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The Unifying Language: Traces of Tolerance and Social Harmony in Palopo City

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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in building public awareness of the importance of tolerance, particularly amidst increasing cultural diversity and the potential for social friction in multicultural societies. Palopo City, a region with diverse ethnicities, languages, and social backgrounds, faces challenges in maintaining social harmony. This study aims to analyze the role of language in fostering tolerance and social harmony in the multicultural society of Palopo City. This study uses a qualitative approach with a field study method. Data collection techniques through observation, interviews, and documentation. The object of the study is the practice of language use in social interactions among residents of Palopo City. Data validity was tested using data triangulation and source triangulation. Data analysis includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results show that language functions as a communication tool, a unifying instrument, a means of strengthening relationships, and a form of social empathy. The practices of code switching, code mixing, and language adjustment according to the social context strengthen interethnic solidarity and prevent misunderstandings. These findings confirm that adaptive, polite, and contextual language practices contribute to the creation of a tolerant and harmonious society in Palopo City. The community, educators, and community leaders in Palopo City need to implement adaptive, polite, and inclusive language practices as a primary strategy in strengthening tolerance and social harmony in a multicultural society.

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Introduction

Indonesia is a country endowed with remarkable diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, and culture. This diversity constitutes a distinctive characteristic of the Indonesian nation and can serve as a significant strength in fostering unity and national cohesion (Munawarah et al., 2024). However, diversity also has the potential to generate social conflict if it is not managed wisely (Peter & Surti, 2025). One of the key aspects that plays a crucial role in shaping harmonious social life is language. Language functions as a bridge that enables people to live in harmony, to respect one another, and to maintain social cohesion (Ebele & Ahmad, 2025; Teibowei & Therese, 2024).

In the contemporary digital era, language constitutes a crucial aspect of communication among individuals (Sukmawaty & Firman, 2023). Language reflects the perspectives, cultural values, and social attitudes of a society (Anisa Niwanda et al., 2024). It also serves as a symbol of unity in the context of globalization (Alfian et al., 2024). When used wisely, language can function as an effective medium for promoting the values of tolerance, mutual understanding, and social harmony among diverse groups.

Social tolerance refers to an attitude of mutual respect and the ability to accept differences within communal life in accordance with prevailing norms (Abdulatif & Dewi, 2021). Meanwhile, social harmony denotes the establishment of balanced, peaceful, and mutually supportive relationships among members of society. Both tolerance and social harmony depend not only on individual attitudes but are also strongly influenced by patterns of communication and behavior in everyday life. In this context, language plays a crucial role in bridging cohesion within a multicultural society.

Despite its considerable potential to promote tolerance and harmony, language is often used in ways that instead exacerbate differences and generate social friction. Language can become a trigger for social tension when it is employed to spread hatred, discrimination, or prejudice against other groups (Meytha et al., 2024). Hate speech frequently gives rise to tensions on social media and contributes to social fragmentation. This phenomenon is evident across various spheres of life, ranging from social media platforms to interactions in public spaces, where language is often used to express hostility, stereotypes, and inequality. Therefore, it is essential to understand how language can be used constructively to reinforce the values of tolerance and to foster social harmony within society.

Language is a system of symbols used for communication among individuals within a society (Mailani et al., 2022). In a social context, language plays a dual role, functioning both as a medium for conveying messages and as an instrument for maintaining social relationships among members of society. Language also shapes social identity, whereby particular groups can be identified through the language they use (for example, regional languages or those associated with specific ethnic groups) (Santoso et al., 2023). In this sense, language creates boundaries that distinguish one group from another. However, through the use of inclusive and respectful language, such boundaries can be narrowed to foster harmony.

One branch of linguistics, sociolinguistics, situates language within the context of its relationship with speakers in society. This perspective is based on the reality that in social life, individuals function not only as independent actors but also as members of communities who interact with one another (Wijana & Rohmadi, 2013). This discipline

highlights the concrete details of language use, such as patterns in the use of particular languages or dialects by speakers, as well as the topics and situational contexts that underlie communication (Fishman, 1971)

Palopo city is a densely populated urban area characterized by significant ethnic diversity. Its population comprises various ethnic groups, including Bugis, Javanese, Torajan, Balinese, Madurese, and Sundanese communities (Yunus et al., 2021). The majority of the population belongs to the Bugis ethnic group, and consequently, the dominant languages used are Indonesian and the Bugis language (Rusdiansyah, 2018). These ethnic differences contribute to the multiplicity of languages used by the community (Suparman & Muhammad Nurahmad, 2022).

