetorical power are intrinsic to its divine message. Classical scholars such as Al-Nawawi (1996) and Watt (1970) emphasize that the Qur’an’s Arabicness (*‘arabiyyah*) is not cultural chauvinism but a manifestation of divine wisdom. Similarly, Izutsu (1964) explains that Qur’anic Arabic evolved into a semantic system capable of expressing universal concepts, transcending its pre-Islamic tribal origins.

From this theological perspective, Ade Armando’s utterance commits a *category error*: it equates the language of revelation with ethnic identity, thereby misconstruing its theological function. His claim, though framed as liberal and pluralistic, neglects centuries of Islamic scholarship that distinguish between divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) and linguistic medium. As a result, his speech act, while rhetorically inclusive, becomes *illocutionarily defective*—performing a theological declaration without the felicity conditions of authority and epistemic grounding.

The *perlocutionary* effects of Armando’s statement were immediate and polarizing. Some audiences interpreted his words as a refreshing assertion of Islam’s universality, resonating with multicultural ideals. Others, particularly religious scholars and conservative communities, condemned the statement as disrespectful and theologically misleading. The controversy demonstrates how cognitive and cultural biases can distort speech acts, especially when speakers overestimate their competence in complex theological discourse—a pattern consistent with the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

Psychologically, Ade Armando’s confidence in making theological assertions without formal training reflects *epistemic overreach*: a misalignment between self-assessed understanding and actual expertise. This bias often leads to communicative arrogance, where rhetorical conviction substitutes for scholarly precision. As Kahneman (2011) notes, such biases are not random but systematic, emerging from intuitive

judgments that bypass reflective reasoning. In this sense, Armando’s statement exemplifies how intellectual overconfidence, when expressed through public speech, becomes both a cognitive and ethical hazard.

From the lens of felicity conditions, the utterance fails the *authority condition*—since theological interpretation traditionally belongs to scholars trained in Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and theology (*‘aqidah*). It also fails the *sincerity condition* if the act was intended more as provocation or ideological critique than as a sincere contribution to religious discourse. Furthermore, the *propositional condition* is compromised because the statement conflates linguistic vehicle with divine essence, resulting in semantic distortion. Collectively, these violations render the speech act pragmatically infelicitous and ethically questionable.

However, Armando’s remark also provides a valuable case for exploring the interplay between cultural modernity and religious authority. In a pluralistic society like Indonesia, public intellectuals often seek to reconcile faith with modern expression. Yet, as this case shows, such efforts must balance intellectual creativity with epistemic humility. Without grounding in appropriate domains of authority, inclusive rhetoric risks becoming *Ruwaibidah*—uninformed speech about public or sacred matters.

In summary, Ade Armando’s statement “God is not Arab” illustrates how an utterance can appear progressive yet remain pragmatically defective when it transgresses the boundaries of expertise and theological propriety. From a linguistic standpoint, it challenges the felicity of religious speech; from a psychological standpoint, it reveals overconfidence characteristic of the Dunning–Kruger Effect; and from an ethical standpoint, it echoes the prophetic warning against *Ruwaibidah*. The controversy surrounding his words underscores the necessity of epistemic awareness, contextual sensitivity, and sincerity in public communication—virtues that sustain both the moral and intellectual integrity of discourse in a plural society.

4.4. Cognitive Bias and Dunning Kruger Effect

The preceding cases—Sri Mulyani’s analogy between *zakat* and taxation, Adies Kadir’s justification of parliamentary salaries, and Ade Armando’s statement on divine language—demonstrate a recurring communicative pattern: confident but incompetent discourse. Each case reveals how individuals occupying positions of authority or public visibility can inadvertently reproduce epistemic errors through speech acts that *appear* persuasive yet fail pragmatic and ethical scrutiny. This phenomenon can be illuminated through the lens of cognitive bias, particularly the Dunning–Kruger Effect.

