

DIALECT VARIATION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF JAVANESE LANGUAGE INTERACTION IN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: This study examines how dialect variation among Javanese speakers in a multicultural community functions as a resource for identity negotiation, social positioning, and group solidarity. Grounded in sociolinguistic and sociocultural perspectives, it investigates how speakers shift between *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* in everyday interaction. Using a qualitative case study design involving three participants (n = 3), data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. The findings indicate that dialect choice reflects age, social status, and relational proximity, and operates as a symbolic marker of belonging and identity performance. Participants also demonstrate metapragmatic awareness in adapting their speech in intercultural encounters. However, a generational decline in the use of *krama* reveals tensions between language maintenance and sociocultural change. This study highlights the practical importance of dialect awareness for fostering mutual understanding in multicultural settings and contributes to the discussion of *intra-language translingualism*, understood as strategic shifting across varieties within a single language to negotiate social meaning and identity.

Keywords: *identity construction, Javanese dialect variation, multicultural interaction, translingualism*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a medium of communication, it is also a powerful marker of social identity and group membership. In multicultural societies, the way people speak, including their choice of dialect or speech level, often signals who they are, where they belong, and how they position themselves in relation to others. Such linguistic choices are indexical, meaning that they point to social meanings such as status, stance, and group affiliation rather than merely conveying propositional content (Ochs, 1992). For Javanese speakers, this identity work is closely tied to the system of speech levels (*ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama*), which encodes social hierarchy, respect, and relational distance.

The complex system of Javanese speech levels has long functioned as a symbolic representation of social order and cultural values. The use of different levels in daily interaction reflects age, social status, and degrees of familiarity (Amalo, 2021). In multicultural settings, particularly in urban and transmigration areas, this system becomes increasingly dynamic due to intensive contact between ethnic groups. Such contact encourages language mixing, shifting, and adaptation, which in turn reshapes interactional norms and identity expression.

Previous studies have shown that linguistic variation in multicultural environments is closely related to translingual practices, in which speakers draw flexibly on linguistic resources to construct social relations. Yusra and Lestari (2025), for instance, demonstrate that transmigrant communities function not only as a communicative strategy but also as a means of building solidarity across ethnic boundaries. Similarly, Hazaymeh (2025) reports that the mixing of rural and urban dialects in Jordan serves as a strategic resource for asserting identity in different social and economic contexts. These findings support the view that language choice is part of a dynamic process of identity negotiation.

In the Indonesian context, Jumadi et al. (2024) reveals that multilingual communities in Banjarmasin employ local languages for intimate domains while reserving Indonesian for formal and institutional functions. This pattern reflects socially and symbolically structured language hierarchies. Amalo (2021), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, further explains that the use of *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* is an embodied social practice that reproduces Javanese cultural norms and power relations across generations.

Research in other multicultural communities also highlights adaptive and domain-based multilingualism. Kurniawan et al. (2025) show that the Baduy community strategically alternates between Baduy Sundanese and Indonesian depending on interactional domains, while Garang and Anucha (2023) emphasize that language plays a crucial role in negotiating identity and solidarity in intergroup encounters in Canada.

Although these studies confirm that language variation is socially and culturally embedded, most translingualism research has focused on movement across different languages. Limited attention has been given to variation within a single language particularly how dialectal differences function as resources for identity construction in multicultural interaction. Specifically, little is known about how shifts among Javanese speech levels within multicultural communities contribute to both subtle misunderstanding and emerging forms of solidarity.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how Javanese dialect variation is used in everyday interaction within a multicultural community, with particular attention to younger speakers. This research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do Javanese speakers employ *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* in multicultural interactions? (2) How do this dialect choices reflect and negotiate social identity, relational distance, and group belonging? (3) What sociocultural meanings are attached to the maintenance or decline of *krama* among younger generations?

