

Politeness in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language: A Sociopragmatic Study

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ABSTRACT — Bengkala Tourism Village, located in the Kubutambahan subdistrict of Buleleng Regency, Bali, is distinguished from other villages by its use of Kolok Bengkala Sign Language (BIKK). This uniqueness has attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding politeness strategies used in interactions between Bengkala residents and visiting local and international tourists. This study employs a qualitative approach by collecting data through recordings of formal and informal interactions, observation, note-taking, documentation, and interviews with experts in Kolok Bengkala language. The primary data consist of verbal elements in the form of Kolok hand signs supported by situational context, as well as non-verbal elements such as facial expressions, body posture, movements, and eye contact between Kolok individuals and non-Kolok residents. Data were analyzed using pragmatic matching, focusing on how signs are understood, responded to, and interpreted by interlocutors within specific contexts. The findings show that politeness in Kolok Bengkala sign language is expressed not through spoken words but through gestures, including hand movements, facial expressions, body language, gaze direction, physical distance, and light physical contact. These elements function to initiate interaction, build closeness, and replace verbal speech. The identified politeness strategies include positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies. This research enriches sociopragmatic studies of non-verbal politeness and provides guidance for local tourism groups in presenting Kolok language as an inclusive educational attraction.

Keywords: *Bengkala; Kolok Sign Language; Politeness; Sociopragmatics*

I. INTRODUCTION

Humans, in their role as social beings, use language as a tool for communication. Language is a system of symbols (sounds or signs) mutually agreed upon by society, arbitrary and conventional in nature, functioning as a medium for social interaction, cooperation, and the expression of thoughts, feelings, and human identity shaped by the social context within the community (Halliday, 1978; Chaer, 2007; Kridalaksana, 1992). Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a cultural identity reflecting the norms, values, and traditions of societal life. It can be a medium for building communication and social interaction that embodies cultural values, customs, norms, and politeness strategies. In other words, social life generally prioritizes politeness as a guideline for interaction. Thus, linguistic politeness becomes a crucial guide in communication. Politeness is a collective agreement within a community in a specific region, manifested in social behavior (Kristianto, 2016). Moreover, politeness is closely tied to moral concepts for interaction, which become habits, customs, and procedures in community life (Watts, Richard J. 2005). Politeness is strongly related to face management (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Face represents an individual's social persona within society. It refers to the social and emotional meaning that each person possesses and expects others to recognize (Yule, 1996:104). Therefore, not only spoken utterances but also non-verbal expressions through gestures in sign language—such as body movements, facial expressions, touch, distance, or visual symbols—may contain face-threatening acts. This means that interaction patterns in sign language still uphold the universal principle of face-saving. Although Brown & Levinson's theory is predominantly applied to spoken language, the politeness strategies aimed at preserving face are also relevant in sign language. The difference lies in the realization of politeness strategies, which are expressed through gestures, facial expressions, touch, body movements, and spatial distance. This concept can be implemented in the communication of deaf and mute individuals in Bengkala Village, Buleleng, Bali. Kolok Bengkala Sign Language, abbreviated as BIKK, is used not only by deaf and mute residents but also by hearing individuals born, raised, and living in Bengkala Village. BIKK has grown and evolved through generations as a form of social adaptation and local cultural identity of Bengkala. Politeness is also present in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language, realized through the choice of signs and supported by gestures such as facial expressions, interaction distance, hand movement intensity, body posture (e.g., bowing), and hand gestures.

From a sociopragmatic perspective, politeness functions as a communication strategy to maintain the interlocutor's face. Politeness in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language illustrates that one of the Tri Hita Karana principles—maintaining harmony with fellow humans—can be practiced in the unique realm of nonverbal communication in Bengkala Village, Buleleng. Previous studies have produced numerous analyses on linguistic politeness, but they mostly focus on the use of sign language translation applications as a solution to communication disequilibrium (Toga & Naquita, 2024), including the implementation of Bisindo through the interpretation of movement components (Gumelar; Hafiar & Subekti, 2018). In contrast, Wirawan's research (2025) discovered a pattern of social interaction between regular students and students with special needs (deaf-mute) at SD Negeri 2 Bengkala, Buleleng, Bali, which highlights diversity and reflects tolerance among individuals with different backgrounds. The interaction between these groups shows the vital role of supporting peers with special needs and demonstrates how adaptive communication methods, such as the use of meaningful local sign language, are embraced by all students. Additionally, various community service activities have been conducted to empower the deaf-mute community (Arifin; Ahmad; Hartato; Utami & Paramitasari, 2022). Meanwhile, research on sign language has mostly emphasized linguistic aspects and language documentation, rather than focusing specifically on politeness strategies. Specific studies on politeness in local sign languages, especially Kolok Bengkala Sign Language, are still very rare. Therefore, this research is crucial as it offers academic benefits and broadens understanding of how politeness is manifested in interactions within the deaf community using sign language. Furthermore, this phenomenon is compelling to explore because it reveals how the Kolok community has developed a distinctive communication system, complete with its own politeness norms. Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine politeness strategies in the interactions of the Kolok Bengkala community through a sociopragmatic lens. The findings are expected to enrich references on nonverbal linguistic politeness, expand understanding of politeness practices across

languages and cultures, and contribute to the preservation of the linguistic identity of the Kolok Bengkala community as part of Bali's local wisdom.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a sociopragmatic perspective. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of politeness practices in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language through real-life interactions within the daily lives of the Kolok community. The research was conducted in Bengkala Village, Kubutambahan District, Buleleng Regency, Bali, which is known as the "Kolok village." This location was selected due to its sizable Deaf community and the presence of a naturally developed sign language system that has been passed down through generations. The primary data sources consist of everyday interactions among Kolok Bengkala residents within domestic, social, and cultural domains, as well as sign utterances that contain both verbal and nonverbal politeness strategies. Data collection techniques include video recording tailored to the situational context, capturing both formal and informal interactions. Each interaction was documented visually for detailed analysis, focusing specifically on facial expressions, body movements, and hand gesture intensity. This was supported by direct observation of community interactions, with notes taken on emerging forms of politeness. Additional documentation techniques were employed to gather supporting data, such as field notes, photographs, and village archives related to the Kolok community. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants (Kolok residents, community leaders, and hearing family members), facilitated by a local sign language interpreter acting as a mediator. The analytical method used is pragmatic identity analysis, focusing on how a sign is understood, responded to, and interpreted by the interlocutor in accordance with the situational context. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was applied by comparing observational data with interview findings. A local sign language interpreter was involved to verify the accuracy of sign interpretations, and peer debriefing sessions with the research team were conducted to test the consistency of the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness in language can also be found in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language. This politeness is expressed nonverbally through gestures, facial expressions, body movements, touch, and social interaction etiquette. The communication system used in the daily activities of deaf and mute residents, as well as other hearing members of the community, relies on Kolok Bengkala Sign Language. This language serves as the mother tongue for deaf and mute individuals in Bengkala Village, Buleleng, Bali. It functions not only as a communication tool among the deaf-mute community but also in interactions with hearing individuals. These interactions proceed smoothly and without barriers, as they generally communicate as naturally as any other community. The primary factor contributing to the presence of politeness in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language is the influence of social and cultural norms rooted in the Tri Hita Karana philosophy, particularly the principle of maintaining harmony with fellow human beings. The general function of politeness in this context is to preserve social harmony and build cultural identity, as sign language is not merely a communication tool but also a symbol of group identity and politeness. Research findings indicate that politeness in Kolok Bengkala Sign Language is realized through a combination of manual signs (hand movements) and non-manual elements (facial expressions, head movements, eye contact, and interaction distance). The politeness strategies commonly applied by the Kolok Bengkala community can be classified into: Positive politeness strategies, which aim to express familiarity and solidarity. These include greetings with hand gestures accompanied by broad smiles and friendly facial expressions when requesting assistance. Negative politeness strategies, which aim to show respect to the interlocutor. These are manifested by reducing the intensity of hand movements when making requests to avoid appearing forceful, and slightly bowing the head when signaling a request. These findings reinforce Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that face-saving strategies appear in various forms, both verbal and

nonverbal. In the context of Kolok Bengkala, politeness is predominantly expressed through nonverbal elements, demonstrating that politeness is not solely a product of spoken language but an integral part of nonverbal communication systems. This study also broadens the scope of sociopragmatic research by introducing the perspective of the Deaf community in Bali. Below is an example of an interaction that occurred in Bengkala Village:

Data (1):

Situational Context (1)	: Nonverbal Speakers: Kolok Residents 1 and 2
Interlocutors	: Individuals providing aquaponic equipment as part of a community service initiative
Context	: Kolok residents received aquaponic tools and expressed gratitude for the assistance they had received.



Fig.1 : Distribution of aquaponic equipment to deaf-mute residents in Bengkala

Data (1) represents a nonverbal interaction between Kolok residents and the providers of aquaponic equipment. The gestures displayed convey a sense of gratitude and respect toward the interlocutor, despite the lack of familiarity due to limited prior encounters. The politeness strategies employed by the Kolok Bengkala community in expressing respect and appreciation to unfamiliar individuals are demonstrated through a combination of neutral-friendly facial expressions, brief eye contact, greater physical distance, bowed body posture, and slow, calm gestures of respect and gratitude. The implemented politeness strategies include negative politeness, shown by maintaining physical distance, avoiding physical contact with the interlocutor, and limiting the duration of eye contact. These behaviors reflect a cautious attitude aimed at preserving the interlocutor's autonomy and comfort. Additionally, positive politeness is expressed through smiling, sincere expressions, and clear hand gestures, indicating recognition and appreciation of the interlocutor. In this situational context, Kolok residents are able to combine both positive and negative politeness strategies when interacting with individuals they are not closely acquainted with. The gestures described above affirm that expressing gratitude through sign language is a form of polite communication practiced in the daily interactions of the Kolok Bengkala community. Similar to spoken communication, sign language is highly dependent on situational context, the relationship between participants, and prevailing cultural norms. By understanding the interlocutor, signers can more easily select the most appropriate and effective politeness strategy—even within the unique framework of Kolok Bengkala Sign Language.

Data (2):

Situational Context (2):

- Speaker (1) : Kolok resident initiating playful interaction
Interlocutor : Inclusive education teacher fluent in sign language
Context : Mr. A, a Kolok resident, playfully engages the teacher during a serious explanation



Fig. 2: Speaker 1 engaging in playful interaction with Speaker 2

Data (2) illustrates an interaction between a teacher and a Kolok resident at the traditional weaving site in Bengkulu. The use of varied gestures and facial expressions demonstrates the Kolok community's ability to adapt to social contexts. In this informal setting, where a high level of familiarity exists, the sign language used is simple and playful, with the Kolok resident teasing the teacher during a serious explanation. The politeness strategy applied in this context is positive politeness, evident in the speaker's efforts to maintain closeness, solidarity, and familiarity with the interlocutor. This is achieved through relaxed and friendly hand movements, accompanied by smiling or warm facial expressions as signs of camaraderie. Additionally, due to the informal nature of the conversation, the speaker employs exaggerated body gestures and humorous facial expressions to lighten the mood. Humor serves as a strategy to maintain warm social relations without offending, even when the topic is serious. Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language emerged naturally and independently within the Bengkulu village environment, shaped by the daily interactions of the Kolok community (deaf and mute residents). This sign language is also used by hearing members of the community in social, cultural, and economic activities. All villagers in Bengkulu indirectly learn the signs to facilitate interaction, ensuring that no discrimination exists against deaf and mute individuals. Therefore, Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language is not merely a communication system—it is a manifestation of Bengkulu's cultural identity, a symbol of equality between hearing and deaf-mute residents, and a reflection of a unique local wisdom distinct from other sign languages.

CONCLUSION

The politeness of Kolok Bengkulu residents is shaped through nonverbal interaction. This system of politeness is manifested through facial expressions, gestures, touch, and interaction patterns that align with local cultural norms. Kolok Bengkulu Sign Language functions not only as a communication tool for the deaf-mute

community but also as a medium of solidarity and a symbol of local cultural identity, particularly in Bengkala Village. The politeness strategies used in interactions are influenced by factors such as age, social status, familiarity, situational context, and social distance. The strategies observed in daily interactions include: Positive politeness strategies, aimed at strengthening closeness, expressed through friendliness, smiling, and humor. Negative politeness strategies, intended to show respect to the interlocutor by maintaining distance, restraining expressions, and softening gestures as a form of deference to those with whom there is limited familiarity, in formal situations, or with elders. Off-record strategies, generally conveyed through subtle gestures, ambiguous expressions, or movements that do not explicitly state intent. Bald on-record strategies, expressed through fast, firm gestures that directly convey meaning without additional symbolic elements. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the enrichment of sociopragmatic knowledge, particularly in the domain of nonverbal politeness. Furthermore, they offer valuable insights for inclusive education, serving as a key reference in understanding the communication patterns of the Kolok community, thereby enabling more natural and inclusive interactions.

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