Cognitive biases are systematic deviations from rational judgment that shape how people perceive, interpret, and respond to information. Rather than reasoning objectively, individuals frequently rely on intuitive heuristics that distort self-assessment and decision-making (Kahneman, 2011). Among these, the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) captures a paradox of modern communication: the less a person knows, the more confidently they may speak. This bias arises because the same cognitive limitations that lead to poor performance also hinder self-awareness of that inadequacy.

In Sri Mulyani’s case, her attempt to align taxation with *zakat* reflected technocratic reductionism—a bias in which complex theological obligations are reframed as policy instruments. By translating spiritual duty into fiscal language, she exhibited a cognitive framing bias that privileges administrative logic over religious nuance. This overextension of domain competence illustrates the Dunning–Kruger

pattern: expertise in one field (economics) fostering misplaced confidence in another (theology). The result was a pragmatic failure where institutional authority replaced epistemic legitimacy, violating the felicity conditions of *truthfulness* and *appropriateness*.

Similarly, Adies Kadir's defense of increased legislative allowances displayed what might be termed elite empathy bias—a moral distortion where identification with one's privileged group impairs sensitivity to broader social suffering. His remarks were shaped by an overestimation of public understanding and acceptance, a form of metacognitive blindness consistent with Dunning and Kruger's (1999) findings. Kadir's speech satisfied the *authority* condition but violated the *sincerity* and *contextual appropriateness* conditions, producing an illocutionary defect rooted in ethical dissonance.

In the case of Ade Armando, the Dunning–Kruger mechanism is more explicitly cognitive. His statement, “God is not Arab,” exemplifies epistemic overreach—a cognitive bias in which individuals misjudge the depth of their understanding and make confident assertions outside their area of expertise. Psychologically, such bias combines *confirmation bias* (favoring ideas that align with one's worldview) and *illusory superiority* (believing one's interpretation is more accurate or enlightened than others'). Armando's linguistic creativity became overshadowed by the ethical and epistemic risks of theological simplification, rendering his speech act *infelicitous* under the conditions of *authority* and *truthfulness*.

Across these cases, the Dunning–Kruger Effect functions as an explanatory bridge between *psychological misjudgment* and *pragmatic failure*. The speakers' cognitive biases distort their perception of communicative competence, leading to public statements that breach felicity conditions even when intentions are ostensibly sincere. The resulting discourse—confident yet deficient—exemplifies what this study identifies as epistemic arrogance: the tendency to speak with conviction unsupported by genuine understanding.

From a broader ethical perspective, such discourse aligns with the prophetic concept of *Ruwaibidah*, in which unqualified individuals assume authority over public affairs. Both frameworks—the psychological and the theological—warn against the societal harm caused by uninformed speech presented as authoritative. When amplified by media and digital platforms, this bias not only misleads audiences but also undermines public trust in legitimate expertise.

As Coutinho and Thomas (2021) and Pennycook and Rand (2017) note, overconfidence and miscalibration are particularly dangerous in an era of rapid information exchange, where persuasive language often eclipses verified knowledge. In political and religious contexts, the Dunning–Kruger Effect magnifies the ethical stakes of communication: epistemic incompetence becomes not merely an individual flaw but a public risk.

Thus, analyzing these cases through felicity conditions reveals how cognitive bias transforms into communicative infelicity. Sincerity without truthfulness, authority without competence, and confidence without humility collectively produce defective speech acts—utterances that appear valid in form but fail in epistemic substance. Integrating the insights of cognitive psychology with the moral and pragmatic frameworks of linguistics and Islamic ethics allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why such failures persist.

In essence, the Dunning–Kruger Effect serves as a modern psychological parallel to the theological warning against *Ruwaibidah*. Both underscore the ethical imperative of epistemic humility—the awareness of one’s limits in knowledge and the restraint to speak only within the bounds of competence. In public discourse, this humility becomes a prerequisite for felicity, ensuring that speech acts not only communicate effectively but also uphold integrity, truth, and moral responsibility.

