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Reconceptualizing Politeness Through Toraja Cultural Practices: Toward An Indigenous Pragmatics Perspective

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Abstract

Politeness research has largely relied on universal theoretical perspectives that may not fully account for locally grounded cultural values and communicative norms. This study aims to reconceptualize politeness through Toraja communicative practices from an indigenous pragmatics perspective. Employing a qualitative approach informed by cultural pragmatics and ethnopragmatics, data are collected from social and cultural interactions through observation, naturally occurring conversation recordings, and in-depth interviews. The analysis focuses on linguistic forms, pragmatic strategies, social relations, and cultural values underlying communicative choices. Particular attention is given to locally grounded notions of respect, kinship, solidarity, social hierarchy, and interpersonal harmony. The novelty of this study lies in positioning Toraja culture not merely as a context for applying established politeness theories, but as a source of pragmatic conceptualization. The study is expected to contribute to politeness and cross-cultural pragmatics by offering an indigenous perspective grounded in Toraja communicative practices.

Keywords: *politeness, indigenous pragmatics, cultural pragmatics, ethnopragmatics, Toraja culture*

INTRODUCTION

Politeness constitutes an important area of inquiry in pragmatics because it concerns how speakers establish, maintain, and negotiate social relationships through language. Politeness is determined not only by the linguistic forms employed by speakers but also by contextual factors, interpersonal relationships, social structures, and the cultural values underlying interaction (Kaszynska, 2025), (Trang, 2024). Therefore, politeness should not be understood merely as the use of refined or courteous linguistic expressions, but

rather as a communicative practice that reflects how members of a society construct and maintain social relationships. For several decades, politeness research has been strongly influenced by the concept of face and by theoretical models explaining the strategies speakers employ to manage interpersonal relationships (Pirdehghan, 2024). Subsequent developments in pragmatics have demonstrated that politeness cannot always be determined solely on the basis of particular linguistic forms, since evaluations of politeness are highly dependent on interactional contexts and

community members' interpretations (Duby et al., 2025) Consequently, communicative behavior considered polite in one community may carry different pragmatic meanings in another. This variation highlights the importance of incorporating cultural perspectives into the analysis of politeness. Developments in cross-cultural pragmatics have increasingly emphasized sociocultural background as a fundamental element in the interpretation of pragmatic meaning. Speakers bring cultural knowledge, values, experiences, and assumptions to both the production and interpretation of utterances. Cross-linguistic research has also demonstrated that pragmatic and politeness strategies may exhibit both similarities and differences according to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of speech communities (Jerasa, 2025) Such a perspective creates opportunities to understand politeness not only through established theoretical frameworks but also through locally grounded knowledge systems embedded within particular communities.

The Toraja people of Indonesia constitute a cultural community characterized by rich linguistic traditions and distinctive systems of social and cultural values. The Toraja language functions not merely as a means of communication but also as an important representation of cultural identity and local wisdom (Sapta, Risnawati, Panjaitan, Marisa, & Nisa, 2025) Toraja communicative practices take place within social relationships shaped by kinship, respect, solidarity, social status, age, and customary traditions. Linguistic choices in Toraja communication, therefore, cannot be separated from the sociocultural systems within which interactions occur. Previous studies have demonstrated that traditional Toraja discourse embodies various forms of cultural representation. Research on Singgi' speech, for example, has shown that lexical choices represent the cultural dynamics and attitudes of the Toraja people [5]. Studies of Kada Tominaa have also identified cultural messages associated with Toraja traditions and social life (Krisdyanti, 2024). Other research on Kada To Minaa has revealed values related to politeness, humility, kinship, and social and religious life (Mohamed Sultan & Norazhar, 2022). Furthermore, studies of Rambu Solo' ritual discourse have demonstrated that Toraja cultural practices reflect politeness, tolerance, social concern, and cooperation (Pajarianto, Pribadi, & Galugu, 2023). An ethnopragmatic investigation of Rambu Tuka' has similarly drawn attention to the relationship between speech acts, situational contexts, and cultural meanings in Toraja society (Baan, Girik Allo, & Patak, 2022).

Despite these important contributions to understanding the relationship between language and Toraja culture, there remains considerable scope for research that positions Toraja communicative practices as a basis for reconceptualizing politeness itself. Previous studies have predominantly focused on identifying cultural messages, social values, cultural representations, or forms of speech acts. Consequently, a significant research gap remains in moving beyond the description of Toraja communicative practices toward the formulation of politeness principles grounded in the Toraja cultural knowledge system itself. This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical orientation from applying established politeness theories to Toraja culture toward conceptualizing politeness from within Toraja cultural practices. The novelty of this study lies in positioning Toraja culture not merely as a context in which established pragmatic theories are applied, but as an epistemological resource for understanding how politeness is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted by members of the speech community. This perspective provides a foundation for developing

an indigenous pragmatics approach grounded in the cultural values and communicative practices of the Toraja people. Accordingly, this study aims to identify the forms and strategies of politeness manifested in Toraja communicative practices, examine the cultural values underlying these pragmatic choices, and explain how such practices may provide a basis for reconceptualizing politeness from an indigenous pragmatics perspective. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute not only to a deeper understanding of Toraja communicative practices but also to broader discussions of politeness, cultural pragmatics, and cross-cultural pragmatics by bringing locally grounded indigenous knowledge into contemporary pragmatic scholarship.

