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Proceedings of the 38th Pacific Asia Conference on  
Language, Information and Computation (PACLIC 38)

Nathaniel Oco, Shirley N. Dita, Ariane Macalinga Borlongan, Jong-Bok Kim (eds.)

2024

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# Address forms, politeness, and framing among multicultural students in an Indonesian university

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## Abstract

Address forms play a crucial role in understanding sociocultural dynamics related to gender, age, status, and power relations between different individuals. A handful of studies have examined address strategies in multicultural university settings, but few have attempted to elaborate the influencing pragmatic and sociolinguistic factors at different levels of interactional frames. Utilizing surveys and interviews, this study explores how politeness is conveyed through different address forms used by students from diverse cultural backgrounds in Indonesia, and how sociolinguistic factors influence the students' address strategies across sociocultural, genre, and interpersonal frames, demonstrating their alignment with the Indonesian societal norms, formal and informal university settings, as well as variations in interpersonal relationships. Preliminary findings from this study reveals distinct politeness strategies used by students towards different groups, as well as various factors playing at different levels of framing, including gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, and linguistic identities at the sociocultural level; formal and informal domains at the genre level; and familiarity, intimacy, and power relations at the interpersonal level. Insights from this study contribute to the understanding of intercultural communication in Indonesia, and may inform multilingual educational practices and policies.

## 1 Introduction

Address forms or terms of address are among the most salient linguistic features associated with the sociocultural dynamics within a speech community (Kiesling, 2009). Examinations on the usage of address forms often show patterns that need to be understood in contexts, which vary widely across time and space and are influenced by various interrelated pragmatic and sociocultural factors. Different address forms may be used in formal and

informal situations; at home and at work; and between those used in multilingual and monolingual settings (Formentelli, 2009; Utsumi, 2020; Soomro and Larina, 2022).

There have been a handful of address studies in non-English, bilingual, and multilingual academic contexts. Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012) found that students in Ghana refer to their lecturers differently depending on the lecturers' presence. In the presence of the lecturers, they used address forms indicating deference, while in their absence, they may use forms that symbolises resistance to powers, e.g. by calling them directly by their first names or even by nicknames shared only among the students. Soomro and Larina (2022) used both quantitative questionnaires and qualitative ethnographic methods to investigate the patterns in the address strategies among Pakistani students in multilingual university settings. They found out that hierarchical relationships play a big role in determining what kind of address forms are used by either of the students or the lecturers. They also observed that English forms such as *Sir* were mostly used towards lecturers in formal contexts, such as in classrooms and lecturers' offices, while native forms borrowed from Urdu, Sindhi etc. were used in informal contexts, such as in the cafeteria. A more recent study by Wijayanti et al. (2023) analysed addressing terms used in chats between English majors and their lecturers from several Indonesian universities, and connect them to an emerging "World English" variety in Indonesia.

While these studies have provided useful insights on address strategies among multicultural university students, they did not attempt to identify all potentially influential factors in different levels of interactional framing. In addition, the study by Wijayanti et al. (2023) only found a limited number of tokens with 13 examples of address terms. There is a need for a more comprehensive investigation into address strategies used by multicultural

students in an Indonesian university settings. The usage of English as a secondary language in education has recently gained currency in Indonesia (Tamtomo, 2015; Zein, 2020). Yet, it remains to be seen how the language is adapted to an Indonesian sociocultural context, including in terms of address strategies.

Utilizing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, students' choices of address were surveyed through questionnaires, and rationales for their usage were analysed thematically and interpreted in reference to the theories of politeness and interactional frames (Coupland, 2007; Holmes and Wilson, 2022). The objectives of this study are twofold: 1) to examine how politeness is conveyed through different types of address forms used by multicultural students in a multilingual Indonesian university context, and 2) to identify multiple sociolinguistic factors that influence the students' choices of address forms in three levels of interactional framing—namely sociocultural, genre, and interpersonal frames.

## 2 Theoretical frameworks

### 2.1 Address forms and address strategies in multilingual contexts

According to Dickey (1997), address forms are the words and phrases used directly by speakers regarding other participants of a conversation. These forms can be contrasted to referent forms, which are used regarding someone not part of a conversation (Dickey, 1997). Following Utsumi (2020) and Manns (2015), this study defines address forms specifically as adjunct second-person referents outside the core clauses (e.g., the word *Ma'am* in *Ma'am, I want to ask a question*). This definition provides a contrast between address forms and second-person pronouns or pronoun substitutes used as syntactic arguments, inseparable from the core clauses (Braun, 1988). In general, while the two categories may overlap, address forms are generally much more open to expansion of repertoires and take a distinctly vocative role (Formentelli, 2009).

Across languages around the world, various distinct categories of address forms can be identified, from personal names and kinship terms to honorifics, titles, and occupational terms (Soomro and Larina, 2022). In English, the category of titles includes words such as Doctor and Professor, while honorifics include words such as Sir and Madam.

One word or phrase may belong to two or more categories; for example, Doctor may also be an occupational term (Formentelli, 2009). Personal names are often divided into at least two parts: 1) first name or given name, and 2) last name or surname. However, this division is not universal; for example, Indonesia does not legally distinguish between given names and surnames, and until 2022, allows people to have only one-word names (Nugraheny and Krisiandi, 2022).

Address strategies are the choices of address forms speakers use when referring to different participants of conversations (Formentelli, 2009). Variations in address strategies depend on both pragmatic factors such as politeness and formality, as well as sociolinguistic factors such as gender, age, and power relations between the conversants (Utsumi, 2020). Multilingual practices may also influence address strategies, as they expand the repertoire of forms available to the speakers. In Indonesia, multilingual speakers may utilise elements from different languages to convey their communicative purposes effectively (Tamtomo, 2015).

### 2.2 Politeness and interactional frames

This study adopts the notions of politeness and interactional frames to contextualise the usage of address forms by multicultural students in a multilingual Indonesian university setting. Politeness involves using specific discourse strategies to foster harmony and avoid conflict (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Positive politeness is concerned with shared attitudes and values, while negative politeness considers social distance and respects status differences. The usage of endearment terms to address other people is an example of positive politeness strategy (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). On the other hand, negative politeness involves more indirectness, as exemplified by the British English way of addressing superiors and older acquaintances with last names preceded by titles or honorifics (Wood and Kroger, 1991; Holmes and Wilson, 2022).

Interactional frames, as explained by Coupland (2007), are the different contexts of discourses in which specific identities are made apparent through the usage of linguistic features. There are three levels of framing, namely 1) sociocultural framing, 2) genre or generic framing, and 3) interpersonal framing. At the macro-level of sociocultural framing, speakers position themselves in accordance with the sociocultural values of a particular community. Linguistic features indexing identities such

| Participant | Gender            | Age | Languages                             | Background   |
|-------------|-------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|--|
| A           | Prefer not to say | 25  | Indonesian, English, Japanese         | Javanese and Palembang Malay; raised in Jakarta        |
| B           | Male              | 22  | Indonesian, English, Sundanese        | Malay and Javanese; raised in Bandung                  |
| C           | Prefer not to say | 22  | Indonesian, English                   | Tegal Javanese and Minangkabau; raised in Jakarta      |
| D           | Female            | 22  | Indonesian, English                   | Chinese Indonesian; raised in Qatar and Australia      |
| E           | Male              | 21  | Indonesian, English                   | Javanese; raised in Palembang and Jakarta              |
| F           | Female            | 20  | Indonesian, English, Japanese, German | Makassarese, Manadonese, and Betawi; raised in Jakarta |
| G           | Female            | 20  | Indonesian, English, Korean           | Chinese Indonesian; raised in Jakarta                  |
| H           | Female            | 20  | Indonesian, English                   | Chinese Indonesian; raised in Jakarta                  |
| I           | Female            | 20  | Indonesian, English                   | Manadonese and Balinese; raised in Jakarta             |

Table 1: List of Interviewees.

as gender, age, and ethnicity are made salient at this level. At the middle level of genre framing, speakers govern their talk in accordance with certain types of speech that are relevant to the participants of an ongoing interaction. Formality is indexed at this level (Coupland, 2007; Utsumi, 2020). Finally, at the micro-level of interpersonal framing, speakers frame their speech in accordance with the dynamics in their individual (short- and long-term) relationships to the addressees. Factors such as power differences, relational history, and intimacy are conveyed at this level (Coupland, 2007; Manns, 2015).

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants and methods of data collection

The research data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, conducted primarily in English. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data on the address forms used in academic settings. Adapting the questionnaire items in Formentelli and Hajek (2016), the first part includes four questions asking students to select the address forms they use towards 1) lecturers, 2) students of the same year of study, 3) senior students, and 4) administrative staff. Each of the questions gives a checklist of address forms (whether in isolation or combined

with personal names) and includes a blank option to add more forms. The second part includes discourse completion tasks (DCTs) concerning the usage of address forms in specific situations. DCTs are open-ended fill-in-the-blanks prompts simulating real-life interactions to bring out the participants' preferred choice of forms, which may reveal patterns that are not readily apparent in simple surveys (Bruns and Kranich, 2021). A total of 3 tasks were devised, involving 1) an interaction between students and lecturers in the classroom, 2) an interaction between students during lunch break, and 3) an interaction between students and administrative staff outside class hours (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was then sent to students of English Literature study program in a university in Jakarta, Indonesia. A total of 13 participants filled the questionnaire.

Since the questionnaire resulted in a limited dataset, it is impossible to rely only on quantitative data. Following Manns (2015) and Utsumi (2020), a semi-structured interview was conducted to collect qualitative data clarifying the answers given by the participants in the questionnaires. A total of 9 participants (labeled A–I) were interviewed based on their availability (see Table 1). Each participant was asked to explain the differences in their strategies for addressing lecturers, students, and administrative staff. In particular, the inter-

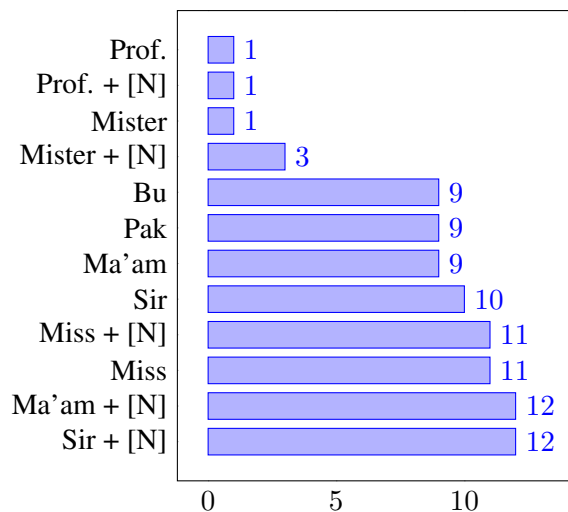


Figure 1: Frequencies of address forms chosen by student towards their lecturers.

viewees were asked what specific sociolinguistic factors contribute to the variation in their address strategies, including variables such as age, gender, occupation, and marital status of the addressees.

### 3.2 Methods of data analysis

The procedures for this study were as follows. First, the quantitative data on the students' usage of address forms towards different groups (lecturers, fellow students, and staff) were presented in charts and analyzed by looking at their frequencies. Next, the survey results were contextualised with complementary data from the DCTs and interview excerpts. The study employed a thematic analysis method, which aims to systematically identify, organise, and discover insightful patterns within a qualitative dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In particular, the data were analysed in reference to the theories of politeness and interactional frames, focusing on the politeness strategies used by students, as well as the most evident sociolinguistic factors influencing the students' address strategies at three different levels of framing.

## 4 Results and discussions

### 4.1 Address forms as politeness devices

In this section, forms used by students when addressing different groups are categorised and discussed based on how whether they are positive politeness devices indicating intimacy and solidarity, or negative politeness devices expressing social distance and deference (Holmes and Wilson, 2022).

When addressing the lecturers (Fig. 1), students

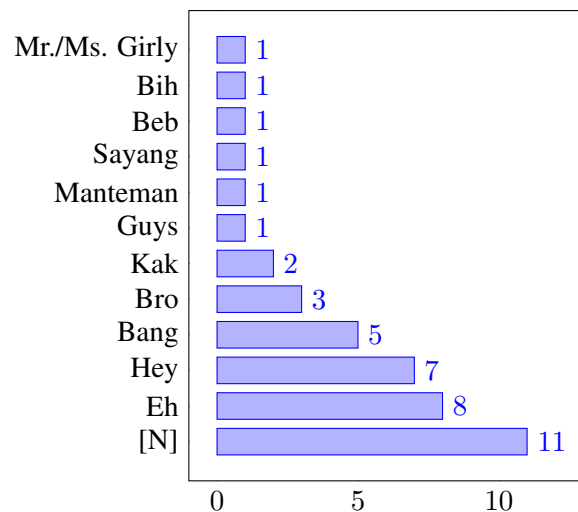


Figure 2: Frequencies of address forms chosen by students towards fellow students of the same year.

overwhelmingly chose to use English honorifics such as *Sir*, *Ma'am* (the full form *Madam* is almost never used), and *Miss*, as well as Indonesian kinship terms such as *Pak* and *Bu*. All these forms were oftentimes combined with personal names—the participants made no distinction between first and last names, as is common among Indonesians. The combinations of *Sir* + [Name] and *Ma'am* + [Name] are particularly interesting, as several participants listed these combinations, but not the bare counterparts.

English honorifics as used by the students towards their lecturers can be seen as negative politeness devices indicating deference. The participants might have used honorifics to avoid directly calling the addressees (in this case, the lecturers) only by their names. Similarly, upward kinship terms such as Indonesian *Pak* 'father' and *Bu* 'mother' express a sense of social distance between the speakers and hearers, which is a characteristic of negative politeness (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). A particular attention should also be given to the usage of the term *Sir*, which according to Wijayanti et al. (2023) overlapped in usage with *Pak*, which is often appended before names. Here, the combination of *Sir* + [Name] was actually even more popular than *Mister* + [Name], which is the more typical combination among native English speakers.

When addressing fellow students of the same year (Fig. 2), 11 out of 13 participants (84.6%) reported using personal names. Other prominently listed forms include vocatives (*Hey*, *Eh*) and Indonesian kinship terms for older siblings (*Bang*,



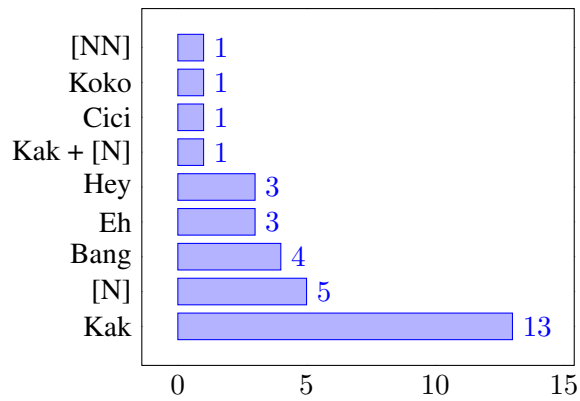


Figure 3: Frequencies of address forms chosen by students towards their seniors.

*Kak*). Two participants also listed the English kinship term *Bro*. Also relatively common were endearment terms in various forms, such as *Beb*, *Bih* (both derived from English *baby*), *Sayang* (Indonesian for ‘honey, sweetie’), and *Mr./Ms. Girly*. These are all terms indicating intimacy and/or familiarity, which reflect a positive politeness strategy (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). One participant also listed collective vocatives such as *guys* and *manteman* (from Indonesian *teman-teman* ‘friends’).

Meanwhile, in addressing their seniors (Fig. 3), all participants unanimously listed kinship terms such as *Kak* and *Bang* as one of their default address forms. These are all upward kinship terms indicating deference of the speakers towards the addressees (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). Notably, unlike the previous category, none of the participants listed any endearment terms for the seniors. Thus, it can be assumed that just as in the case with addressing lecturers, participants tended to default to negative politeness devices when interacting with senior students.

The ubiquity of bare personal names and endearment terms as address forms for students of the same year are characteristic of positive politeness strategy, as they indicate a sense of solidarity among the students (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). Bare personal names were also used to address senior students by 5 out of 13 participants (38.5%). However, at least one participant indicated in their interview that the usage was more limited towards those who they know well enough:

[...] when I talk to seniors, my address to them depends on how close I am to them. If I don’t know them well enough,

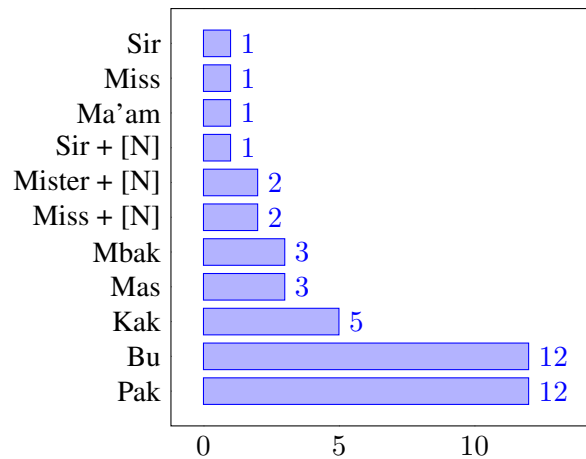


Figure 4: Frequencies of address forms chosen by students towards the campus’ administrative staff.

I will use *Kak* because I feel like I need to be polite. If I do know them well, I will use informal addresses [...] for them [Participant F, 20]

On the other hand, while there were participants who did use upward kinship terms such as *Kak* and *Bang* with students of the same year, further inquiry through the interviews revealed that some of them used these kinship terms as familiarisers that were functionally equivalent to endearment terms:

I usually address them with their names, but sometimes I use the other words to call them, even if they aren’t older. So like, instead of being like, *eh Jawad ini gimana* (‘Hey, Jawad, what should we do’) [I’d] say, *bang ini gimana bang* (‘Bro, what should we do’) [Participant G, 20]

Last but not least, in approaching campus’ administrative staff, almost all of the participants (12 out of 13, 92.3%) chose the Indonesian kinship terms *Pak* and *Bu* as the appropriate address forms, while a handful (5 out 13, 38.5%) also chose *Kak*, as well as the Javanese kinship terms *Mas* ‘older brother’ and *Mbak* ‘older sister’ (3 out of 13, 23.1% each). Only 2 participants (15.1%) chose the English forms *Mister/Miss* + [Name], with one of them also choosing the bare forms.

As in the case of students-lecturers’ interactions, this preference for honorifics and kinship terms indicates a negative politeness strategy, in that it avoids addressing the interlocutors directly by their names (Holmes and Wilson, 2022). However, un-

like when they addressed lecturers, students overwhelmingly preferred native Indonesian and even Javanese address forms instead of English. This suggests that there were also other factors in play other than politeness in determining the students' address strategies, which brings us to the next subsection.

#### 4.2 Contextualizing address forms in different levels of framing

To fully comprehend the influencing factors behind participants' strategies in deciding address forms, we need to consider the different levels of interactional frames in which they are produced (Coupland, 2007; Utsumi, 2020). This section will discuss the relevant factors in detail, with reference to the three levels of framing: sociocultural, genre, and interpersonal. Data from the discourse completion tasks and interviews will be heavily relied on to support the arguments.

At the macro-level of sociocultural framing, it is argued that gender, age, marital status, ethnic, and linguistic identities are all particularly relevant markers made salient through address forms. A significant amount of address forms examined so far are gendered, especially the honorifics and kinship terms. The very act of using address forms such as *Sir*, *Miss*, *Ma'am*, is in and of itself an act of gendering participants of interactions. Conversely, the awareness of such gendering practice also explains why a significant number of participants chose *Kak* over other kinship terms with similar meanings to address both senior students and administrative staff. It can be argued that this specific address form is seen as gender-neutral in Jakartan Indonesian, unlike *Bang*, *Mas*, *Mbak*, *Koko*, and *Cici*. As noted by one of the participants:

I assume any senior students are older than I am, so to play it safe and polite, I usually use *Kak* no matter what gender.  
[Participant H, 20]

Data from the interviews indicates that age and marital status, both being important sociocultural markers in Indonesia, are also made salient at this level of interaction:

It depends on how old they [the interlocutors] are compared to me and what position they hold relative to myself within a specific setting. [Participant C, 22]

[...] I use honorifics that ha[ve] a relation with their occupation. Also, I use *Miss* to address an unmarried or younger female lecturer, while *Ma'am* is for the female lecturers that are older or married.  
[Participant H, 20]

The sociocultural frame also includes the indexing of ethnic identities of both the speakers and interlocutors (Manns, 2015). An example of address forms indexing the speakers' ethnic identities were the usage of *Mas* and *Mbak* towards to the campus' staff, which were limited to participant B, C, and E, all of whom were of Javanese or partial Javanese backgrounds. This concurs with observations from previous studies (Errington, 1998; Manns, 2015) that the two forms were still markedly Javanese (compared to, say, *Kak*) and were rarely used by non-Javanese. Conversely, address forms might also index interlocutors' ethnic identities, as in the case of Hokkien sibling kinship terms *Koko* and *Cici* for Chinese Indonesians.

The students' linguistic identity as speakers of Indonesian in multilingual context was often made relevant in discourses, especially among students-students' and students-staff' interactions. In the results of the DCT regarding students-staff interactions, 7 out of 13 (53.8%) responses wrote the whole sentence in Indonesian, and even a couple of those who responded in English still included Indonesian forms of address (e.g. *Excuse me, Kak, is the administrative desk open?*). This indicates that there the students attempted to make their linguistic identity as speakers of Indonesian clear to the addressee, which, in the scenario, was specified as a "junior male staff" behind the administrative desk.

[...] when I talk to campus' administrative [staff], I switch to Indonesian because there's no need of me using English, because Indonesian is the standard language to use for public settings, and because if I use English, there's a chance that the staff would not understand me or there would be miscommunications.  
[Participant F, 20]

The variety of address terms used between different groups indicate that the participants were aware of their indexicalities. This awareness might also lead to an avoidance in using address terms that were perceived to index certain stereotypes.

One participant noted her reluctance in using *Mas* towards the staff, exactly because she was not sure if it would index the appropriate ethnic and class identity for the interlocutors:

Technically [*Mas*] works too, but some young men in Jakarta take offense to being called that because they associate it with working-class professions or people. *Pak* works best because it's a universal honorific for all men everywhere in Indonesia and it's sufficiently formal for a situation where you do not know the other person [Participant F, 20]

Moving on to the second level of genre framing, it is argued that the use of address forms by the participants indexes at least two primary domains: formal and informal. Within formal domains, there is also lecture as a specific genre of discourse. Formality is defined by Utsumi (2020) as discourses that are public, respectful, but not intimate. One of the participants interviewed clearly made a distinction between the two:

[...] lecturers and admin are addressed more formally that is suiting of their position. For friends, because it is more casual and familiar there is no need for formalities. [Participant A, 25]

Students-lecturers and students-staff interactions in classrooms and offices are strictly formal because they both involve public and respectful discourses, despite the obvious differences in the types and languages of address forms used. In fact, the differences are irrelevant, as there are direct parallels in the degree of formality between the English forms used to address lecturers and the Indonesian forms used to address staff. *Sir* and *Mister* can be thought of as equivalent to *Pak*, *Miss* and *Ma'am* equivalent to *Bu*, and so on. This is a strong example of how sociocultural markers of ethnic and linguistic identities that are salient at the macro-level can be made non-salient at another level (Coupland, 2007; Manns, 2015; Utsumi, 2020).

One form that can be considered indicative of informality is *Bang*, which, in Jakarta, is primarily used among speakers of Betawi and Colloquial Jakartan Indonesian. We can see this in the way a handful of participants used *Kak* to address staff, but none of them reported *Bang* for the same use, despite the parallelism between the two (both being upward sibling kinship terms). This contrasts

with how participants addressed fellow students, especially seniors, with both forms. In other words, *Bang* seems to index the intimate aspect of informality, which is not supposed to be present in formal situations (Utsumi, 2020).

Within the formal domain, a particular genre is identified, which is that of the lectures, done in the university classrooms with English as the primary language of instruction. Students participating in the discourse during lectures selected address forms that reflect the polite and formal characteristic of the genre. Crucially, the genre distinguishes itself from other formal contexts by the usage of English address forms:

[...] because we are in Eng[lish] Lit[erature] classes, we usually use *Sir/Ma'am/Miss* instead of *Pak/Bu*. [Participant G, 20]

The usage of English address forms in this formal genre of lectures findings may seem to concur with findings from Soomro and Larina (2022), who observe that English forms tended to be used in formal situations, while native forms were mostly reserved for informal situations. However, participants of this study also used native forms in formal interactions outside the classroom, especially with campus' staff. Thus, in the case of this study, the most relevant factor influencing the students' choice of English forms (as opposed to the native forms) is their participation in English academic lectures, not the formality of the situations *per se*.

At last, there is the micro-level of interpersonal framing, in which the degree of intimacy, familiarity, and personal relationships influence the usage of address forms. Interpersonal framing is best used to analyse the usage of address forms in informal situations (Utsumi, 2020), such as in the discourse between students, whether those from the same or different years of study. As mentioned above, it seems that the participants distinguish between seniors they know well, who are addressed directly by bare personal names, and those more distant, who are addressed with honorifics. Similarly, the usage of familiarisers and endearment terms might depend on the participants' interpersonal relationship with the addressees.

In one of the DCTs, the participant had to complete an interaction in which a student asks their fellow classmate taking a lunch break to bring some food for them as well. An exceptional pattern not found in the close-ended questionnaire emerged



here: the lack of *any* adjunct address terms in 3 out of 13 responses (23.1%). This can be analysed as part of the negative politeness strategy of avoidance. But in the context of interpersonal framing, the lack of address terms here can also be seen as avoiding formalities imposed by formal address terms at the genre level. Thus, the omission of address terms here can perhaps be considered a marker of casualness (Ton, 2018).

While both students-lecturers and students-staff interactions are both perceived as formal matters within the genre level, the findings from this study indicate the differences in the participants' power relations *vis a vis* lecturers and administrative staff. With lecturers, students preferred to use upwards kinship terms indicating parental relationships, such as *Pak* and *Bu*. Meanwhile, when referring to staff, students' invariably also used upwards kinship terms indicating siblings relationships, such as *Kak* and *Mas*. The divide in the use of kinship terms might reflect the interpersonal relationship hierarchy between lecturers and staff as perceived by the participants.

## 5 Conclusion

This study explores the nuanced usage of address forms among multicultural students in an Indonesian higher educational setting. Underpinned by the theories of politeness strategies and interactional frames, the study reveals that politeness strategies are manifested through the students' variations in address forms towards different groups. It also shows multiple factors playing at different levels of framing, including gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, and linguistic identities at the sociocultural level; formal and informal domains at the genre level; and familiarity, intimacy, and power relations at the interpersonal level. These findings offer insights on intercultural communication among university students in Indonesia, and may inform practices and policies in regards to the emerging use of English in multilingual educational context.

This study reports preliminary findings obtained from questionnaires and interviews with a limited sample size. More data is needed to verify the characterization of address strategies used by multicultural students in polyglossic university context. Further research could employ direct observation to reveal patterns that might not emerge due to the constraints of questionnaires and DCTs.

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## **A Appendix: Discourse completion tasks**

### **A.1 Situation 1**

A student (S) attends a university lecture conducted in English by a female professor (P) and wants to ask a question.

**S:** \_\_\_\_\_

**P:** Alright, thanks for the question. Anyone else?

### **A.2 Situation 2**

Student A is going out to the cafeteria for lunch, and Student B asks him to bring some for her, too.

**A:** I'm going to the cafeteria to get some lunch.

**B:** \_\_\_\_\_

**A:** No problem, I'll be back in a bit.

### **A.3 Situation 3**

Student C appears on the campus' administrative desk and asks a junior male staff whether it is still open.

**C:** \_\_\_\_\_