4.5. Theological Parallels: *Ruwaibidah* in Hadith Studies

The phenomenon of unqualified individuals assuming authority in public discourse finds a striking theological parallel in the Islamic concept of *Ruwaibidah*. Rooted in a Prophetic narration, the term refers to those who speak on public matters without knowledge, moral integrity, or legitimate authority. The *hadith* warns that such a condition signals a decline in societal order, where ignorance replaces wisdom and the incompetent govern collective affairs.

Classical scholars, including Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī (1989) and al-Nawawī (1996), interpret the *Ruwaibidah* narration as a moral and social admonition rather than a mere eschatological sign. Ibn Hajar emphasizes that the rise of *Ruwaibidah* reflects a collapse of ethical governance and epistemic discipline, where individuals lacking the proper *‘ilm* (knowledge) and *amānah* (trustworthiness) gain influence. Al-Nawawī further elaborates that this phenomenon corrupts both public reasoning and moral order, as it blurs the line between truth and personal opinion. While these interpretations do not explicitly address modern psychology, they reveal profound concern with the same epistemic failures that contemporary science identifies as cognitive bias.

Cognitive biases, as discussed by Kahneman (2011) and Thaler and Sunstein (2008), are systematic deviations from rationality that lead individuals to overestimate their understanding or moral rightness. The Dunning–Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999) provides a modern psychological framework for this same behavioral pattern. In essence, both concepts—*Ruwaibidah* in theology and the Dunning–Kruger Effect in psychology—describe an inversion of competence: those least equipped to speak are often the most confident and vocal.

The *Ruwaibidah* thus represents not merely intellectual incompetence but also moral irresponsibility. The unqualified speaker’s failure is twofold: an epistemic failure (ignorance of what is true) and an ethical one (arrogance in proclaiming what one does not know). In linguistic terms, their speech acts violate felicity conditions at every level—*authority* (they lack recognized legitimacy), *sincerity* (their intention is not grounded in genuine understanding), *truthfulness* (their propositions lack epistemic adequacy), and *appropriateness* (their context of speech exceeds their domain). Such violations render their utterances *illocutionarily defective*, echoing both Austin’s (1962) account of infelicity and the Islamic view of unethical speech.

As al-Nawawī (1996) explains, the Prophet’s warning against *Ruwaibidah* is not limited to theological discourse but extends to governance, law, and public decision-making—domains in which speech shapes reality. In this sense, the *Ruwaibidah* functions as a moral archetype of epistemic arrogance, endangering both communal wisdom and institutional trust. The *hadith* calls for a restoration of qualified authority (ahl al-‘ilm) and ethical restraint (wara‘) in speech—principles deeply resonant with the felicity conditions of *authority* and *sincerity* in speech act theory.

From a comparative perspective, *Ruwaibidah* offers a theological mirror to the psychological mechanisms underlying the Dunning–Kruger Effect. Both expose how

ignorance, when amplified by overconfidence, leads to communicative and moral corruption. Yet the *Ruwaibidah* concept adds a crucial ethical dimension often absent in cognitive models: it situates epistemic failure within a framework of moral accountability before God and society. Knowledge, in this sense, is not merely cognitive accuracy but a trust (*amānah*) that demands humility and responsibility in its expression.

This theological insight enriches the interdisciplinary framework of the present study. By aligning *Ruwaibidah* with felicity conditions and cognitive psychology, we gain a holistic understanding of incompetent discourse as both a linguistic infelicity and a moral transgression. The unqualified speech act becomes a site where pragmatic theory, ethical philosophy, and theological tradition converge. The *Ruwaibidah* embodies the failure to meet the very standards that ensure meaningful communication: sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness.

In contemporary public discourse—particularly in digital and political arenas—the reemergence of *Ruwaibidah*-like behavior is unmistakable. Social media has democratized speech but also magnified epistemic arrogance, allowing uninformed voices to shape public opinion. The prophetic warning thus finds renewed relevance: the danger of the ignorant speaking in the name of truth remains both timeless and universal.