Multiculturalism is an approach that recognizes and celebrates cultural diversity within a society (Sugeng, Naupal, 2023). In a social context, this theory provides a framework for understanding how differences in culture, religion, language, and ethnic identity can be integrated into a broader society without erasing the unique characteristics of each group. Multiculturalism not only emphasizes tolerance toward differences but also underscores appreciation and respect for diversity as a valuable asset that must be preserved and celebrated. This theory is often applied in countries characterized by high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity, such as Canada, Australia, and Indonesia. Fundamentally, multiculturalism stresses the importance of not merely tolerating differences, but also recognizing them as integral components of society.

Previous studies indicate that efforts to build tolerance and social harmony in multicultural societies have been undertaken through various approaches. Rahmawati & Hariyati, (2024) emphasize the role of multicultural communication in fostering tolerance through communicative strategies that promote harmonious social life. In line with this, Chudzaifah et al., (2024) highlight the importance of interfaith dialogue and the introduction of diversity values through open and objective approaches to cultivate a harmonious society. Meanwhile, Zumrud, (2024) demonstrates that education and innovation in learning contribute to instilling respect for differences as a foundation for social harmony. Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine the role of language as an instrument for strengthening tolerance remain limited. Therefore, this study offers novelty by investigating the role of language in both fostering and potentially undermining social harmony within a multicultural society in Palopo City. Accordingly, this study contributes to enriching the understanding of the importance of language management as a strategy for creating harmonious social interactions amid diversity.

This study aims to examine the role of language in fostering tolerance and social harmony in Palopo city, as well as to understand how language can be utilized as a tool for disseminating positive messages that support diversity and intergroup cohesion. By understanding the role of language in this context, it is expected that strategies can be identified to promote more inclusive language use while minimizing the use of divisive and provocative language. The significance of this study lies in the socio-political context of Indonesia, which is currently facing substantial challenges related to issues of diversity and pluralism. By investigating the relationship between language and social harmony, this research is expected to contribute to efforts aimed at creating a more inclusive, tolerant, and peaceful social environment, both at the local and national levels.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach that emphasizes an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly the contribution of language in fostering tolerance and social harmony in Palopo city. This approach enables the researcher to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and social practices of the community within the context of interactions across ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries. This study was conducted in Palopo City, South Sulawesi, from August to October 2026. The research subjects were selected purposively in accordance with the research objectives, involving a total of eight informants consisting of traditional leaders, religious leaders, students, and members of the general public. The object of the study was the practice of language use in social interactions among community members.

The type of data used is descriptive qualitative data, obtained from three primary sources: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies. Data collection techniques include observation to identify communication practices that reflect tolerance and social harmony, in-depth interviews with respondents from various social backgrounds to explore their perceptions of the role of language, and documentation studies of relevant written documents and media materials. The data collection instruments consist of interview guidelines and observation sheets developed by the researcher in accordance with the research focus. The interview guidelines emphasize aspects such as the role of language, forms of language use, and communication strategies, while the observation sheets focus on everyday communication practices that demonstrate politeness, inclusivity, and acceptance of differences within society.

Data validity is ensured through methodological and source triangulation to minimize bias and to ensure an accurate representation of social reality. The collected data are then analyzed qualitatively through three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is carried out by simplifying, focusing, and selecting information from field notes so that only data relevant to the research focus are presented. Data display is conducted in the form of logical and systematic narratives that enable readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. Conclusion drawing is performed gradually, beginning from the initial stages of data collection, by developing preliminary interpretations and conclusions that are subsequently refined and strengthened into the final conclusions of the study.

Results

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation studies conducted, it was found that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for establishing social relationships, strengthening solidarity, and fostering mutual respect among community members. Language serves as a space through which individuals can express their identities without generating social conflict.