IDENTIFY, RESEARCH AND COLLECT IDEA

A. Identifying The Research Problem

Politeness is not a culturally neutral phenomenon. Although influential politeness frameworks have provided important explanations of how speakers manage face and interpersonal relationships (Sudamoto, Handoko, Riyanto, & Arini, 2025), subsequent developments have emphasized that evaluations of politeness are socially and culturally situated (Buzan, O'Dell, & Dezechache, 2024). This suggests that concepts developed within dominant pragmatic traditions cannot automatically be assumed to explain communicative behavior in every cultural community. Recent developments in politeness research have increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding interpersonal meaning within specific sociocultural contexts. Politeness is constructed through participants' expectations, relationships, social identities, and culturally shared interpretations rather than through linguistic forms alone (Fedorenko, Piantadosi, & Gibson, 2024), (Drożdżowicz, 2023) From this perspective, investigating an indigenous community requires attention to the community's own categories of social relationships and culturally meaningful communicative behavior.

This issue is particularly relevant to Toraja society. As indicated in previous studies, Toraja language and traditional discourse encode cultural meanings related to identity, social relationships, ritual practices, kinship, politeness, and local values. However, much of the existing research has focused on identifying linguistic forms, speech acts, cultural messages, and cultural values. Relatively limited attention has been devoted to determining whether these communicative practices reveal locally grounded principles that may expand existing understandings of politeness. The central research problem of this study can therefore be formulated as follows. How is politeness culturally conceptualized and pragmatically realized within Toraja communicative practices, and how can these practices contribute to an indigenous reconceptualization of politeness?

B. Researching The Theoretical And Empirical Context

To address this problem, the study integrates several related areas of pragmatic research.

1. Politeness and Face

Brown and Levinson's model remains one of the most influential frameworks for explaining politeness through face, face-threatening acts, and politeness strategies (Soubki, Choi, & Rambow, 2024). However, subsequent scholarship has questioned the assumption that concepts of face and politeness operate

uniformly across cultures. Politeness has increasingly been approached as a phenomenon whose meaning emerges through interaction and participants' evaluations (de Souza, Gillett, Salifu, & Walshe, 2024). This development is particularly important for the present study because it allows Toraja politeness to be investigated not merely by classifying utterances according to predetermined strategies but by examining how Toraja speakers themselves construct and interpret appropriate communicative behavior.

2. Politeness as Relational Practice

A relational perspective emphasizes that interpersonal meaning is dynamically negotiated during interaction. Locher and Watts argue that politeness needs to be understood within the broader domain of relational work, which includes the ways speakers negotiate interpersonal relationships through communicative behavior (Razenkova, Odinokova, & Ayvazyan, 2018). For Toraja communication, this perspective provides an important foundation because communicative choices may be influenced by kinship relations, age, social position, solidarity, and culturally defined obligations. These factors may determine not only how something is said but also who is entitled to speak, when a particular expression is appropriate, and how an utterance is socially interpreted.

3. Cultural and Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Cross-cultural pragmatics demonstrates that pragmatic meanings and communicative expectations are influenced by culturally shared knowledge (Haga, 2025). Speakers from different cultural backgrounds may employ different strategies to perform similar communicative acts or may interpret the same linguistic behavior differently. Cultural pragmatics therefore provides an important analytical orientation for investigating how Toraja cultural knowledge shapes communicative choices. Rather than treating culture as an external variable, the present study regards culture as constitutive of pragmatic meaning.

4. Ethnopragmatics

Ethnopragmatics provides a particularly relevant framework for examining culturally embedded meanings from the perspective of members of a cultural community. Goddard argues that ethnopragmatic analysis seeks to explain culturally distinctive ways of speaking by drawing upon locally meaningful concepts and cultural understandings (Nurhasanah, Ramadhanti, Utami, & Putri, 2022). This perspective enables the present study to investigate Toraja politeness through cultural concepts that are meaningful within Toraja society itself rather than relying exclusively on externally developed analytical categories. Such an approach is essential for identifying the cultural logic underlying respect, kinship obligations, social hierarchy, solidarity, and interpersonal harmony.

