

Language styles variation in an Islamic boarding school: Sociolinguistic study and EFL implications

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ABSTRACT

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The present study examines the use of language styles among *santri* (students studying and living in an Islamic boarding school) in one of Islamic boarding schools located in East Java, Indonesia. Referring to Joos' (1967) five language styles and Allan Bell's Audience Design Theory (2014), this study explores how *santri* adjust their speech styles based on social context and interlocutors, particularly when interacting with peers, seniors, and *ustadzah* (female teachers who teach Islamic studies). Using semi-structured interviews and direct observation involving nine participants from grades seven to nine, thematic analysis revealed six main themes, notably adaptation to hierarchical relationship and strategic code-switching between Indonesian and Javanese to manage formality. Findings indicate that casual style dominates peer interactions, while consultative and formal styles are often used to communicate with seniors and *ustadzah*, often incorporating Javanese and Indonesian polite forms. Emotional and situational factors, such as when managing conflict and showing empathy also influence language choice. This study highlights *santri's* strong sociolinguistic awareness and suggests their ability to adapt speech in L1 can be utilized to enhance sociolinguistic competence in EFL (English as a foreign language) context.

Keywords: Audience design theory, EFL, Islamic boarding school education, Language style, Sociolinguistic awareness

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a tool of communication but also a reflection of social and interactional context (Alejandro, 2024; Amin, 2020; Mammadova, 2025). Language not only shapes the environment in which it is used, but also carries cultural norms and social relationships (Ahtif, 2022; Parajuli, 2021; Samajdar, 2020). This interplay between language, culture, and society is often seen from the way people adjust their speech, leading to the study of language styles. According to Hartika and Ardianto (2024), one important aspect of language use is language styles, which refers to variation in speech according to context, audience, and purpose. The use of language styles in social interactions is an essential aspect in sociolinguistic studies, especially in the context of educational institutions, such as pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) (Anwar & Rosyid, 2023; Wa'adi et al., 2024). Pesantren, as Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, have unique communication dynamics, where santri (students study and live in Islamic boarding schools) interact with various parties such as peers, seniors, and ustadzah (female teachers who teach Islamic studies), each holding distinct social roles and status. A student's choice of language style therefore reflects not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of prevailing social norms and relationships (Abbas, 2024; Ali, 2022; Emike, 2022; Wahidah et al., 2019).

The interplay between linguistic competence and social awareness is the central theory of style in sociolinguistics. According to Bell (2013), Language style is the way speakers use the language based on choices like vocabulary, syntax, and delivery that speakers select in interaction. Joos (1967) likewise notes that language style indicates the social relationship of the participants and the setting of the interactions. While numerous frameworks describe language style, the present study adopts Joos's Five Language Styles (Intimate, Casual, Consultative, Formal, Frozen) to label the actual forms speakers employ, and Bell's Audience Design Theory to explain why those forms shift. It is stated that style-shifting occurs when speakers adjust their language in response to the audience characteristics and later emphasizes that style is an indexical tool to construct identities during interactions (Bell, 2013).

Although Joos' model dates from the 1960s, it remains relevant to contemporary investigations of language style in social interaction, offering a systematic and applicable classification, particularly for describing student speech in educational institutions. However, Joos' framework alone cannot fully explain why particular styles are chosen in specific social situations. To address this limitation, the present authors integrate Bell's (2013) Audience Design, which stresses that speakers adjust their style according to audience characteristics such as social status, familiarity, and role. This is based on Bell's (2014) statement that Audience Design has become the leading model of sociolinguistic style since its proposal in 1984. Therefore, this theory provides a clear explanation for why speakers switch their language styles, allowing

the study to better understand language style variation in a more flexible and detailed way.

