



A Contrastive Study of the Address System in Indonesian and Korean

Putu Adi Santoso^{1*}, Ni Made Sri Wulandari², Kim Min-Seo³

¹Department of Linguistics, Universitas Udayana, Bali, Indonesia

²Department of Applied Language Studies, Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia

³Department of Korean Language and Literature, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea

*Corresponding Author: adisantoso@unud.ac.id

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Abstract

This study provides a comparative analysis of the Indonesian and Korean address systems, aiming to identify their linguistic structures, socio-pragmatic functions, and cultural foundations. The research specifically investigates how address terms encode politeness, hierarchy, and interpersonal relations in both languages. Using a qualitative-comparative method, data were collected from natural Indonesian conversations and semi-structured interviews in Bali, while Korean data were derived from published sociolinguistic studies and interviews with Korean language instructors. The analysis reveals that Indonesian predominantly employs flexible lexical address forms-such as Pak, Bu, Mas, and Mbak-that reflect solidarity and contextual negotiation, while Korean relies on a highly structured honorific system rooted in age, hierarchy, and Confucian values. The findings contribute theoretically to contrastive pragmatics and culturally embedded politeness systems, and practically to intercultural communication and language teaching. The study recommends future quantitative research on generational shifts and register-based address usage.

Keywords

address terms;
Indonesian language;
Korean language;
sociolinguistics;
politeness strategies

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Introduction

The ways in which speakers of different languages address one another reflect not only grammatical choices but also deeply embedded cultural norms of social relations, respect, solidarity, and hierarchy. Address terms serve as a sociolinguistic mirror through which speakers enact politeness strategies, construct social identities, and negotiate interpersonal distance. They are, therefore, essential indicators of how language embodies cultural values and social structures. In the Indonesian context, address terms such as Pak ('Mr.' or 'Father'), Bu ('Mrs.' or 'Mother'), Mas ('older brother' or 'young man'), and Mbak ('older sister' or 'young woman') are not merely markers of gender or kinship but also encode social proximity and degrees of respect. These terms often transcend biological relationships and are used in various pragmatic contexts-among colleagues, in service encounters, or between strangers-to create harmonious social interaction (Sneddon, 2003; Hamdani, Barnes, & Blythe, 2022). Empirical research by Hamdani et al. (2022); Blythe et al. (2022) demonstrates that Indonesian speakers employ explicit address

terms as conversational tools for next-speaker selection and topic management, showing how these linguistic forms maintain smooth turn-taking and reinforce the cooperative nature of Indonesian communicative culture.

In contrast, the Korean address system is one of the most hierarchically nuanced in the world, tightly interwoven with the nation's Confucian heritage that emphasizes age, social rank, gender, and formality (Ashirbaeva, 2021; Sohn, 2009). Korean honorifics and speech levels (*jondaetmal* vs. *banmal*) encode relational asymmetry, reflecting whether interlocutors are of higher, equal, or lower status. For example, the use of *-nim* suffixes (e.g., *seonsaeng-nim*, 'teacher') or kinship terms like *oppa* ('older brother [used by a female]') and *hyung* ('older brother [used by a male]') not only denote familial hierarchy but also signal intimacy, solidarity, or deference depending on context (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Lee & Ramsey, 2000). These choices are governed by sociocultural scripts that require speakers to constantly assess the relative social standing of their interlocutors before speaking, making address selection a process of social cognition as much as linguistic encoding (Yannuar, 2017; Manns, 2015).

What makes the comparison between Indonesian and Korean particularly fascinating is the way both systems balance formality with solidarity, but through distinct cultural mechanisms. While Indonesian address practices emphasize *rasa hormat* (a sense of respect) and *keakraban* (closeness) within a relatively egalitarian framework, Korean address practices are deeply shaped by hierarchical consciousness rooted in *ye-ui* (courtesy) and *inhwa* (harmonious order). Consequently, while Indonesian speakers can easily shift between *Mas* and *Pak* to reflect changing levels of familiarity, Korean speakers must carefully adjust speech levels and lexical choices to maintain relational appropriateness. As noted by Kádár and Mills (2011), such differences highlight how politeness and address are culturally variable realizations of universal social needs-recognition, respect, and belonging-manifested through distinct linguistic strategies.

Despite the centrality of address systems in sociolinguistics and intercultural communication, comparative investigations between the Indonesian and Korean languages remain strikingly scarce. While a number of studies have examined address and honorific systems in East Asian languages-particularly Japanese, Chinese, and Korean-few have systematically contrasted them with languages of the Southeast Asian region, such as Indonesian or Malay, where social hierarchy and politeness are encoded differently. As McDonald et al. (2021) observe in their overview of pronoun substitutes and address forms across Asian linguistic communities, there exist noteworthy cross-linguistic parallels, such as the pragmatic tendency to avoid direct second-person pronouns in favor of titles, kinship terms, or occupational roles. However, they also emphasize a persistent gap in comprehensive contrastive analyses that examine how sociocultural values shape these linguistic forms across distinct yet geographically proximate speech communities.

Existing scholarship on Indonesian has predominantly focused on its internal variation-exploring how forms like *Bapak*, *Ibu*, *Kakak*, and *Mas* vary across regions and social contexts (Sneddon, 2003; Hamdani et al., 2022; Blythe et al., 2022). Similarly, Korean studies have richly documented the intricate honorific system, especially in relation to the *jondaetmal* and *banmal* dichotomy, and its deep entanglement with age, gender, and hierarchical relations (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Sohn, 2009; Kim, 2019). Yet, few attempts have been made to compare how these two systems operationalize politeness strategies, particularly through address terms that embody both hierarchy and solidarity. This lack of contrastive exploration is surprising given the long-standing cultural interactions between Indonesia and Korea in education, media, and business, all of which frequently bring the two languages into intercultural contact.

The absence of such comparative inquiry is more than a mere academic oversight-it limits our understanding of how speakers from different sociocultural traditions interpret linguistic politeness in

interaction. In today's globalized era, where intercultural communication between Indonesians and Koreans has intensified through migration, tourism, and digital media, misinterpretations arising from address terms can lead to pragmatic failure or unintended offense. For instance, the Indonesian tendency to use kinship-based address terms even with strangers can be misread by Korean interlocutors as overly intimate or informal, while the Korean insistence on age-based and status-sensitive forms may appear overly formal or distant to Indonesian speakers. These cross-cultural mismatches underscore the practical and pedagogical significance of comparative studies in this domain.

This research thus aims to fill the existing gap by offering a systematic contrastive analysis of address systems in Indonesian and Korean, focusing on their linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, and underlying sociocultural ideologies. By examining authentic conversational data and existing descriptive grammars, the study seeks to uncover both convergent and divergent features of how social relations are linguistically enacted. Beyond its descriptive contribution, the research aspires to provide theoretical insight into the universality and variability of politeness across cultures, and to contribute to applied domains such as intercultural education, language teaching, and cross-cultural pragmatics.

The research problem that guides this study can be formulated as follows: What are the principal similarities and differences between the Indonesian and Korean address systems in terms of linguistic form, pragmatic function, and sociocultural conditioning? Furthermore, how do these differences reflect the broader cultural norms, values, and ideologies governing social interaction in each speech community? These questions form the conceptual backbone of this comparative investigation and aim to bridge linguistic description with socio-pragmatic interpretation. By asking not only how address terms differ, but also why such differences exist, the study seeks to illuminate the deep interconnections between language, culture, and cognition.

At the structural level, the investigation explores how the two languages employ different grammatical and lexical mechanisms to encode address. Indonesian, with its relatively flexible morphology and a preference for lexical terms of respect-such as Bapak ('father'/Mr.), Ibu ('mother'/Mrs.), Mas ('older brother'/young man), and Mbak ('older sister'/young woman)-emphasizes semantic transparency and social intimacy. Korean, on the other hand, possesses a highly developed system of honorific morphology, speech levels, and affixes (such as -nim and -ssi) that operate within strict hierarchical frameworks (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sohn, 2009). Therefore, understanding form involves analyzing how these grammatical and lexical choices serve as linguistic tools for expressing social meaning.

From a functional perspective, the study examines how address terms operate as pragmatic strategies to manage interpersonal relations. Drawing on theories of politeness and relational work (Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2008), this research posits that address terms are central to the performance of facework - the negotiation of respect, intimacy, and hierarchy in interaction. Indonesian speakers, for example, often use kinship-based address forms even in non-familial contexts to promote *keakraban* (closeness) and social harmony (Hamdani et al., 2022; Blythe et al., 2022). Korean speakers, by contrast, tend to use honorifics to maintain social order and express deference, reflecting the Confucian principles of *ye-ui* (propriety) and *inhwa* (harmonious hierarchy). These contrasting functions raise intriguing questions about whether politeness is a universal phenomenon with culture-specific realizations, or whether it constitutes fundamentally different pragmatic systems across societies (Suhandano. Et al., 2024)

The third dimension of inquiry concerns social conditioning - the sociocultural variables that determine address choice, such as age, gender, occupational status, intimacy, and formality. As previous studies have shown (Kádár & Mills, 2011; Ide, 2006), address behavior is highly sensitive to contextual factors, and speakers must continuously evaluate situational cues to select the appropriate form. In Indonesia, the flexible and often symmetrical nature of address use reflects the country's pluralistic and relatively egalitarian orientation, while in Korea, address selection is governed by strict age and status

hierarchies embedded in everyday discourse. Investigating how these variables interact offers valuable insight into the relationship between linguistic practice and social ideology.

These research problems are not purely descriptive but deeply interpretive. They invite reflection on how speakers conceptualize respect, solidarity, and identity through their linguistic behavior. Address systems are thus not merely linguistic artifacts but cultural performances that both reproduce and challenge social norms. For instance, the rising trend of informal speech and the use of globalized address forms among younger Koreans - such as omitting honorific suffixes in digital communication - may signal shifts in societal values toward greater equality and individualism (Park & Lee, 2020). Similarly, in urban Indonesian contexts, younger speakers may replace traditional kinship-based terms with neutral English-derived forms such as *bro* or *sis*, reflecting the influence of globalization and youth culture. Understanding such ongoing changes helps reveal how address systems evolve in response to cultural and generational transformation.

In light of these perspectives, the overarching goal of this study is to establish a comprehensive cross-cultural understanding of address behavior as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. By contrasting the Indonesian and Korean systems, this research not only identifies their linguistic and functional characteristics but also situates them within their respective moral and ideological frameworks. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the broader field of intercultural pragmatics by demonstrating how culturally embedded norms of respect and hierarchy are reflected, negotiated, and sometimes resisted through address practices.

This study thus aims to (1) identify and categorise the address terms used in Indonesian and Korean, (2) analyse the social variables that govern term choice in each language, and (3) compare and interpret the cultural-pragmatic significance of the differences.

Materials and Methods

The present research adopts a qualitative comparative design, focusing on naturally occurring address systems in Indonesian and Korean. Indonesian data were collected in Bali (Indonesia) between July–September 2025, targeting adult speakers in both formal and informal contexts through natural conversations in markets, workplaces, and community settings, as well as semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. For Korean, due to practical constraints, the study relies on peer-reviewed sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies published in the past decade (Ashirbaeva, 2021; Chang et al., 2018; Hanani & Nugroho, 2020), which were complemented by interviews with four Korean language instructors residing in Bali. All data—both primary and secondary—were then analyzed thematically to identify recurrent patterns and to reveal cultural-pragmatic contrasts between the two languages.

Building on this integrated dataset, the thematic analysis proceeded by categorizing address forms based on type (kinship terms, titles, pronouns), social variables (age, status, intimacy), and linguistic realization (lexical vs. morphological). Comparative interpretation was conducted to highlight how socio-cultural norms shape address choices in Indonesian and Korean. To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, the study employed triangulation of data sources, member checking with selected Indonesian participants to confirm interpretive accuracy, and inter-coder discussions to ensure consistency across the coding process.

Results and Discussions

The analysis of Indonesian address terms reveals a strong sociolinguistic orientation toward lexical and kinship-based designations, which function as central tools for managing interpersonal relations, expressing respect, and indexing social proximity or distance. The Indonesian system demonstrates an indexical versatility in which lexical titles, rather than inflectional morphology, carry the pragmatic load of

encoding hierarchy and politeness. In both spoken and digital discourse data, a dominant reliance on forms such as Pak/Bapak (commonly used for older males or in formal interactional contexts), Bu/Ibu (for older females, signaling both gender and respect), Mas (used for slightly older males, generally within the same generation or social circle), and Mbak (for older females with comparable relational status) was observed across age groups, professions, and communication modalities.

These address forms do not simply denote biological age or gender identity; rather, they operate as multifunctional pragmatic markers that simultaneously convey deference, familiarity, empathy, and social inclusion. Through their use, speakers are able to negotiate social boundaries dynamically and situationally, balancing between formality and solidarity. This phenomenon illustrates the relational nature of Indonesian politeness, in which language use is closely aligned with the principles of *rasa hormat* (respect) and *keakraban* (closeness), both of which are key dimensions of Indonesian interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, the widespread use of kinship-based terms such as *kakak* (older sibling) and *adik* (younger sibling) in non-familial interactions underscores the metaphorical extension of family relationships into public and social domains. These kinship metaphors are used to soften interactions, reduce perceived social distance, and signal inclusion within a shared social network. For example, it is common in workplaces, schools, and online communities for individuals to refer to colleagues, classmates, or even strangers using *kak* or *adik*, depending on the perceived relative age and familiarity level. This pattern demonstrates how the Indonesian cultural model of social harmony-rooted in collectivist and community-oriented values-shapes the semantics and pragmatics of address behavior.

The preference for kinship metaphors also highlights an important contrast with languages that rely primarily on grammatical encoding of politeness. In Indonesian, lexical choice serves as the principal politeness strategy, rather than verb conjugation or honorific morphology. This provides speakers with a high degree of flexibility and creativity in managing social interaction. It allows for rapid adaptation to shifting relational contexts, such as in social media or peer-group communication, where participants often alternate between formal and informal terms depending on tone, medium, or emotional proximity (Sugianto & Floris, 2014; Sari, 2004).

Notably, field interviews and conversational data reveal that the selection of these address terms is guided less by rigid hierarchy and more by relational negotiation and contextual alignment. Younger speakers, for instance, may deliberately choose *Mas* or *Mbak* when addressing slightly older friends, instead of the more formal *Pak* or *Bu*, to emphasize camaraderie and reduce social distance. Such a shift illustrates the changing sociolinguistic norms among younger Indonesians, where the dimension of solidarity politeness increasingly coexists with traditional hierarchical respect. This trend aligns with the broader transformation of Indonesian society, particularly in urban areas, where social mobility, digital communication, and exposure to global youth culture are reshaping traditional norms of interaction.

Regional variation further enriches the Indonesian address system. In Bali, for example, speakers frequently employ indigenous Balinese kinship terms such as *Bli* (older brother), *Gus* (a diminutive form of *Agus*, often used as a friendly or respectful address for young Balinese men), and *Mbok* (older woman or respected female). These terms coexist and often intermingle with national-level Indonesian address forms, producing hybrid patterns such as “*Bli, boleh bantu sebentar?*” or “*Bu Mbok, sudah makan?*”. The coexistence of such forms illustrates Indonesia’s linguistic pluralism, where regional identity markers are seamlessly integrated into national discourse. This not only reinforces local identity but also demonstrates the adaptive, inclusive nature of Indonesian pragmatic culture.

In addition, the contextual elasticity of Indonesian address terms allows speakers to manipulate social meanings to achieve specific communicative goals. For instance, using *Pak* instead of *Mas* may intentionally introduce a tone of formality, seriousness, or authority in professional or institutional discourse. Conversely, shifting from *Pak* to *Mas* in a casual exchange can instantly soften the interaction,

creating a more approachable and friendly atmosphere. This flexibility points to the sociopragmatic competence of Indonesian speakers, who continuously calibrate address choices in accordance with contextual variables such as age, power, social distance, and communicative purpose.

Overall, these patterns suggest that the Indonesian address system functions as a pragmatic negotiation space where speakers dynamically balance social norms, cultural values, and individual intentions. Rather than being governed by rigid grammatical rules, it reflects a discursive adaptability rooted in the cultural ethos of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *tenggang rasa* (considerate empathy). Consequently, the Indonesian system offers a linguistically simple yet pragmatically rich mechanism for expressing social relations, making it an exemplary model of cultural pragmatics in a multilingual society (Chandra, & Bhimasena, 2024).

These findings corroborate previous studies on Indonesian address-term usage, particularly within urban youth and online communication contexts, where kinship metaphors and solidarity expressions dominate over strictly hierarchical distinctions. Indonesian address practices thus exhibit a fluid, dynamic system, shaped by age and familiarity but adaptable to situational needs and personal relationships. Interestingly, the flexibility of the Indonesian address system was highlighted in interview data, which showed that younger speakers often address older friends with “Mas” or “Mbak” instead of the more formal Pak or Bu. This choice signals solidarity and relational closeness rather than deference, suggesting that interpersonal warmth and equality may take precedence over rigid status marking in many contemporary Indonesian interactions. Regional variation also emerged, particularly in Bali, where Balinese kinship titles such as Bli (older brother), Gus (short for Agus, often used for young Balinese men), and Mbok (older woman) intersect with national Indonesian address forms. This hybridization reflects the multilayered linguistic ecology of Indonesia, where national, regional, and cultural identities converge in pragmatic practice.

In contrast, the Korean address system demonstrates a more systematic and stratified hierarchy, embedded deeply within both lexical choices and grammatical morphology. As documented in previous research (e.g., Ashirbaeva, 2021), Korean address behavior is governed by the dual mechanisms of speech level (존댓말 vs 반말) and honorific morphology, which together encode degrees of formality, intimacy, and power distance. Korean speakers select between address suffixes such as *-ssi* (씨), *-nim* (님), or kinship/role-based titles like *선생님* (seonsaeng-nim, ‘teacher’) depending on relational status, context, and age difference. Crucially, such choices are interwoven with corresponding speech endings that adjust the overall politeness level of the utterance. Interviews with Korean instructors confirmed that these address strategies are integral to maintaining social harmony (조화) and relational balance (관계 유지) in Korean society.

When compared side by side, several contrastive patterns become evident between the two languages. The Indonesian system is lexically rich but morphologically simple, relying on titles and kinship metaphors to convey respect and emotional proximity. By contrast, the Korean system is morphologically rich but lexically structured, embedding relational cues directly within verbal inflection and honorific markers. The boundary between formal and informal interaction in Indonesian is fluid and contextually negotiated, while in Korean it is systematically codified through linguistic form. This suggests divergent cultural orientations: Indonesian communicative culture tends toward egalitarianism, flexibility, and interpersonal solidarity, whereas Korean culture emphasizes hierarchy, formality, and age-based deference as central components of social interaction (Mukminin, 2025; Halim et al., 2024).

These linguistic and pragmatic contrasts carry significant pedagogical implications. Indonesian learners of Korean often face challenges in mastering the speech-level system and honorific distinctions, as such structures have no direct equivalent in their native pragmatic framework. Consequently, they may

underestimate the social weight of inappropriate speech-level use, potentially resulting in pragmatic infelicities or perceived impoliteness. Conversely, Korean learners of Indonesian may overgeneralize hierarchical politeness norms, producing speech that sounds overly formal, distant, or unnatural in Indonesian contexts, where informality often signals friendliness and inclusion (Hamzah, 2024; Surono 2018).

Therefore, this contrastive analysis underscores the importance of explicit pragmatic instruction in language teaching. Integrating cross-cultural pragmatic comparison-especially in the domain of address systems-can enhance learners' sociopragmatic awareness, helping them navigate the subtleties of respect, familiarity, and relational dynamics in intercultural communication.

In a broader sense, this study contributes to contrastive pragmatics by mapping the "address system" dimension-lexical, morphological, and situational-across two typologically and culturally distinct languages. By doing so, it provides a nuanced picture of how linguistic structures reflect and reinforce cultural values, and how these values manifest in everyday interactional behavior. This reinforces the view that language and culture are mutually constitutive, and that pragmatic competence involves not only knowing what to say, but how, when, and to whom to say it in culturally appropriate ways.

Conclusion

This study concludes that both Indonesian and Korean languages encode social relations through their address systems, yet they employ fundamentally different linguistic strategies to express respect, hierarchy, and social distance. Indonesian relies predominantly on lexical flexibility, where speakers choose from a wide range of address terms-including kinship labels (such as Bapak, Ibu, Kakak, Adik) and honorific titles (Pak, Bu, Mas, Mbak)-to convey politeness and social alignment. The choice of form in Indonesian is highly context-dependent, influenced by factors such as age, familiarity, occupation, and situational formality. This fluidity demonstrates that politeness in Indonesian is constructed dynamically through pragmatic negotiation and shared cultural norms.

In contrast, the Korean address system is structurally bound to morphological hierarchy. Honorifics are systematically embedded within the grammar, affecting not only address terms but also verb endings, particles, and pronouns. Korean thus encodes social hierarchy and respect as obligatory grammatical features rather than as optional lexical choices. This morphological encoding reflects the deep-rooted Confucian values in Korean culture, emphasizing respect for elders, clear social boundaries, and adherence to established hierarchies. The Korean system, therefore, tends to be more rigid and rule-governed, leaving less room for spontaneous lexical innovation compared to Indonesian.

The contrast between lexical flexibility in Indonesian and grammatical hierarchy in Korean illustrates how each language mirrors its respective cultural worldview. Indonesian, as a lingua franca in a diverse archipelagic society, emphasizes adaptability, inclusivity, and situational pragmatism in communication. Korean, on the other hand, reflects a collectivist orientation that values stability, respect, and formality in interpersonal interaction. These linguistic patterns demonstrate that language is not merely a communicative tool but also a repository of social cognition and cultural identity.

From a broader perspective, these findings have significant implications for intercultural communication and language education. For learners and educators, understanding how social relations are encoded differently across languages can prevent pragmatic misunderstandings and foster cross-cultural empathy. In teaching contexts, explicit instruction on address terms, politeness strategies, and the socio-cultural motivations behind them should be prioritized, particularly for speakers transitioning between languages with differing politeness systems, such as Indonesian learners of Korean or vice versa. Future research may extend this study by incorporating a larger and more diverse corpus of natural speech data to allow for quantitative analysis. Investigating generational variation could also offer valuable insight

into how modernization, globalization, and media exposure are reshaping patterns of address in both societies. Comparative research involving other languages in the Southeast and East Asian regions may further enrich our understanding of how linguistic politeness and social hierarchy are negotiated across cultures.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the idea that linguistic forms of address serve as cultural mirrors-reflecting how societies perceive and structure human relationships. The contrastive analysis between Indonesian and Korean highlights not only the linguistic diversity of politeness strategies but also the universal human effort to maintain respect, harmony, and social balance through language.

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