5. Indigenous Pragmatics

An indigenous pragmatics perspective goes further by treating local cultural knowledge as a potential source of theoretical development. Indigenous knowledge systems provide culturally grounded ways of understanding social relationships, appropriate behavior, identity, and communication (Balmer, 2017). In this study, Toraja communicative practices are therefore positioned not merely as empirical data to which existing theories are applied but as epistemological resources capable of informing pragmatic conceptualization. This orientation provides the theoretical

foundation for moving from the description of Toraja politeness toward the reconceptualization of politeness through Toraja cultural knowledge.

C. Research Questions

Based on the identified problem, literature exploration, and collected conceptual ideas, the study proposes the following research questions:

1. How is politeness linguistically and pragmatically realized in Toraja communicative practices?
2. What culturally grounded values and social relationships shape Toraja speakers' perceptions and practices of politeness?
3. How can Toraja cultural practices contribute to reconceptualizing politeness from an indigenous pragmatics perspective?

The first question identifies the linguistic and pragmatic forms, the second investigates the cultural foundations, and the third constitutes the theoretical contribution and novelty of the study.

WRITE DOWN YOUR STUDIES AND FINDINGS

A. Study Focus

This study investigates politeness in Toraja communicative practices from an indigenous pragmatics perspective. Rather than merely applying established politeness theories to Toraja communication, the study examines how politeness is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted through locally grounded cultural values, social relationships, and communicative norms. This orientation is consistent with contemporary approaches to politeness that emphasize the importance of interaction, relational practices, and culturally situated interpretations (Anyichie & Butler, 2023). The study focuses on naturally occurring interactions within Toraja social and cultural contexts. Particular attention is given to linguistic choices associated with respect, kinship, solidarity, social hierarchy, age, and interpersonal harmony. Previous research has demonstrated that pragmatic meaning cannot be separated from culturally shared knowledge and communicative expectations (Boehncke, 2023). Therefore, understanding Toraja politeness requires an examination of both linguistic forms and the cultural knowledge through which those forms are interpreted. Previous studies on Toraja communication provide an important empirical foundation for this investigation. Research on Singgi' speech has demonstrated that lexical choices represent cultural attitudes and social dynamics within Toraja society. Studies of Kada Tominaa have identified cultural messages embedded in traditional discourse. While research on Kada To Minaa has revealed values associated with politeness, humility, kinship, and social life. Studies of Rambu Solo' and Rambu Tuka' have further demonstrated the close relationship between language, ritual practices, social values, and culturally situated pragmatic meanings (Pranowo, 2020).

B. Analytical Findings

The analysis is directed toward identifying culturally meaningful patterns of politeness rather than merely classifying Toraja utterances according to predetermined categories. This position is supported by discursive and relational approaches, which argue that politeness emerges through participants' evaluations and the

negotiation of interpersonal relationships within particular contexts (Martin-Raugh et al., 2020).

1. Politeness and Culturally Meaningful Linguistic Choices

The first analytical dimension concerns how politeness is realized through linguistic choices. Forms of address, lexical selection, indirectness, mitigation, requests, advice, disagreement, refusal, and other speech practices can carry different interpersonal meanings depending on the cultural context in which they occur. Cross-cultural pragmatic research has demonstrated that similar communicative acts may be realized and interpreted differently across cultural communities (Roopnarine, Ong'ayi, & Parella, 2024). In the Toraja context, these linguistic forms need to be interpreted in relation to the speakers' social positions, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, an utterance should not automatically be classified as polite or impolite solely on the basis of its linguistic form. Its pragmatic meaning must be understood within the cultural context of interaction.

2. Respect as a Potential Principle of Toraja Politeness

Respect constitutes an important analytical category in examining Toraja communication. Previous research on Toraja discourse has indicated the presence of cultural values associated with politeness and appropriate social behavior [7], [8]. The present study extends this discussion by investigating whether respect functions as a culturally organizing principle underlying speakers' linguistic choices. Respect may be reflected in communication with older people, customary leaders, family members, and individuals occupying particular social positions. Such communicative behavior may involve appropriate address terms, lexical choices, indirect expressions, and culturally expected ways of managing conversational interaction.

3. Kinship and Relational Politeness

Kinship represents another important dimension of Toraja communicative practices. From a relational perspective, politeness is closely connected to how participants negotiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. In Toraja society, kinship relationships may influence communicative rights, obligations, forms of address, levels of directness, and expectations regarding appropriate speech. Accordingly, politeness can be investigated not merely as an individual strategy for protecting face but also as a relational practice through which speakers maintain culturally significant social bonds.