By revisiting the *Ruwaibidah* through modern analytical frameworks, this research underscores that the ethical integrity of speech is inseparable from epistemic competence. Whether viewed through Islamic moral philosophy or pragmatic linguistics, the solution lies in reclaiming humility as a communicative virtue—recognizing that speech, to be felicitous, must align not only with truth but also with the speaker's rightful domain of authority.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how the intersection of linguistic pragmatics, cognitive psychology, and Islamic ethical thought provides a multidimensional understanding of incompetent discourse in contemporary public communication. Drawing on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the analysis revealed that violations of felicity conditions—specifically *sincerity*, *authority*, *appropriateness*, and *truthfulness*—not only constitute pragmatic infelicities but also reflect deeper epistemic and moral failures.

Through the case studies of Sri Mulyani, Adies Kadir, and Ade Armando, the research demonstrated that speech acts performed outside the speaker's domain of expertise can produce defective or harmful communicative outcomes. Sri Mulyani's conflation of *zakat* and taxation exemplified an overextension of institutional authority into theological discourse, while Adies Kadir's justification of parliamentary allowances exposed a lack of contextual sensitivity and moral resonance. Ade Armando's statement on divine language revealed epistemic overconfidence—a linguistic act performed without theological legitimacy. In each case, the intended illocutionary force—to persuade, inform, or enlighten—was undermined by the failure to meet necessary felicity conditions, resulting in pragmatic breakdowns and public controversy.

These communicative failures can be interpreted as manifestations of the Dunning-Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), in which individuals with limited competence overestimate their understanding and express unwarranted confidence. This cognitive bias not only distorts self-perception but also leads to epistemic arrogance in

public speech. When amplified by media visibility and institutional power, such overconfidence becomes socially consequential, producing discourse that is rhetorically persuasive yet epistemically hollow.

From a theological perspective, this pattern mirrors the Prophetic warning against *Ruwaibidah*—the ignorant who speak on public affairs without qualification. Both frameworks, psychological and theological, converge on a shared ethical insight: speech divorced from knowledge and sincerity endangers both truth and society. The *Ruwaibidah* concept introduces a moral dimension absent in psychological theories—it treats the misuse of speech not only as cognitive error but as a spiritual and ethical failure that disrupts justice, trust, and communal order.

By integrating these perspectives, the study advances felicity conditions as a normative framework for evaluating the legitimacy of public discourse. In this synthesis, *sincerity* corresponds to moral integrity, *authority* to epistemic competence, *appropriateness* to contextual sensitivity, and *truthfulness* to factual and ethical responsibility. Together, they provide an evaluative model for determining when speech is both pragmatically effective and ethically legitimate.

In the broader context of digital communication and populist rhetoric, this framework acquires renewed urgency. The democratization of media has blurred boundaries between expertise and opinion, enabling the *Ruwaibidah* phenomenon to reemerge in modern form—uninformed individuals exerting disproportionate influence through confident but baseless claims. As Kahneman (2011) and Pennycook and Rand (2017) observe, such cognitive distortions flourish in information-saturated environments where confidence often substitutes for competence.

Ultimately, this research affirms that effective communication requires more than linguistic skill; it demands epistemic humility, ethical sincerity, and awareness of one's communicative boundaries. When felicity conditions are upheld, speech acts become vehicles of understanding and trust; when violated, they become instruments of confusion and moral erosion.

The findings thus contribute to three key areas of scholarship:

1. Pragmatics — by extending felicity conditions into the evaluation of ethical and epistemic competence;
2. Cognitive psychology — by linking linguistic infelicity to cognitive bias and self-deception; and
3. Islamic ethics — by demonstrating how the *Ruwaibidah* concept anticipates modern concerns about misinformation and unqualified authority.

In conclusion, the study underscores that the integrity of public discourse depends not only on what is said but on who speaks, why they speak, and how responsibly they speak. Felicity in communication is therefore not merely a linguistic achievement—it is a moral and intellectual discipline. Upholding sincerity, authority, appropriateness, and truthfulness in public speech is essential for safeguarding the epistemic and ethical fabric of society.

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