In various interactions, both formal and informal, the use of regional languages and the Indonesian language appears to play a strategic role in creating familiarity and maintaining social harmony. Regional languages are employed as symbols of emotional closeness and cultural identity, while the Indonesian language functions as a neutral medium that enables individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds to communicate on an equal footing.

Language as a Means of Communication

Language serves as the primary means of facilitating communication among individuals, particularly within a pluralistic society such as Palopo. The interview results indicate that the people of Palopo tend to adjust their language use according to the social context and their interlocutors. A community leader, Informant 1, stated that when at home, they use the regional language to interact with family members, whereas in the workplace or other public settings, they use the Indonesian language.

A similar view was also expressed by Informant 2, a teacher, who stated that the language most frequently used in the workplace is Indonesian, whereas at home the regional language is used.

Furthermore, Informant 3, a university student, stated that he uses Indonesian in communication with friends or lecturers, although it is still spoken with a regional accent. Although differences in accent or dialect with regional nuances frequently occur among peers and are often accompanied by joking interactions, such differences become a space for mutual tolerance and respect, rather than a form of social rivalry or prestige.

In addition, Informant 4 stated that the use of regional language depends on communicative needs. She explained that in daily communication she most frequently uses the Tae' language, while sometimes mixing it with Indonesian when interacting with individuals who do not understand the regional language. She also adjusts his language use in certain situations; for example, when meeting Bugis speakers, she makes an effort to use a few expressions in the Bugis language as a form of respect toward the interlocutor.

This statement indicates a level of linguistic awareness among the people of Palopo. They understand that regional languages are more appropriately used within familial and local cultural contexts, whereas Indonesian functions as a means of interethnic communication so that messages can be understood by all parties. This pattern of language adaptation demonstrates social flexibility that contributes to the development of tolerance in everyday interactions.

Observations in traditional markets reveal a similar phenomenon. In these settings, traders and buyers interact using a mixture of Indonesian and regional languages. When offering goods, they often use expressions such as: "Apa kita cari iyye?" and "Mau ki' beli berapa, nak?". This form of code-mixing indicates that people attempt to adapt to their interlocutors, not to assert ethnic identity, but rather to create a more familiar and friendly communicative atmosphere. In this context, language functions not only as a tool for conveying messages but also as a symbol of hospitality and respect for differences.

Interview results with a university student, Informant 5, further support this finding. He stated that Indonesian is used as a common language understood by people from various backgrounds and ethnic groups, as language plays an important role as a bridge for interethnic communication and in preventing misunderstandings. This statement illustrates that the younger generation in Palopo understands the function of language as a communicative tool that can reduce the potential for social conflict. The Indonesian language is positioned as a neutral and unifying language, while regional languages continue to be respected as cultural identities of respective groups.

Language as a Means of Unifying a Diverse Society

Language serves as a means of unifying the diverse community of Palopo. The use of Indonesian as the national language functions as a bridge among groups with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Through language, people can foster a sense of belonging and strengthen social solidarity. Informant 6 stated that the Indonesian language plays a very important role as a unifying language in Palopo. By using Indonesian, everyone can understand one another despite differences in ethnicity or the use of regional languages in daily communication. Language, in this sense, becomes a medium for encouraging social cohesion within the community.

Informant 1, a traditional leader, stated that there is a local expression he frequently uses, namely "*Maiki ta mamasa kada,*" which is used to encourage unity, cooperation, and togetherness among the community. He applies this expression in everyday communication during local events or community gatherings. This expression represents local values that carry moral messages about the importance of solidarity. Its use in specific social contexts, such as community deliberations, customary activities, and minor conflict resolution, demonstrates that language plays an active role in strengthening social bonds and fostering mutual respect among community members.

Informant 5 mentioned a Javanese expression, "*Mangan ora mangan sing penting kumpul,*" which means whether there is food or not, what matters is being together. This simple expression contains profound social meaning, reflecting a worldview that prioritizes togetherness and kinship over material concerns. Similar values are also found in various regional languages such as Bugis and Tae', which emphasize sipakatau (mutual humanization) and sipakainge (mutual reminding). These values are reinforced through everyday speech and have become a foundation for social tolerance within diversity. Language, therefore, does not only function as a means of conveying meaning but also as a medium for instilling moral values and solidarity that underpin social harmony. When people interact using polite, respectful, and inclusive language, they indirectly strengthen social ties and expand the space for tolerance.

Language as a Means of Strengthening Social Bonds

Field observations indicate that language plays an important role in strengthening social relations among community members. In various social activities such as communal work (gotong royong), religious events, and traditional gatherings, language is used not only to convey messages but also to build familiarity. During communal work activities, for instance, the researcher observed informal conversations among residents working together, such as: "*Apa mi jama tu?*"

Such greetings are often followed by light laughter and continued conversation in Indonesian. The use of regional language as an opening greeting demonstrates that language has a strong social function, namely creating an atmosphere of closeness and mutual respect. In the social context of Palopo, regional languages serve as symbols of emotional intimacy, while Indonesian functions as a bridge that expands interethnic interaction. Informant 7, who is of Torajan ethnic background and a Tae' language speaker, stated that he often uses greetings such as "*apa kareba*" and "*maballo to sola*" to maintain social relations among community members.

Meanwhile, Informant 8, a religious leader, also emphasized the importance of word choice in interfaith communication, stating that in religious activities he always pays close attention to the language he uses. He adjusts his language according to the dominant ethnic group so that they can easily accept the message being conveyed.

This statement indicates that language possesses the power to touch emotions and build cross-faith understanding. Through appropriate and polite language choice, messages of tolerance can be effectively communicated without offending others. This is in line with the social values of the Palopo community, which highly respects courtesy and differences.

Language as a Manifestation of Empathy and Social Concern

People use language not only to convey messages, but also to express care, appreciation, and sensitivity toward others' feelings. This phenomenon is reflected in word choice, speaking style, and linguistic strategies that take into account the social and emotional conditions of the interlocutor.

The use of the pronoun "we" ("kita") in interaction demonstrates that the community prioritizes values of togetherness and collective belonging. This linguistic form reflects social empathy, in which speakers attempt to create an equal and mutually respectful communicative atmosphere without emphasizing individual superiority. There is also a commonly used expression regarded as a symbol of politeness, namely "iyye". As stated by Informant 2, polite language is used such as the word "iyye". Although it is not standard Indonesian, it is considered a polite and friendly expression within the community.

The term "*tabe*" carries a broad meaning; however, it is generally used to express permission, apology, or respect toward the interlocutor. In the daily life of the Palopo community, *tabe* is used across ethnic groups by Bugis, Torajan, and Javanese speakers alike, thus becoming a universal symbol of politeness understood by all social groups.

Observations show that expressions of empathy are also present in digital-based communication, such as conversations within community WhatsApp groups. The people of Palopo continue to demonstrate empathetic communication, for instance by using opening greetings such as "*Assalamu'alaikum, tabe' izin menyampaikan...*" and closing messages with polite expressions such as "*Terima kasih sebelumnya.*" This phenomenon indicates that social empathy remains preserved even when interactions occur in virtual spaces. These findings demonstrate that language functions as a form of empathy that reinforces the character of the Palopo community as one that upholds human values, politeness, and care for others.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that language plays a highly fundamental role in the social life of the people of Palopo. Language is not merely understood as a medium for conveying messages, but also as a means of facilitating interethnic and intergroup interactions. Based on the interview results, the community of Palopo demonstrates adaptive linguistic behavior in accordance with social context, interlocutors, and communicative situations. This phenomenon indicates the presence of communicative competence as proposed by Hymes in (Utami & Handayani, 2023), who argues that an

individual's language ability is determined not only by mastery of linguistic rules but also by the ability to adapt language use to its social context.

The practice of using regional languages within the family environment and Indonesian in public spaces represents a form of social adaptation that reflects linguistic awareness of cultural diversity. In everyday interactions, the researcher also identified instances of code-switching and code-mixing, indicating speakers' social flexibility. This finding is consistent with the study by (Maddimunri et al., 2025), which shows that the use of mixed Bugis and Indonesian languages functions to strengthen interethnic social solidarity and reduce the potential for communication conflict. The phenomenon of code-mixing in daily communication also aligns with the findings of Rohmani & Ali Putra, (2023), which state that code-mixing is influenced by environmental factors and frequently occurs in bilingual communities as a strategy to build familiarity, enhance communication efficiency, and express cultural identity without generating social tension. Thus, it can be concluded that adaptive language use in Palopo city is an important factor in fostering tolerance, preventing misunderstandings, and strengthening harmonious social relations.

Findings related to dialectal variation are relevant to the concept of language accommodation in Communication Accommodation Theory proposed by (Soliz & Giles, 2014), which explains that speakers tend to adjust their language choice, dialect, or speech style in order to achieve social closeness and reduce intergroup distance. The tendency of the community to use Indonesian in public spaces and regional languages in family domains reflects speakers' efforts to adapt in order to create harmonious interactions.

Language functions as an instrument of unity and a reinforcement of social solidarity within the multicultural society of Palopo. Indonesian, as the national language, plays a crucial role in creating communicative equality across ethnic and cultural boundaries. Through the use of a shared language, people build a sense of togetherness and strengthen social cohesion. This view aligns with theory of the social function of language by Fishman (1972), which emphasizes that language serves as a means of social integration and the formation of collective identity.

The Bugis cultural values of *sipakatau* (mutual humanization) and *sipakainge* (mutual reminding) reflect the function of language as a vehicle for transmitting moral and social ethics. Through such expressions, language functions to instill principles of togetherness and tolerance. This perspective is supported by Halliday, as cited in Lindayani et al. (2024), who argues that language has an interpersonal function, namely to build and maintain social relationships among individuals. The use of polite and neutral language in multicultural settings contributes to strengthening social harmony and reducing the potential for disintegration. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a social mechanism that reinforces values of togetherness and strengthens mutual respect amid diversity.

Field observations indicate that language plays a central role in strengthening social relations and fostering familiarity among community members. In various social activities such as communal work (gotong royong), religious events, and traditional ceremonies, the use of both regional languages and Indonesian functions to create an interactive atmosphere that is warm and friendly. In addition, interview findings with a religious leader reveal the presence of pragmatic awareness in the selection of words and speech styles according to the audience. This finding is supported by the study of Adnan et al., (2024)

which states that the use of polite and context-appropriate language in interfaith communication can strengthen mutual respect and reduce social prejudice. Thus, in the society of Palopo City, language does not only function as a tool of communication but also as an instrument that strengthens social networks, fosters mutual understanding, and contributes to the formation of a harmonious and tolerant social order.

Within a multicultural society, adaptive, polite, and context-sensitive linguistic practices demonstrate that language functions as a primary means of building and maintaining social tolerance. Indonesian serves as a symbol of national equality and a unifying medium across ethnic groups, while regional languages function as a means of expressing cultural identity and emotional closeness. Accordingly, the wise use of language contributes directly to the formation of an inclusive, harmonious, and civilized society. Fundamentally, humans do not only function as individuals but also as members of interacting communities (Wijana & Rohmadi, 2013).

In a multicultural social context, linguistic empathy becomes an essential element in maintaining harmonious intergroup relations. Language used with sensitivity reflects the community's awareness of the need to place themselves in the situation and feelings of others, thereby enabling peaceful and mutually understanding communication. This reality shows that linguistic empathy is not only rooted in traditional speech culture but is also successfully adapted in modern communication practices. The community continues to preserve local politeness values, such as the use of the term "*tabe'*," which symbolizes humility and respect toward others. This linguistic sensitivity reflects a collective identity that upholds politeness, solidarity, and social care, thereby contributing to the creation of a peaceful and respectful social life.

Conclusion

Language within the multicultural society of Palopo city has been shown to play a significant role in fostering tolerance and social harmony through its functions as a means of communication, a unifying instrument, a medium for strengthening social relations, and a manifestation of social empathy. Practices of code-switching, code-mixing, and context-sensitive language choice demonstrate linguistic flexibility that helps prevent misunderstandings while simultaneously strengthening interethnic solidarity. Politeness and sensitivity in language use across various social, customary, and religious interactions reflect linguistic empathy that reinforces social networks and promotes the creation of an inclusive, harmonious, and civilized society.

As a recommendation, educational institutions are encouraged to integrate communication ethics and language politeness education into both the curriculum and extracurricular activities. For future researchers, it is suggested that the scope of study be expanded to other regions or more diverse communities in order to examine linguistic dynamics within different social contexts.

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