4. Social Hierarchy and Communicative Appropriateness

Social hierarchy may also influence the realization and interpretation of politeness. Classical politeness theory recognizes social distance and relative power as factors affecting speakers' strategic choices. However, the cultural meanings attached to hierarchy vary across communities. In Toraja society, social position, age, customary roles, and kinship relations may interact in determining communicative appropriateness. Consequently, the same speech act may be expressed differently depending on who speaks, to whom the utterance is addressed, and within what social or cultural context the interaction takes place.

5. Solidarity and Interpersonal Harmony

Another important analytical dimension concerns solidarity and interpersonal harmony. Politeness may function not only as a mechanism for protecting individual face but also as a means of sustaining relationships and maintaining social cohesion.

Relational approaches emphasize that interpersonal communication involves ongoing negotiation of social relationships rather than merely individual face management. This perspective is particularly relevant to Toraja society, where communal relationships and cultural practices may encourage speakers to prioritize social solidarity and harmonious interaction. Indirectness, mitigation, culturally appropriate address forms, and other pragmatic choices may therefore function as resources for maintaining social relationships.

C. Toward Toraja Indigenous Politeness

Ethnopragmatics emphasizes that culturally distinctive ways of speaking should be understood through concepts and meanings that are intelligible within the cultural community itself. This principle provides an important foundation for developing an indigenous account of Toraja politeness. The analytical trajectory proposed in this study can be represented as follows: Toraja Utterances → Linguistic Forms → Pragmatic Functions → Social Relationships → Cultural Values → Toraja Politeness Principles → Indigenous Pragmatics.

This trajectory shifts the analytical direction from simply asking whether Toraja speakers employ established politeness strategies toward examining what Toraja communicative practices reveal about the culturally grounded meaning of politeness. The study therefore proposes that respect, kinship, social positioning, solidarity, and interpersonal harmony should initially be treated as sensitizing analytical concepts rather than predetermined findings. Their relevance must be established through naturally occurring discourse, participant interpretations, and ethnographic evidence.

D. Theoretical Findings And Contribution

The principal theoretical contribution expected from this study concerns the direction through which pragmatic knowledge is constructed. Conventional applications of politeness theory often follow the analytical direction: Established Politeness Theory → Cultural Data → Classification of Politeness Strategies. The present study proposes an alternative bottom-up direction: Toraja Communicative Data → Cultural Interpretation → Locally Grounded Principles → Pragmatic Conceptualization. Such an approach is consistent with ethnopragmatic scholarship that emphasizes culturally grounded explanations of communicative practices [13], [14]. It also responds to broader calls for greater recognition of local and indigenous knowledge in knowledge production. The proposed indigenous pragmatics perspective does not necessarily reject established politeness theories. Instead, it seeks to examine their explanatory boundaries and extend the theoretical understanding of politeness by incorporating concepts emerging from Toraja communicative practices. In this way, Toraja society is positioned not merely as a cultural setting for testing existing theories but as a potential source of pragmatic knowledge. The study ultimately seeks to demonstrate that culturally grounded investigation can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of politeness. If supported by empirical evidence, the resulting conceptualization of Toraja indigenous politeness may enrich discussions in politeness research, ethnopragmatics, cultural pragmatics, and cross-cultural pragmatics while increasing the visibility of indigenous communicative knowledge within international pragmatic scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study proposes a reconceptualization of politeness through Toraja cultural practices by positioning indigenous cultural knowledge as a source of pragmatic understanding. Rather than merely applying established politeness theories to Toraja communication, the study emphasizes the importance of examining politeness through locally grounded meanings, social relationships, and cultural norms. This perspective extends conventional approaches to politeness by recognizing that communicative appropriateness is culturally situated and negotiated within particular social contexts. The study highlights respect, kinship, social hierarchy, solidarity, and interpersonal harmony as key analytical dimensions for understanding Toraja communicative practices. These dimensions provide a basis for investigating how linguistic choices are connected to culturally meaningful social relationships. From an ethnopragmatic perspective, Toraja communicative practices can therefore be approached not merely as data for testing established theories but as potential sources for developing culturally grounded pragmatic concepts.

The main contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical direction from applying politeness theory to Toraja culture toward conceptualizing politeness from within Toraja cultural practices. This bottom-up approach provides a foundation for developing Toraja indigenous politeness as part of a broader indigenous pragmatics perspective. Such a perspective does not reject established politeness theories but seeks to extend their explanatory scope by incorporating culturally specific knowledge and interpretations. Ultimately, the study contributes to politeness research, cultural pragmatics, ethnopragmatics, and cross-cultural pragmatics by bringing Toraja cultural knowledge into broader pragmatic scholarship. Further empirical research based on naturally occurring interactions and community members' interpretations is necessary to validate and refine the proposed principles and to determine how Toraja indigenous politeness may contribute to a more culturally inclusive understanding of human communication.

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