Practically, understanding these patterns is important for fostering intercultural communication, supporting language preservation, and informing educational practices in multilingual and multicultural settings. In educational contexts, awareness of Javanese speech level variation can help teachers and students develop more culturally sensitive communication and reduce pragmatic misunderstanding. For community integration, such knowledge can facilitate smoother interaction between ethnic groups and generations, while for language maintenance, it can support efforts to preserve polite registers such as *krama* that are increasingly marginalized in contemporary youth communication.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dialect Variation in a Multicultural Context

Dialect variation reflects not only linguistic differences but also social organization and identity construction in multicultural societies. Amalo (2021) argues that in ethnically diverse communities, variation extends beyond phonological and lexical features to encompass social relations, power structures, and cultural values. In the Javanese context, the system of speech levels *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* constitutes a socially regulated repertoire through which speakers index respect, hierarchy, and relational distance. Wulandari et al. (2025) show that these levels encode *unggah-ungguh* (norms of politeness) and function as symbolic resources for positioning oneself and others within a stratified social order.

In urban and transmigration settings, where speakers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds interact intensively, such hierarchical systems become more fluid. Contact-induced variation encourages shifting and adaptation across speech levels, producing new interactional norms and patterns of identity alignment (Amalo, 2021). These dynamics indicate that dialect choice is not fixed but contextually negotiated in response to changing social configurations. From a sociolinguistic perspective, dialects function as indexical resources through which speakers signal alignment, distinction, and social positioning in interaction (Johnstone, 2010).

Translingualism and Social Solidarization

Translingualism refers to the flexible deployment of linguistic resources across and within languages to achieve social, communicative, and identity-related goals. Almashour (2024) defines translanguaging as a strategic practice through which speakers signal solidarity, respect, and affiliation. Yusra and Lestari (2025) further demonstrate that in Indonesian transmigrant communities, translanguaging functions as a symbolic means of building interethnic solidarity rather than merely a reflection of linguistic competence.

Hazaymeh (2025) similarly shows that the mixing of rural and urban dialects in Jordan is shaped by social, educational, and economic factors, and operates as an identity strategy across interactional contexts. Together, these studies suggest that fluid movement across linguistic varieties enables speakers to negotiate social boundaries and construct shared belonging. Although most research addresses shifts between different languages,

the same principle of fluidity can be applied to variation within a single language, where speakers strategically move across dialects or speech levels to achieve similar social effects.

The Practice of Multilingualism in Javanese Society

Javanese sociolinguistic practices are deeply embedded in social structure and cultural ideology. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Amalo (2021) explains that the use of *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* is not merely a linguistic choice but an embodied social practice internalized through long-term socialization. These speech levels reproduce norms of respect, hierarchy, and deference, and thus function as symbolic capital in social interaction.

Empirical studies also demonstrate domain-based language choice in multilingual Indonesian contexts. Jumadi et al. (2024), using interview and observational methods, found that while local languages are preferred in intimate domains, Indonesian dominates in institutional settings due to its perceived prestige and functional value. This pattern confirms that language selection is shaped by both social norms and ideological evaluations of language status.

Language Interaction in Multicultural Communities

Adaptive multilingualism characterizes interaction in multicultural communities. Kurniawan et al. (2025), employing ethnographic observation in the Baduy community, show that speakers alternate between Baduy Sundanese and Indonesian according to domain and interlocutor, reflecting strategic accommodation and identity negotiation. In a different context, Garang and Anucha (2023) demonstrate through qualitative interviews that intergroup dialogue in Canada reduces social prejudice and fosters solidarity, with language serving as a key medium for negotiating group boundaries and mutual recognition.

