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POLITENESS BEYOND UNIVERSALITY: FACE-THREATENING ACTS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLISM IN MUNA KABHANTI

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ABSTRACT
This study explores politeness strategies in Kabhanti, a traditional oral performance of the Muna peoplein Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. As a dialogic and competitive poetic exchange, Kabhanti is rich in satireand face-threatening acts (FTAs), yet it is socially accepted as a form of legitimate communication thatmaintains rather than disrupts harmony. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study draws oninterviews with cultural practitioners and textual analysis of Kabhanti lyrics, interpreted through Brownand Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Findings reveal two major strategies: (1) on-record mitigation,evident in euphemisms and hedging to soften direct statements, and (2) off-record strategies, especiallyin Kabhanti with implicature and symbolic cultural references, where meaning is conveyed indirectlythrough metaphor and local symbols. These strategies allow speakers to express critique, rejection, orsarcasm while preserving relational balance. Importantly, the study highlights the limits of Brown andLevinson's claim to universality: in the Muna context, satire and indirect criticism function as tools ofsocial intelligence, patience-testing, and cultural solidarity rather than threats to face. This suggests thatpoliteness theory must be contextualized within specific cultural frameworks, where FTAs can serveconstructive social roles. The study contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics by illustrating how indigenoustraditions challenge Western-centric models of politeness. Future research should examine thetransformation of Kabhanti in modern contexts, including its role in education, cultural preservation, andintercultural communication.

Introduction

Oral traditions in Indonesia come in many forms, with *pantun* being one of the most well-known. For centuries, *pantun* has served as an aesthetic and communicative medium through which people convey advice, social criticism, and emotions in a polite and indirect manner (Bartosh, 2023). Similar traditions can be found across Southeast Asia. In Thailand, there exists the *Bai Sri* or *Bai-Si* ritual poetry, which includes prayers, blessings, and expressions of communal harmony (Titrassamee, 2014). In the Philippines, traditional short poetic forms such as *tanaga* and its variants are used to express local wisdom, humor, and social reflection in artistic ways (Agum, 2019; Rumusud, 2022). In Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Southeast Sulawesi, lies the island of Muna, home to the Muna people. This community values social harmony and tends to avoid direct confrontation, favoring subtle and meaningful modes of expression. Within this communicative culture, the oral tradition known as *Kabhanti* developed. Closely related to the *Palenda* genre, *Kabhanti* functions as a medium for advice, indirect criticism, and cultural reflection (Leiden University, n.d.). Despite its cultural importance, *Kabhanti* has received little academic attention, especially from a linguistic perspective focusing on politeness strategies. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing *Kabhanti* through Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, thereby situating it alongside other major oral traditions in Southeast Asia.

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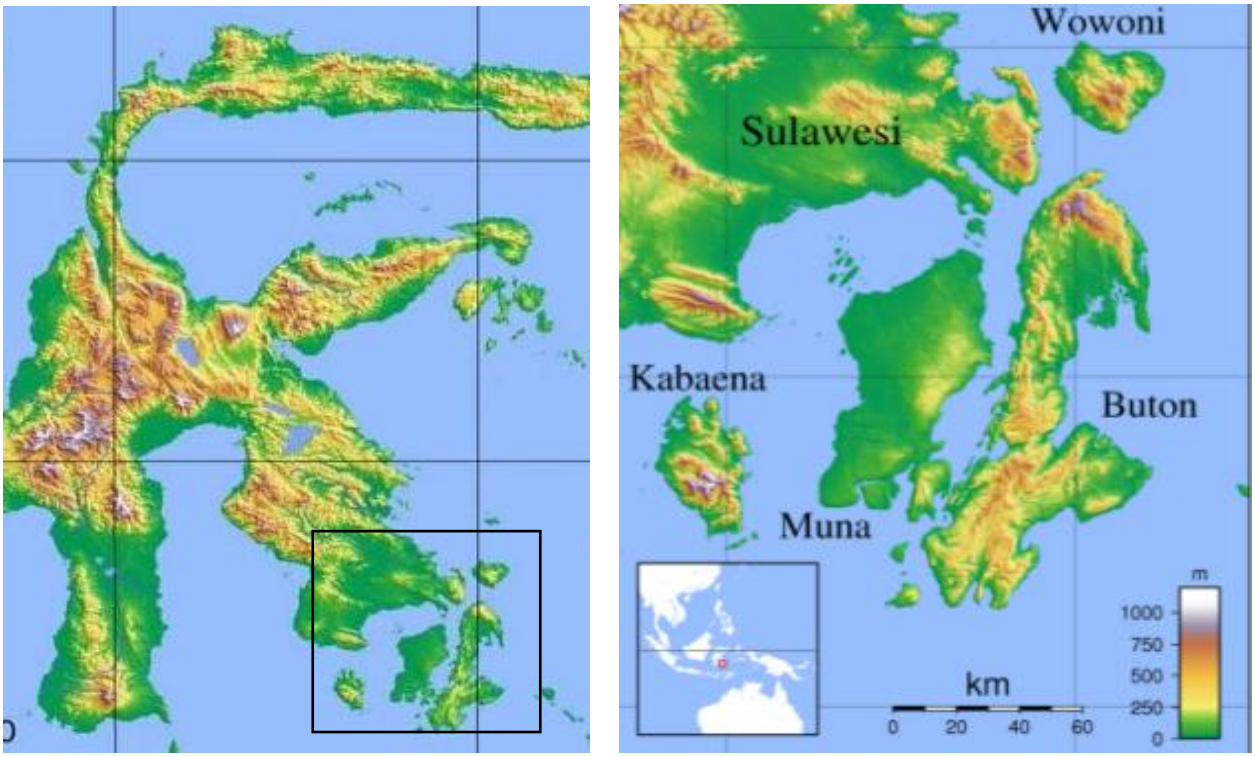

Figure 1. Map of Muna Island

Kabhanti is more than just an entertainment practice; it functions as a social interaction space where meaning is negotiated, feelings are expressed, and satire is legitimized. This is evident in *Pobhanti*, the traditional activity of exchanging *Kabhanti* between groups, often male and female, in a spontaneous and competitive format. The lyrics of *Kabhanti* may contain sharp sarcasm, which theoretically poses a threat to the interlocutor's "face." According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, every individual seeks to maintain both positive face (the need to be appreciated) and negative face (the need not to be imposed upon). Avoiding face-threatening acts (FTA) is crucial to maintaining smooth communication. However, in *Pobhanti*, such face-threatening expressions are culturally sanctioned and socially accepted.

The uniqueness of *Kabhanti* as an oral literature makes the *Pobhanti* phenomenon worthy of study not only as a linguistic-interactional phenomenon but also as an urgent subject for cultural preservation and knowledge development. On one hand, this oral tradition faces the threat of extinction due to the decreasing number of active speakers and changes in the social interaction patterns of the Muna community. On the other hand, the lack of academic documentation on the linguistic strategies of *Kabhanti*—particularly from a sociopragmatic perspective—creates a theoretical gap in understanding culture-based variations of politeness. Based on the urgency of preservation and the theoretical gap, this study will specifically address two key questions: (1) What linguistic strategies do the Muna people use in *Pobhanti* activities to avoid threats to face (face-threatening acts/FTA)? (2) Does this cultural practice align with or deviate from Brown and Levinson's universal politeness principles? By analyzing the linguistic practices of the Muna people in *Pobhanti*, this research not only tests the relevance of universal politeness theory in a local cultural context but also offers a critical reflection on the limitations of universalism in cross-cultural pragmatics.

Van den Berg and La Ode Sidu (2000:30), as well as Hadirman (2020:1), define *Kabhanti* in the Muna language as a type of "pantun," highlighting its broad similarities in form and function with the Malay-Indonesian pantun. However, a deeper comparative analysis reveals *Kabhanti*'s distinctiveness, not only structurally but also in its socio-pragmatic context within the landscape of Southeast Asian satirical poetry. Structurally, while the traditional Malay pantun is strictly defined by a quatrain form with an a-b-a-b rhyme scheme and a clear division between the *pembayang* (imagery) and *maksud* (meaning) (Waridah, 2014), it

is important to note that the *pembayang* serves as a foreshadowing image while the *maksud* delivers the message through analogy or metaphor (Tran, 2013, p. 70). In this sense, the pantun reflects a distinctive analogical reasoning pattern that mirrors the logic and worldview of Malay society (Tee, 2014, p. 112).

Kabhanti, by contrast, exhibits a marked flexibility. As seen in the following example of *Kabhanti Kantola* (Aderlaepe et al., 2006:74), it often contains more than four lines per stanza, with a free rhyme pattern and no strict division between its introductory and core message. This stands in sharp contrast even to other structured forms in the region, such as the Filipino *tanaga*, which is traditionally a heptasyllabic or octosyllabic quatrain relying heavily on central metaphor and proverbial compression (Lumbera, 1968, p. 29; Almario, 2017, p. 56). Likewise, the highly formalized *Bai Si* of Thailand functions as a ritual poetry emphasizing moral advice, prayers, and expressions of social unity (Pongsiri et al., 2013; Kanchana, 2015, p. 88).

This structural divergence points to a deeper, more significant distinction in cultural function. Unlike the often playful or romantic Malay pantun, the concise and metaphor-driven *tanaga*, or the ritualistic *Bai Si* of Thailand, *Kabhanti* operates as a more direct, yet still culturally encoded, instrument of social commentary and critique within Muna society. Its structural freedom enables its core function as an institutionalized platform for "licensed aggression" to manage social friction. Its flexibility allows it to adapt to specific social tensions, functioning as a sanctioned channel for expressing dissent, testing intelligence, and negotiating social norms through strategically deployed face-threatening acts. As Foley (1997, p. 432) notes in his discussion of verbal art as social performance, poetic genres often function as arenas for indirect social negotiation, revealing cultural values through stylistic choice. In a similar vein, Finnegan (2012, p. 203) emphasizes that oral poetry in many traditional societies acts as a communicative bridge between artistry and social regulation. