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Assessing the Impact of Linguistic Diversity on Interpersonal Comfort of Multilingual Student in Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how linguistic differences influence communication comfort in multilingual peer relationships among Surabaya State University students. Within increasingly diverse higher education settings, interactional comfort plays a critical role in fostering peaceful, cohesive, and harmonious social bonds among students hailing from varying regional and cultural backgrounds. Employing a quantitative survey research design, empirical data was collected through structured questionnaires distributed to active university students representing a wide range of native languages and local dialects. The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the exact degree to which language discrepancies affect daily social interactions, emotional comfort, and the overall ease of building meaningful peer connections within the campus environment. By examining these dynamic patterns, the study highlights how language barriers and code-switching strategies shape social inclusion. Ultimately, the findings offer valuable empirical insights into campus social dynamics, demonstrating the pivotal role of linguistic adaptation in promoting positive interpersonal relationship development and cross-cultural understanding within multicultural academic communities.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menguji secara mendalam bagaimana perbedaan bahasa memengaruhi tingkat kenyamanan berkomunikasi dalam hubungan pertemanan multibahasa di kalangan mahasiswa Universitas Negeri Surabaya. Di tengah lingkungan perguruan tinggi yang semakin beragam dan heterogen, kenyamanan berinteraksi memainkan peran yang sangat krusial dalam membangun serta memelihara ikatan sosial yang damai, kohesif, dan harmonis di antara mahasiswa yang berasal dari berbagai latar belakang daerah maupun bahasa ibu. Menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif melalui metode survei, data empiris dikumpulkan menggunakan instrumen kuesioner terstruktur yang disebarkan kepada mahasiswa aktif dari pelbagai latar belakang kebahasaan. Fokus utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis dan mengevaluasi sejauh mana hambatan atau perbedaan bahasa memengaruhi interaksi sosial harian, kenyamanan emosional, serta kemudahan dalam membangun hubungan pertemanan yang bermakna di lingkungan kampus. Dengan memetakan pola dinamika tersebut, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana penyesuaian bahasa dan strategi alih kode membentuk inklusi sosial. Hasil dari penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan wawasan empiris yang komprehensif mengenai dinamika sosial kampus, sekaligus menegaskan pentingnya adaptasi kebahasaan dalam mendukung perkembangan hubungan interpersonal serta pemahaman lintas budaya di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi multikultural.

INTRODUCTION

Human interaction fundamentally relies on language as a primary medium for expressing thoughts, emotions, and intentions. As conceptualized by Chaer (2003), language operates as a essential verbal instrument for human communication. Building upon this, Chaer (1994) defined language as an arbitrary system of vocal symbols utilized by community members to interact and establish social identity. Although alternative communication channels exist, language remains the most comprehensive and versatile mechanism for social cohesion. Furthermore, language is intrinsically bound to cultural framework; Chaer and Agustina (1995) emphasize that while its primary function is communicative, language also bridges individuals across distinct cultural backgrounds. Consequently, language and culture maintain an egalitarian, co-dependent relationship vital to human social existence.

In the contemporary era of globalization, cross-cultural and multilingual interactions have become increasingly commonplace, particularly within higher education institutions characterized by diverse ethnic and regional student populations. In campus environments such as Surabaya State University, students routinely navigate daily social exchanges using a mix of regional dialects, national languages (Indonesian), and foreign languages. These linguistic disparities can either fortify social connections or present significant communication barriers. When pronounced language differences exist, students may experience awkwardness, psychological discomfort, or social alienation caused by divergent interpretations. The deep interconnection between language and culture often creates difficulties in translating subtle expressions, resulting in miscommunication that diminishes interaction quality. As Gumperz (1982) posited, language serves as both a gateway connecting cultures and a potential barrier to effective communication. This aligns with empirical observations by Gudykunst and Kim (2017), who demonstrated that linguistic divergence frequently generates interpersonal tension, as individuals with lower language fluency often feel unappreciated or excluded during peer group conversations.

Within multilingual peer relationships, the level of interaction comfort reflects the ease and psychological security individuals feel when communicating with peers from different linguistic backgrounds. According to Gudykunst (2004), comfort in cross-cultural and multilingual settings is strongly determined by an individual's capacity to navigate cultural and linguistic nuances. Baker (2011) demonstrated that students with higher language proficiency in multilingual environments exhibit greater confidence and communicative ease. Conversely, those facing language barriers often feel sidelined, which diminishes overall friendship satisfaction. Addressing these challenges requires mutual effort; as Byram (2008) highlighted, deciphering intended meanings across different languages remains a primary hurdle in multilingual relationships. However, when individuals demonstrate openness and a active desire to understand one another despite linguistic gaps, interpersonal comfort increases substantially.

This research aims to analyze the influence of language differences on the level of comfort within multilingual friendships among Surabaya State University students. In this context, friendship comfort denotes the ease with which students communicate, achieve mutual understanding, and cultivate harmonious relationships amidst linguistic diversity. Understanding these dynamics is critical for identifying how linguistic variations shape campus social life and for developing strategies to support positive multicultural student interactions. Thus, based on the outlined background, this study addresses the following research questions, first, how do language differences influence the level of comfort in multilingual friendships among students and second what factors determine students' level of comfort within peer relationships involving diverse languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory, formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, posits that individuals construct their self-concept based on perceived membership in specific social groups. Within multilingual student friendships, language choice acts as a primary identity marker determining group acceptance. The theory assumes that individuals speaking the same language naturally categorize one another as an "in-group," whereas speakers of different languages are relegated to the "out-group." This categorization can trigger interpersonal friction, as individuals tend to display preferential treatment toward in-group members. While shared language strengthens social cohesion and psychological closeness, linguistic divergence generates social distance. Consequently, Social Identity Theory offers an explanatory framework for understanding how language differences influence interactional comfort and social dynamics among students at Surabaya State University.

Complementing this perspective, Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explains how individuals alter their communicative behavior during social exchanges based on psychological, social, and relational factors. Accommodation occurs through convergence—adapting one's speech style to mirror an interlocutor and reduce social distance—or divergence, where individuals accentuate linguistic differences to reinforce distinct identities. Unaccommodated language differences frequently induce awkwardness, mutual unintelligibility, and social discomfort (Gudykunst, 2005). Although some multilingual students experience anxiety when unable to converse in their peers' primary language, others prefer retaining their native dialects without adapting. CAT illuminates how communicative adaptation—or the lack thereof—directly impacts interactional harmony and student comfort in multilingual settings.

Language serves as the primary mechanism for conveying ideas, intentions, emotions, and thoughts. According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), language is defined as an arbitrary system of vocal symbols utilized by community members to interact and identify themselves, as well as polite, refined verbal conduct. Chaer (2003:30) defines language as an essential verbal instrument for human communication, while Wardhaugh (2010) highlights that language functions not merely to transmit information, but also to build social relationships and construct identity. Within multilingual friendships, language differences encompass variations in dialects and native tongues used during peer interactions. Achieving competence in multilingual settings requires both polyglot abilities and the flexible capacity to adapt to shifting social contexts, as unmanaged linguistic friction can diminish interpersonal comfort and alter friendship quality.

Interactional comfort refers to the subjective sense of security, ease, and relaxation felt when communicating across linguistic boundaries. Beyond shared vocabulary, interactional comfort depends on navigating cultural and linguistic nuances across three distinct dimensions. Verbal comfort involves conversing fluently without perceived friction across multiple languages. Social comfort centers on feeling accepted and valued within a peer group, allowing self-expression free from fear of judgment or marginalization. Cognitive comfort pertains to the ease of processing and understanding messages delivered in different languages without experiencing mental overload or ambiguity.

Multilingual friendship describes social bonds where peers regularly interact using more than one language. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), friendship is a fundamental social bond offering emotional support, a sense of belonging, and mutual trust. These relationships differ from monolingual ones through distinct dynamics, including the fluid use of multiple languages depending on situational context, adaptation to diverse cultural norms, and code-

switching—such as transitioning from Javanese to Indonesian—to accommodate non-speakers and maintain inclusive communication.

Previous empirical studies provide valuable context for understanding these dynamics. Qualitative research conducted by Angela Kojoh, Vamela Aruperes, Briggta Rantung, Mint Husen Raya Aditama, and Rinna Yuanita Kasenda demonstrated that language and cultural differences significantly influence daily campus communication; however, these differences foster mutual learning and unity rather than ethnocentric biases. In a quantitative study, Radiko Arviyanda, Enrico Fernandito, and Prabu Landung observed that students utilize regional languages when interacting with family and peers from identical origins, whereas Indonesian serves as the primary unifying identity across broader campus exchanges. Furthermore, a literature review by Rivandi Aju Gurning, Widia Wati Sipayung, Elsah Sinurat, and Yuliana Sari Saragih concluded that a comprehensive understanding of linguistic variations is critical for preserving cultural richness and maintaining social harmony within diverse communities.

Synthesizing these theoretical and empirical foundations, the research model examines the direct effect of language differences on the level of comfort in multilingual student friendships. The independent variable of language differences—encompassing the types of languages used, frequency of usage, and overall linguistic diversity—is conceptualized to directly influence the dependent variable of comfort level, which is measured through subjective feelings of comfort, ease of communication, and interaction quality. Grounded in this model, the study tests two opposing hypotheses regarding Communication Science students at Surabaya State University (Class of 2023): the primary hypothesis (H1) states that language differences exert a significant effect on the level of comfort in multilingual friendships, whereas the null hypothesis (H0) asserts that language differences do not exert a significant effect on this comfort level.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employs a quantitative survey design to empirically analyze the impact of language differences on interpersonal comfort within multilingual friendships. According to Sugiyono (2011), quantitative methodology relies on numerical data processed through statistical techniques to test predefined hypotheses, while Sutisna (2020) emphasizes that quantitative research grounds findings in observed factual data. Data collection utilizes a dual-source approach comprising primary and secondary data. Primary data were gathered directly from participants via self-administered questionnaires hosted on Google Forms, providing direct insights into students' perceptions, communication comfort, and linguistic accommodation. Secondary data, as described by Sari and Zefri (2019), encompass information gathered from pre-existing literature, academic journals, and institutional archives, which serve to establish a solid theoretical foundation and contextualize student interactions at Surabaya State University.

Operationalization of Variables

The research framework evaluates two primary variables: the independent variable of language differences (X) and the dependent variable of comfort levels in multilingual friendships (Y). Language differences encompass the diversity of languages spoken within peer groups—such as regional dialects including Javanese, Batak, Madurese, and Sundanese alongside the national language, Indonesian—measured through language type, usage frequency, and group linguistic diversity. Conversely, comfort level reflects the subjective degree of ease, emotional security, and social inclusion experienced during cross-linguistic exchanges, operationalized through indicators of interactional ease, psychological security, and relationship quality. Both variables

are measured using a standardized research instrument featuring a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The target population for this study comprises approximately 500 active undergraduate students from the Communication Science Department at Surabaya State University (Class of 2023) who regularly engage in cross-linguistic peer interactions. To obtain a representative sample, Slovin's formula was applied with a 10% margin of error (e = 0.10), yielding a required sample size of 84 respondents. Sampling was conducted using a purposive random sampling method (Sugiyono, 2011) to ensure participants met specific inclusion criteria, specifically being active university students who actively engage in daily social interactions with peers from differing language backgrounds.

Data Collection and Research Instrument

Primary data were collected systematically using an online survey distributed via Google Forms to ensure broad accessibility and efficient data aggregation. The survey instrument was divided into demographic items, assessments of linguistic variation and accommodation capability, and Likert-scale statements measuring interactional comfort. The instrument contained ten primary statement items: five items addressing the independent variable (measuring multilingual usage, code-switching frequency, and group language diversity) and five items measuring the dependent variable (evaluating interactional ease, emotional comfort, and the absence of social communication barriers).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures executed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics—including mean, median, mode, and standard deviation—were calculated to summarize the central tendencies and dispersion of the dataset. Prior to hypothesis testing, the instrument underwent rigorous validation. As noted by Cooper and Schindler (cited in Zulganef, 2006) and Ghozali (2009), validity testing ensures that an instrument accurately measures its intended constructs; this was evaluated using Bivariate Pearson correlation, where items showing a calculated r value exceeding the critical table value at a 0.05 significance level were deemed valid. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, following Sugiharto and Situnjak (2006) and Ghozali (2009), who define reliability as the consistency and stability of measurement tools over time. An Alpha threshold exceeding 0.700 was set to confirm satisfactory internal consistency. Finally, inferential testing utilized Pearson correlation analysis to establish the strength and direction of linear association between variables, alongside simple linear regression modeling to evaluate the explanatory power and significance ($p < 0.05$) of language differences on interpersonal comfort levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data collected from 84 active undergraduate students in the Communication Science Department at Surabaya State University (Class of 2023) were analyzed to evaluate the relationship between language differences and interactional comfort. Following the instrument testing procedures outlined by Cooper and Schindler (cited in Zulganef, 2006) and Ghozali (2009), all ten questionnaire items underwent Bivariate Pearson correlation testing. Each item yielded a calculated correlation value (r_{count}) exceeding the critical table value ($r_{\text{table}} = 0.214$ at $\alpha = 0.05$), confirming construct validity. Furthermore, in accordance with Sugiharto and Situnjak (2006) and Ghozali (2009), reliability testing via Cronbach's Alpha yielded coefficients

of 0.824 for Language Differences (X) and 0.851 for Level of Comfort (Y), exceeding the 0.700 threshold and indicating strong internal consistency.

Descriptive analysis indicates that students experience high exposure to linguistic diversity ($M = 3.82$), routinely navigating conversations involving Indonesian, local dialects (such as Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, and Batak), and foreign languages. Concurrently, overall interactional comfort remains high ($M = 3.96$), suggesting that linguistic variations do not inherently diminish social harmony within campus peer groups.

Table 1
Instrument Testing

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Status
Language Differences (***X***)	3.82	0.64	0.824	Valid & Reliable
Level of Comfort (***Y***)	3.96	0.58	0.851	Valid & Reliable

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to test the influence of language differences (X) on interactional comfort (Y). The regression model demonstrated a statistically significant relationship ($F = 28.42, p < 0.001$), with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.508$, indicating a moderate positive relationship. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.258$) reveals that 25.8% of the variance in students' interactional comfort is directly explained by linguistic diversity and accommodation dynamics, while the remaining 74.2% is influenced by unmeasured exogenous factors. Because the calculated significance level ($p = 0.000$) falls below the standard threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the primary hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. Language differences exert a statistically significant effect on the level of comfort in multilingual friendships among Surabaya State University students.

The empirical finding that language differences significantly shape interactional comfort validates the foundational premises of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1970s). While initial linguistic boundaries can categorize unfamiliar peers as the "out-group" and create social distance, continuous interaction in a shared academic environment allows students to reframe multilingual peer groups into an inclusive "in-group." As conceptualized by Chaer (1994, 2003) and Chaer and Agustina (1995), language serves as both an arbitrary symbolic system and an essential tool for social identity and cultural integration. Rather than acting strictly as a communicative barrier, language variations within Surabaya State University foster a shared social framework where cultural identity is maintained alongside group cohesion.

This dynamic aligns closely with Howard Giles's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Students report frequent code-switching—such as transitioning from Javanese to Indonesian—to ensure non-native speakers are included. This adaptive strategy represents communicative convergence, where individuals modify their speech style to minimize social distance and alleviate mutual awkwardness (Gudykunst, 2005). When students actively converge, communication friction decreases, enhancing verbal, social, and cognitive comfort across peer networks. Conversely, instances of unaccommodated divergence can lead to temporary social anxiety or feelings of exclusion, supporting the assertions of Gudykunst and Kim (2017) regarding the tension generated when individuals feel sidelined during conversation.

Furthermore, the results corroborate Gudykunst's (2004) conceptualization of cross-cultural adaptation, wherein interactional comfort depends on navigating linguistic and cultural nuances.

Students who demonstrate higher linguistic adaptability express greater confidence and interpersonal ease, matching the empirical observations of Baker (2011). As Byram (2008) noted, the willingness to interpret intended meanings across diverse native tongues transforms potential communication barriers into opportunities for deeper connection. As Wardhaugh (2010) emphasized, language functions beyond raw information transmission to construct lasting social bonds. These findings resonate with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) fundamental belongingness hypothesis, demonstrating that multilingual students maintain strong emotional support and mutual trust when communicative openness is prioritized.

Finally, the findings contextualize earlier empirical research within higher education settings. As observed by Angela Kojoh et al., language and cultural differences on campus serve as catalysts for mutual learning and integration rather than ethnocentric division. This supports the patterns documented by Radiko Arviyanda et al., where regional languages preserve cultural origins while Indonesian serves as a unifying national identity that bridges diverse social circles. As highlighted by Rivandi Aju Gurning et al., recognizing and accommodating linguistic diversity is essential for preserving cultural richness while maintaining campus social harmony. Ultimately, language differences influence friendship comfort not by acting as absolute barriers, but by requiring active linguistic accommodation and mutual openness among students.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that language differences significantly influence interactional comfort within multilingual student friendships at Surabaya State University. Rather than acting as an absolute barrier to social connection, linguistic diversity is actively navigated through adaptive strategies such as code-switching and speech adjustments. By seamlessly transitioning between regional dialects and the national language, students bridge communication gaps, fostering strong emotional security, ease of interaction, and mutual understanding across diverse peer networks. From a theoretical perspective, these findings highlight the practical application of Social Identity Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory within higher education. Although different native languages can initially create social distance, continuous interaction enables students to reframe differences and build inclusive peer groups. Adapting speech patterns to accommodate non-native speakers reduces social anxiety, strengthens trust, and maintains interpersonal harmony. Ultimately, cultivating a linguistically flexible campus environment supports broader goals of educational quality, social inclusion, and cross-cultural peace within academic communities. University administrators can leverage these dynamics by encouraging programs and social spaces that embrace linguistic diversity. Future research can build upon these findings by investigating how linguistic adaptation unfolds across different academic disciplines and multi-university settings.

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