Most previous research on language style has centered on popular-culture domains, such as movies (Effendi, 2023; Octaviani & Purwarno, 2021), YouTube (Cendekia Putri et al., 2021; Dewi & Aulina, 2022), and Twitter statuses (Ukhtin et al., 2021), Tiktok content (Lisdawati, 2021), and celebrity interviews (Hutauruk et al., 2022). There is also a lot of research investigating only the use of specific code-switch within the *pesantren* settings such as studies conducted by Nurhayati and Hasanah (2023) and SusyLOWATI, et al. (2019). However, research that connects language style and audience design with Islamic boarding school life is still rarely carried out. There are some studies (Gufron et al, 2024; SusyLOWATI & Rusbiyantoro, 2021; Wakhidin & Ramdhani, 2021) examine language style, but none use Bell's audience design. In contrast, studies in other Islamic boarding school contexts analyzing identity in Islamic boarding schools (Sani & Romadhoni, 2025) and studies of language attitudes (Asgara et al., 2022; Utami, 2020) ignore the category of style. Consequently, a clear gap exists: studies that clearly explain how *santri* adjust their language style to different audiences in everyday conversations are still very rare.

The present study focuses on investigating spoken language styles among *santri* within one of reputable Islamic boarding schools. Specifically, it seeks to answer the two research questions:

1. What types of language styles are commonly used by *santri*?
2. How do the contexts (speaking with friends, seniors, and *ustadzah*) influence their language use?

This research is positioned to extend the findings from previous research on language styles in Islamic boarding schools by integrating the Joos-Bell framework and applying it to the context of junior high school Islamic boarding schools which have rarely been explored before. By addressing this gap, the study not only enriches the literature on language style variation within *pesantren* settings but also provides pedagogical insights into how sociolinguistic awareness can be cultivated among adolescent learners in EFL contexts.

METHODS

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the language styles used by *santri* in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment. This research design is appropriate for this study since it allows for an in-depth exploration on how *santri* communicate using their language styles in natural settings, particularly how they adjust their language styles based on their interlocutors and situations within the *pesantren* environment. As Cresswell (2013) emphasizes that qualitative research is

well suited for exploring a central phenomenon in its natural settings, enabling researchers to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, construct meanings, and interact with their environment.

Participants

The participants of this study consist of 9 *santri* from one of reputable junior high schools within the *pesantren* environment in South Malang, East Java. The participants were drawn equally from three different grade levels: seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, with three *santri* from each level. Purposive sampling was chosen to select *santri* who actively communicate and engage in interaction with friends, seniors and *ustadzah* in *ma'had* (dormitory). The criteria were used to ensure that the participants indeed have varied opportunities to use language styles differently and they can also provide rich data for this study. In addition, the diverse level of the *santri's* grade allows the researchers to observe how the language styles differ depending on hierarchical and social dynamics.

Ethical considerations

All activities done in this research adhered to ethical standards for human participant research. Before the process of collecting data, participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their voluntary participation in this study was secured to informed consent. Participants were assured that their identities would be confidential. In addition, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports. This study involved no activities which could lead to physical, psychological, and social risks for the participants.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study are semi-structured interviews and observation. They are elaborated as follows:

Semi-structured Interview Guide

To collect in-depth data, this study used a semi-structured interview guide as a primary research instrument. The interviews were designed to explore the participants' personal experiences regarding the use of their language styles in different social contexts within the *pesantren* environment. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to answer them in a flexible manner, enabling the researchers to follow up on interesting and unexpected responses. Within the interview guideline, there are questions related to what kinds of language styles that the participants use to interact with their friends, seniors, and *ustadzah*, how the participants perceived and adjusted their language styles when interacting with them, and the reasons behind them. Importantly, the interview guideline used in this study has been reviewed and validated by an expert in the field. The validation process ensured that the questions are clear and contextually relevant. This expert's approval added credibility to the research instrument which strengthened the

trustworthiness of this study.

Field notes

In addition to semi-structured interviews, an observation was conducted to gain the participants' authentic language used in real-life settings using field notes as the second instrument. Here, the researcher observed the participants' interactions with their friends, seniors, and *ustadzah* within various contexts like dormitory conversations and school interaction. During the observation, the researchers carefully made field notes focusing on common use of speech styles and their adjustment to them. This result of this data allows the researcher to triangulate them with the interview findings which enhance the depth and validity of the analysis. Through the observation, the study is able to construct a more comprehensive list of language styles used in *pesantren*.

Data collection

The nine chosen interviewees were met individually and interviewed within 10 up to 12 minutes. Interviews were held after school hours in a quiet setting to ensure that the participants felt comfortable to express their thoughts and respond to the questions. All the interviews were then audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and authenticity in the analysis. Moreover, the researchers also carried out observation during regular school and dormitory activities such as during school break, *dhuha* prayer, *ro'an* (a mass cleaning activity), night talks, and *diniyah* (Islamic religion learning and teaching process) activities, where participants interacted in informal and formal ways. The researchers took notes during the observation focusing on what language styles the participants commonly used to interact with friends, seniors, and *ustadzah*.

Data analysis

This study employs thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). There are six phases to analyse data using this thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing the report.

Table 1. Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing with data	The researcher read repeatedly the interview transcripts and field notes collected from the <i>pesantren</i> environment. While reading, the researcher noted some early ideas of the findings such as the tendency of the <i>santri</i> to speak casually with their peers using Indonesian or Javanese. For example, one of the participants said, " <i>Kalau sama teman, saya santai saja, sering campur Bahasa Indonesia sama Bahasa Jawa.</i> "

	<p>("When I talk to <i>my friends</i>, I speak casually, often mixed Indonesian and Javanese"). The notes could help the researcher to identify potential language styles used by the <i>santri</i> early on.</p>
2. Generating initial codes	<p>Each transcript was examined line by line to assign codes which showed important aspects of the language styles. Codes can be in the form of visible behaviors shown when <i>santri</i> talks to their interlocutor such as 'Joking when talking with friends'. 'Using casual language', and 'Mixing Indonesian and Javanese' or the reasons for the language styles used like 'To make the friendship closer'. The researcher used manual coding to allow closer engagement with the data and ensure there is no single data left.</p>
3. Searching for themes	<p>Similar codes were categorised into broader themes. For example, 'Joking when talking with friends'. 'Using casual language', and 'Mixing Indonesian and Javanese' were categorized into the theme, "Dominance of Casual Language Style with Friends". Data from the field notes also supports that this pattern happened consistently during leisure time and <i>ro'an</i> (a mass cleaning activity) in the dormitory.</p>
4. Reviewing the themes	<p>The emerging theme was reviewed for internal consistency and ensured that each theme is different from others. The "Dominance of Casual Language Style with Friends" theme is clear and did not appear when talking to <i>ustadzah</i>. The casual styles were frequently used in peer interactions, seen from the relaxed and humorous tone while speaking.</p>
5. Defining and naming themes	<p>The theme was then refined to highlight its role in peer communication. Therefore, the final theme is 'Dominance of Casual Language Style in Peer Communication'.</p>
6. Producing the report	<p>The final report is written in a coherent narrative which is supported by the quotations of the participants' interview transcript and theoretical interpretation. For example, the 'Dominance of Casual Language Style in Peer Communication' is linked to Joos's (1967) definition of casual style and is proven also by the transcripts.</p>

RESULTS

Following the six phases of thematic analysis, the researcher has found 30 codes and classified them into 5 themes. The findings are presented based on the research questions of this study in the form of themes in the following sections.

RQ 1 What types of language styles are commonly used by *santri*?

The analysis of interview transcripts and field notes shows that there are three dominant language style themes within the *pesantren* context. To present the findings clearly, the table below summarizes the themes, subthemes, definitions, illustrative quotes obtained from the interview with the participants, and data sources.

Table 2. Summary of findings on language styles used by *santri*

No	Theme	Subtheme	Description	Illustrative Quotes	Source of Data
1	Dominance of Casual Language Style in Peer Communication	Code-switching between Indonesian and Javanese	Daily peer interactions marked by frequent joking, relaxed tone, and mixing the local language (Javanese) and Indonesian	"I like to speak very casually. I often speak a mix between Indonesian and Javanese to my friends because I am comfortable with it." (P1, P4, P5)	Interview; Observation (while <i>santri</i> are talking each other during breaks)
		The use of humor and informal expressions	Humorous banter in peer communication to enhance social comfort and closeness in friendship	"Hmm, I like to be very relaxed when I speak to my friends. I also like joking." (P1, P2, P6)	Interview; Observation (during leisure time in the dormitory)
2	Intimate Language Styles Through Creative and Playful Words	The use of unique nicknames	Unique nicknames used only within close peer groups, often humorous or unrelated to real names	"We call our friends Nathania with Tanos, Zahra with Cupit, Zakiya with Emak..." (P5, P7, P8, P9)	Interview; Observation (unique nickname heard during relaxed banter in the dormitory)
		Abbreviations and wordplay	Creative modifications of words	"We say OKS OKS instead of 'okay'." (P5)	Interview (during banter in the

			generally used which only understood within the group		dormitory)
3	Consultative Language in Communication with Seniors and <i>Ustadzah</i>	Semi-formal and polite talk with seniors	Respectful tone interactions with balance of formality and friendliness indicated mixing Indonesian and Javanese	"I speak Indonesian with my seniors, but when it comes to joking, I speak Javanese." (P1)	Interview
		Respectful expressions and polite communication with <i>ustadzah</i>	The use of Javanese <i>krama inggil</i> such as <i>ngapunten</i> (sorry/excuse me), <i>maturnuwun</i> (thank you), and <i>nuwun sewu</i> (excuse me)	"Ngapunten <i>ustadzah</i> , kulo izin mau ke kamar mandi." ("Excuse me, <i>ustadzah</i> , I'd like to go to the bathroom.") (P1)	Interview; Observation (during the <i>diniyah</i> = Islamic studies classes)
		Code-switching for emphasis or emotion	Shifting between Indonesian and Javanese <i>krama inggil</i> ¹ to convey seriousness and politeness when speaking to <i>ustadzah</i>	"Ustadzah, ngapunten njih. Saya mau ke belakang dulu." ("Excuse me, <i>ustadzah</i> , I'd like to go to the bathroom.") (P5)	Interview; Observation (during the <i>diniyah</i> = Islamic studies classes)

The table shows that there are three themes found as the answers of research question 1. Each of the themes is elaborated as follows:

Dominance of casual language style in peer communication

A central finding from this study is the dominance of casual language style as defined by Joos (1967) that it is frequently used in peer interactions, specifically among *santri* within the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment. This style is characterized by relaxed, spontaneous speech, and frequent joking. Here, in the context of the Islamic boarding school, most *santri* consistently described their communication with peers as casual. During the semi-structured interviews, three participants stated, "Hmm, I like to be very relaxed when I speak to my friends. I also like joking" (P1, P2, P6). The fourth and fifth participants also emphasized casual ways to speak or interact with their friends.

The use of casual styles in the *santri*'s daily conversation were also proved by the use of mixed languages, namely Indonesian and local language (Javanese) to speak with their friends. "I like to speak very casually. I often speak a mix between Indonesian and Javanese to my friends because I am comfortable with it" (P1, P4, P5). Indeed, based on the researchers' observation, the tendency to use casual language style among peer interactions mostly include frequent code-switching between Indonesian and Javanese language.

Intimate language styles through creative and playful words

The second theme highlights the use of creative and playful words used as intimate language styles within closed-peer interaction. It means that the use of creative and playful words is restricted in certain groups of *santri* in their daily conversations. According to Joos (1967), the intimate language style is reserved for people with close personal relationships, including private codes and shared references. Participants use pseudonyms for someone they consider special, and only their circle of friends knows about it. For instance, "We call our friends Nathania with Tanos, Zahra with Cupit, Zakiya with *Emak*, Mira with Mera, Firza with Ipul, and also Alya with Opat" (P5, P7, P8, P9). Calling their friends by names that are far from their real ones, even turning them into puns or playful words, is considered funny within their circle of friends. In this context, especially within the boarding school environment, such behavior is very common. Based on the researcher's observation during relaxed banter in the dormitory, not only the playful words used to call their friends' names, but also the use of certain abbreviations among peers in their daily conversations. Some of them are the use of the words OKS OKS to say "Okay" (P5).

Consultative language style in communication with seniors and *ustadzah*

A prominent pattern that emerged from the result of the semi-structured interview is the consultative language style used by *santri* when interacting with seniors and *ustadzah* within the *pesantren* environment. This style reflects semi-formal speech, characterized by a respectful tone, polite expressions, and occasional mixed languages between Indonesian and Javanese, particularly *krama inggil*. *Santri* consciously adjusted their speech to strike a balance between friendliness and deference, depending on their relationship with the seniors. The first participant

stated, "I speak Indonesian with my seniors, but when it comes to joking, I speak Javanese" (P1). Similarly, the fourth participant noted,

"I speak casually to my seniors, but it is more polite compared to when I speak to my friends. And I mostly use Indonesian to speak with them, like when I ask permission to go or do something, I always be polite by saying, "*Permisi, mau*" ("Excuse me, I want to") (P4)

This is a clear example of consultative politeness, where conversation remains friendly but structured with markers of respect. The fifth participant distinguished between familiar and less familiar seniors,

"Hmmm when I talk to seniors who are close enough with me, I use Javanese, like when I walk in front of them, I would say '*Mbak, amet yo.*' ('Excuse me.') But when the seniors are less familiar to me, I speak Indonesian because I am a bit shy to use Javanese. I think it will be impolite or a bit rude." (P5)

In most cases, the speech includes permissive markers such as, "*Permisi*" ("Thank you") and respectful titles like "*mbak*". It indicates the speaker's intention to show respect while maintaining a conversational tone.

While generally relaxed, this style includes linguistic caution, particularly in uncertain or hierarchical interactions. As the second participant shared, "When I first came to this *pesantren*, I spoke Indonesian and a bit formal because at that time, I was still afraid of them. Now I am getting familiar with them and speak casually" (P2). This case shows that the speaker's comfort level in speaking with their seniors evolves, but still retains a base of respectful language when addressing seniors.

Meanwhile, the data from the semi-structured interview reveals that *santri* also predominantly employ a consultative language style when speaking with *ustadzah*. This language style is marked by politeness, semi-formal language and active turn-taking, aligning with Joos' (1967) definition of the consultative style, which is typically used in professional but interactive settings.

Santri consistently use Indonesian as the base language when speaking to *ustadzah*, often combining Javanese *krama inggil* and polite expressions like using the word "*ngapunten*" ("Sorry/excuse me") everytime they want to say something, "*maturnuwun*" to say thank you in a polite way instead of *Terimakasih*, and "*nuwun sewu*" ("Excuse me") whenever they walk in front of *ustadzah*.

The first participant provided an example like, "*Ngapunten ustadzah, kulo izin mau ke kamar mandi.*" (Excuse me, *ustadzah*, I'd like to go to the bathroom.") (P1). This sentence illustrates how the speaker initiates interaction respectfully. Similarly, the third participant shared, "*Ustadzah ngapunten, boleh izin pulang ya ustadzah?*" ("*Ustadzah*, excuse me, could I ask permission to go home?") (P3).

Moreover, the researcher also found during the observation that several participants noted the use of mixed codes, especially when conveying emotion or seriousness. For

example, the fifth participant said, “*Ustadzah, ngapunten njih. Saya mau ke belakang dulu.*” (“*Ustadzah, excuse me, I want to go to the bathroom.*”) (P5). This sentence incorporates the use of both Javanese *krama inggil* and Indonesian.

RQ 2 How do the contexts (speaking with friends, seniors, and *ustadzah*) influence their language use?

Table 3. Summary of influence of contexts on *santri*'s language use

No	Theme	Subtheme	Description	Illustrative Quotes	Source of Data
1	Audience-Based Adjustment of Language Styles	Influence of Interlocutor Identity	The level of formality changes based on the listener's identity and personality. The language styles will be casual with peers, more formal with seniors, more formal with seniors, and most formal with <i>ustadzah</i> .	“It depends on where and whom I am speaking to, so I think I have to be able to adjust.” (P3)	Interview; Observation (after <i>dhuha</i> prayer in the mosque)
2	Situational Influence on Language Styles	Emotional or Contextual Sensitivity	The changes of the language styles depend on mood or situation. Tense or serious contexts prompt polite speech and are more formal.	“When I observe that my interlocutor appears angry, I will speak more politely and formally.” (P3) “When my senior is not in a good mood, I will speak Indonesian to her to make me more polite.” (P5) “When the situation in my bedroom is not that good, I will directly change my language styles in a more respectful way.” (P6)	Interview

Audience-based adjustment of language styles

The participants' responses consistently indicate that the identity of the interlocutor, whether friends, seniors, or *ustadzah* directly influences the level of formality in their language use. For example, the third participant explicitly stated, "It depends on where and whom I am speaking to, so I think I have to be able to adjust" (P3), highlighting the importance of tailoring speech to audiences. When talking with friends, participants use casual, relaxed language, characterized by joking, slang, and playful words. However, after having *dhuha* prayer in the mosque, the researcher observed and found that the presence of seniors or authority figures triggers a shift toward more respectful and structured language. The second participant noted, "Hmmm, I think it depends on whom I am speaking to. For example, I will speak a bit in a formal way, if the seniors are strict" (P2). Similarly, interaction with *ustadzah*, evokes the highest degree of formality and politeness, often marked by the use of Indonesian and Javanese *krama inggil* forms.

Situational influence on language styles

In addition to who is being addressed, the emotional and situational context of the interaction also shapes language use. Participants frequently mentioned that they shift to a more formal or polite style in response to tense, serious, or emotionally charged situations, even when speaking with friends. For instance, the third participant said, "Well, when I observe that my interlocutor appears angry, I will speak more politely and formally" (P3). Similarly, the fifth participant stated, "When my senior is not in a good mood, I will speak Indonesian to her to make me more polite" (P5). The sixth participant also added, "When the situation in my bedroom is not that good, especially when one of our seniors has a problem with us as their juniors, I will directly change my language styles in a more respectful way" (P6).

DISCUSSION

This study examines the variation in language styles among *santri* within the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) environment, focusing on the context of their language use. More specifically, it focuses on how language choices shift depending on the social context. This analysis mainly refers to two frameworks: Joos' (1967) five speech styles (intimate, casual, consultative, formal, and frozen) and Bell's Audience Design Theory (2014), which highlights that speakers adjust their language based on the type, status, and closeness of their audience or interlocutor. The research findings support the primary hypothesis that *santri* are mindful and context-aware in their language use, adapting their speech according to social relationships and the current communication situation. A key finding of this study is the fact that casual style is the most commonly used style in everyday interactions among *santri*. This finding supports Joos' (1967)

idea that casual style is generally used in relaxed settings among friends or peers. Closely related is the use of the intimate style, observable in creative nicknames and unique terms used within certain friend groups. On the other hand, interactions with seniors and *ustadzah* reflect the use of a consultative style, confirming the initial assumption that communication in *pesantren* follows a hierarchical structure. According to the findings of the study, *santri* frequently select a linguistic style that varies according to who they are speaking to, aligning with Bell's (2014) Audience Design Theory. In general, the findings of this study indicate that *santri* in *pesantren* employ a variety of language styles, adapting their speech to the social and emotional situation. Although the listener's social status frequently shapes the degree of formality, interpersonal relationships and emotional dynamics also have a big impact on how they communicate. These results underscore the importance of considering both structural aspects (such as social hierarchy and social roles) and interpersonal factors (such as emotional closeness and emotion) when analyzing language use in institutional settings like *pesantren*.

In previous research, a study by [Gufon et al. \(2024\)](#) examined registers in Islamic boarding schools, but their study took a broader scope by comparing the types of language used in religious contexts and everyday life. Meanwhile, the present study narrows the focus by focusing on how *santri* change language styles and adjust their way of speaking depending on the interlocutor and situational context. On the other hand, [Susylowati and Rusbiyantoro \(2021\)](#) and [Wakhidin and Ramdhani \(2021\)](#) have also conducted research in Islamic boarding schools, but have not used the theory by Joos or Bell's as a basis for analysis. Instead, the present study combines the two theories to see not only what language styles are used, but also why *santri* shift from one style to another.

In the context of digital media, [Dewi and Aulina \(2022\)](#) and [Hutauruk et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzed the language styles of public figures on the YouTube platform and interviews. Although their studies show variations in the use of language in the media, their focus is different because they do not involve institutional and cultural contexts such as Islamic boarding schools. Likewise, [Octaviani and Purwarno \(2021\)](#) and [Effendi \(2023\)](#) studied the language style of fictional characters in films, focusing more on the narrative structure rather than language behaviors in real life. Interestingly, the most relevant to this discussion is a study by [Sani and Romadhoni \(2025\)](#) examined the formation of *santri*'s identities through a narrative approach in the *pesantren* environment. Their findings are in line with the results of the present study which show that language plays a central role in forming identity, such as when *santri* speak to friends, seniors, or *ustadzah*.

Slang, acronyms, and bilingual code-switching (between Javanese and Indonesian) are common features of *santri*'s language, which reflect connection and a shared identity. The casual style according to Joos' theory is characterized by shared background knowledge, low formality of the setting, and little need for explicit explanations. This

suggests that *santri* feels comfortable, relaxed, and prefers to maintain their relationships with their peers. The intended decision to use this informal language is to make communication enjoyable and relaxing, not because they are ignorant of appropriate linguistic rules. The presence of intimate style supports the theory that in close-knit friendships, where language functions as a symbol of closeness and trust, *santri* create unique linguistic norms.

In addition, the idea that social hierarchy has a significant impact on *santri's* language styles is accurate. However, this study broadens the understanding by demonstrating that situational conditions and emotional states also have a major influence on language style choice. For example, several *santri* acknowledged that, even when speaking to close friends, they would adopt a more formal and respectful style if they sensed that the audience was not in a good mood. This demonstrates how *santri* maintains positive relationships and is attentive to others' feelings when communicating. It also proves that besides the identity of the audience, other circumstances such as the emotional tone and situational context also affect language style choices. The patterns found in this study reflect a high degree of interpersonal sensitivity and emotional awareness to communicate within the *pesantren* environment. This study also contradicts the common perception that language use in Islamic boarding schools is rigid or strictly regulated, revealing that *santri* demonstrate a high level of linguistic flexibility. They effectively adjust their speech based on the social situations they encounter, suggesting that they do not speak merely to deliver messages but also to build relationships and maintain harmony in everyday life within the *pesantren* environment. These insights highlight the central role of language in social interaction.

Importantly, a pedagogical implication of this research is in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to emphasize that effective English communication skills not only rely on grammar mastery, but also the ability to adjust one's language style based on cultural and social contexts. The ability of *santri* to adjust their language style with the social or emotional circumstances show that they have sociolinguistic awareness or competence which can be developed to English as the target language. The EFL teachers can continuously develop the *santri's* sociolinguistic awareness through some meaningful activities like conversations and role-play within the *pesantren* environment. By engaging in such activities, *santri* can also choose appropriate English expressions based on whom they are talking to, in what situations, and what kinds of emotions their interlocutors feel. This can prepare *santri* to interact using English in a more natural and respectful way.

However, this study has some limitations. The scope of this study was limited to an Islamic boarding school where the findings of this research could not be generalized to other Islamic boarding schools. The number of participants and the observation time were also limited which could affect the result of the data. In addition, the presence of the researcher during *santri's* activities in the dormitory might affect their

speaking adjustments because they knew that they were being observed. For future research related to this kind of issue, it is recommended that investigating *santri*'s speech style under the influence of digital media will be highly relevant, especially in observing the differences between offline and online language styles used by *santri*.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *santri* use different language styles depending on their interlocutors and the situation they are in. Using Joos' theory of five speech styles and Bell's Audience Design Theory, the study shows that *santri* are very aware of their social environment and adjust their way of speaking accordingly. Based on the findings of this study, *santri* often use casual and intimate styles when talking to close friends, which include slang, abbreviations, and switching between Indonesian and Javanese. However, when speaking to seniors or I, they tend to speak more formally, using polite words and Javanese *Krama Inggil*. This shows that they understand how to behave and communicate respectfully based on the social roles and relationships involved. The findings challenge the assumption that communication in *pesantren* is always formal. Instead, *santri* show a high level of flexibility in choosing how to speak, depending not only on social status but also on emotional situations. This shows that the use of language within the *pesantren* environment is not only for exchanging information, but also for expressing respect and maintaining social harmony.

Pedagogically, this research recommends that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching not only focuses on grammar and vocabulary mastery, but also explicitly develops *santri*'s competence to adjust the language styles based on the social and social contexts. The integration of sociolinguistic awareness in the EFL curriculum can help *santri* to be prepared for intercultural communication. Even though this study focuses on a specific *pesantren* setting, future research is recommended to explore similar dynamics in other cultural and educational settings to investigate other insights which can be implemented across contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Mauludiyah, R.B.: Conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), writing–original draft (lead), review (lead), securing funding. Sahrebanu, D.S.: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), writing –original draft (supporting), review (lead), editing (lead). Anugerahwati, M.: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), review (lead), editing (lead). Zen, E.L.: Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), review (lead), editing (lead).

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