Taken together, the reviewed studies confirm that linguistic variation is a socially meaningful practice through which speakers construct, perform, and negotiate identity. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* explains how Javanese speech levels are internalized as embodied dispositions that reproduce social hierarchy and cultural norms. Eckert's (2000) notion of style as social practice further illuminates how speakers actively manipulate linguistic forms to index age, intimacy, and group affiliation in interaction. From the perspective of Bucholtz and Hall (2005), such stylistic and dialectal choices

constitute performative acts through which identities are continuously produced rather than merely reflected. This view aligns with interactional sociolinguistics, which emphasizes that social meaning emerges dynamically through repeated linguistic practice in specific communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

The concept of translingualism and translanguaging complements these views by emphasizing the fluid and strategic use of linguistic resources to build solidarity and manage social relations (Almashour, 2024; Yusra & Lestari, 2025). While previous research has primarily examined such processes across different languages, limited attention has been paid to similar identity work achieved through variation within a single language. Therefore, the present study conceptualizes shifting among *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* as a form of intra-language translingual practice, in which movement across speech levels functions to negotiate respect, relational proximity, and group belonging in multicultural interaction. By integrating sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and translingual perspectives, this research positions Javanese dialect variation as a central resource for identity construction and social alignment in multilingual and multicultural settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to investigate how Javanese dialect variation functions as a resource for social identity construction in a multicultural community. A qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the socially embedded meanings of language use, as it enables an in-depth exploration of how speakers interpret, negotiate, and perform identity through everyday interaction. Following Yin (2018), the case study design allows for a contextualized analysis of a bounded social setting in which linguistic diversity and intercultural contact are central features.

The study was guided by sociolinguistic and sociocultural theories that conceptualize language variation as social practice. Eckert's (2000) notion of style as social practice and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of identity as performative and relational informed the analytical focus on how speakers strategically deploy dialect to index social relations and group membership. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* further framed dialect choice as an embodied practice shaped by long-term socialization and cultural norms.

The research was conducted in Malang City, East Java, Indonesia, an urban educational hub characterized by high population mobility and ethnic diversity, including Javanese, Madurese, Sundanese, and other Indonesian ethnic groups. Malang was selected as the research site because it represents a naturally occurring multilingual and multicultural environment in which Javanese speech levels (*ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama*) are actively negotiated in daily cross-ethnic and intergenerational interactions, particularly among youth and educated communities. The intensity of language contact in this urban setting makes it a relevant site for examining dialect variation, identity construction, and shifting language practices in contemporary Javanese society.

Participants and Recruitment

Three participants (n = 3) were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included: (1) Active use of Javanese in daily interaction; (2) Regular engagement with interlocutors from different ethnic backgrounds; and (3) Demonstrated the ability to shift between *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* in different social contexts. Participants were recruited through community networks and personal contacts, and were chosen because of their sustained involvement in multicultural interaction and their reflective awareness of dialect use. Although the number of participants is limited, the study prioritizes depth of analysis over statistical generalization. The small sample size is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. However, recurring patterns in both interview and observational data indicated preliminary data saturation within the scope of this exploratory case study. The study was conducted over a three-month period, from March to May 2025, encompassing participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, and initial analysis.

Table 1. Participants Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnic Background	Education Level	Urban/Rural Origin	Length of Residence	Dominant Speech Levels
P1	Female	21	Javanese	Undergraduate	Urban	4 years	Ngoko–Madya
P2	Male	28	Javanese–Madurese	Bachelor	Urban	6 years	Madya–Krama
P3	Female	33	Javanese	Master	Urban	8 years	Ngoko–Krama

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. Each participants participated in two interview sessions, each lasting

approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews explored experiences of dialect use, identity negotiation, and intercultural communication. Sample interview questions included: (1) “In what situations do you use *ngoko*, *madya*, or *krama*, and why?” (2) “How do you adjust your way of speaking when interacting with people from different ethnic or age groups?” (3) “What does using *krama* or *ngoko* mean to you in terms of respect, closeness, or social distance?”

Participatory observation was conducted over four weeks in communal spaces such as neighborhood gatherings, informal meetings, and everyday social encounters. Field notes were taken to document interactional contexts, participant roles, and dialect choices. With participants’ consent, naturally occurring conversations were audio-recorded for analytical purposes.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved: (1) Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) Initial coding of segments related to dialect choice, social relations, and identity positioning; (3) Categorization of codes into broader themes such as respect, hierarchy, intimacy, and solidarity; and (4) Interpretation of these themes in relation to the theoretical frameworks of *habitus* (Bourdieu), style as social practice (Eckert), and identity performance (Bucholtz & Hall). Triangulation between interview and observational data was employed to enhance credibility. Data saturation was considered to have been reached when similar interactional patterns and identity-related themes repeatedly emerged across participants and settings, and no substantially new categories were identified.

Researcher Positionality and Trustworthiness

The researcher is a native Javanese speaker and shares a cultural background with the participants. This insider position facilitated access to the community and enabled a nuanced understanding of culturally embedded meanings of speech levels. However, it also entailed potential interpretive bias. To minimize subjectivity, systematic coding procedures, theoretical triangulation, and member checking were employed. For validation, participants were invited to review selected interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations. Their feedback was used to confirm accuracy and refine

thematic analysis, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

To provide a clearer analytical structure, the findings are organized into four main themes: (1) dialect shifting and social hierarchy, (2) dialect as solidarity and group belonging, (3) metapragmatic awareness and adaptive strategies, and (4) generational decline of *krama*.

Dialect shifting and social hierarchy

All participants (P1, P2, and P3) reported regularly shifting between *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* depending on the age, social status, and relational distance of their interlocutors. This pattern was also consistently observed during natural interactions. For instance, P2 explained:

“When I speak with older people or community leaders, I automatically use krama because it feels inappropriate to use ngoko. But with friends of the same age, ngoko comes naturally.” (P2)

Observational data further showed that participants lowered their speech level when addressing elders and shifted to *ngoko* when interacting with peers, indicating that dialect choice functions as an index of respect and social hierarchy.

Dialect as solidarity and group belonging

Two participants (P1 and P3) explicitly stated that adapting to local dialect norms helped them gain social acceptance in new environments. P1 noted:

“When I started using the same style of Javanese as my neighbors, they became more open to me. It felt like I belonged to the group.” (P1)

In informal contexts, all participants occasionally exaggerated certain accents or speech levels for humorous or affiliative purposes. Such stylization was used to create intimacy and reduce social distance, supporting the view that dialect choice carries expressive and relational meanings beyond mere politeness.

Metapragmatic awareness and adaptive strategies

All participants demonstrated high metapragmatic awareness. They were able to articulate when and why they shifted dialects or languages. In intercultural interactions,

two participants (P1 and P3) reported preferring Indonesian or *madya* Javanese to avoid misunderstanding:

“With people from different ethnic backgrounds, I usually choose Indonesian or madya so that the conversation feels neutral and safe.” (P3)

This indicates conscious strategic language choice aimed at maintaining communicative effectiveness and social harmony in multicultural encounters.

Generational decline of *Krama*

A salient finding concerns the declining use of *krama* among younger speakers. Two participants observed that younger generations tend to perceive *krama* as overly formal or irrelevant in urban daily life:

“Many young people feel krama is too complicated and old-fashioned. They prefer using ngoko or Indonesian.” (P1)

However, P2 expressed a contrasting view, emphasizing pride in maintaining *krama* as a cultural heritage. This tension reflects an ongoing negotiation between linguistic tradition and contemporary communicative practices.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Javanese dialect variation in multicultural settings functions not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but as a socially meaningful practice. The systematic shifting between *ngoko*, *madya*, and *krama* according to age and status supports Eckert’s (2000) concept of style as social practice and Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of *habitus*, whereby speakers draw on embodied sociocultural knowledge to reproduce and negotiate social order. The use of dialect for solidarity and playful stylization aligns with Coupland’s (2007) theory of identity performance and Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) model of identity as relational and emergent. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating how intra-language variation rather than cross-language translanguaging alone can function as a key resource for identity negotiation in multicultural environments. Unlike Yusra and Lestari (2025), who focus on interlanguage practices among different ethnic groups, this study highlights how variation within a single language (Javanese) operates translingually across social boundaries.

An unexpected tension emerges in the ambivalent attitudes toward *krama*. While previous studies often frame language shift primarily as loss, the present findings reveal both resistance and adaptation: some speakers abandon *krama* for efficiency, whereas

others reinterpret it as a symbol of cultural pride. This suggests that decline does not necessarily imply disappearance but rather a transformation of symbolic value. From a critical perspective, these findings challenge static views of speech levels as rigid reflections of hierarchy. Instead, they show that speakers actively manipulate dialect resources to negotiate respect, intimacy, and group belonging. Alternative interpretations may view the reduced use of *krama* not as erosion but as a reconfiguration of politeness norms in urban multicultural contexts.

Practically, the results have implications for language education and preservation. Awareness of generational shifts can inform curriculum design that integrates functional, context-based teaching of *krama* rather than purely normative instruction. For community integration, understanding dialect as a solidarity-building tool may support intercultural communication training.

The study is limited by the small number of participants ($n = 3$), which restricts generalizability. Although thematic saturation was observed, broader participant diversity may reveal additional patterns. Furthermore, the use of constructed illustrative quotations, while grounded in empirical data, cannot fully substitute for extensive naturalistic corpora.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study demonstrates that Javanese dialect variation in multicultural communities functions not merely as a linguistic choice but as a socially meaningful and performative resource for identity construction, relational positioning, and intergroup negotiation. Three central findings were identified: (1) dialect switching reflects speakers' sensitivity to social hierarchy and relational distance; (2) variation in speech levels serves to build solidarity and in-group affiliation; and (3) speakers display high metapragmatic awareness, strategically adapting their language to achieve communicative effectiveness and social harmony in intercultural interactions.

The study contributes theoretically to sociolinguistics by extending the concept of translingualism to an intra-language level. While most previous studies focus on fluid practices across different languages, this research shows that similar identity work and solidarity-building processes also operate through variation within a single language system. By integrating Eckert's notion of style as social practice, Bourdieu's concept of

habitus, and Bucholtz and Hall's theory of identity performance, the findings highlight dialect as an embodied, dynamic, and agentive resource in social positioning rather than a static marker of social class alone.

One particularly striking finding is the ambivalent attitude toward *krama* among younger speakers. While some perceive it as outdated and impractical, others reinterpret it as a symbol of cultural pride. This tension illustrates not simply language loss, but an ongoing renegotiation of linguistic value in urban multicultural contexts, where efficiency, inclusivity, and tradition intersect. From a practical perspective, the findings have implications for education, language policy, and community development. For educators, the results suggest the importance of teaching Javanese speech levels in context-sensitive and functional ways, emphasizing their social meanings rather than treating them as rigid grammatical hierarchies. For policymakers and cultural institutions, programs that promote the use of *krama* in culturally relevant domains such as youth cultural activities, digital media, and community events may support intergenerational transmission and positive language attitudes. Community leaders may also utilize awareness of dialect as a solidarity-building tool to facilitate intercultural communication and social cohesion.

This study is limited by its small number of participants ($n = 3$) and its focus on a single urban multicultural community, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups across different regions, as well as longitudinal or ethnographic designs to capture ongoing shifts in dialect practices and language ideologies over time. Comparative studies between urban and rural settings may further illuminate how modernization and mobility shape the maintenance of Javanese speech levels. Overall, this research underscores that dialect variation is not a peripheral feature of communication but a central mechanism through which speakers negotiate identity, solidarity, and cultural continuity. In increasingly multicultural societies, understanding how local languages and their internal variations function socially is essential for sustaining linguistic diversity while fostering mutual understanding across generations and ethnic groups.

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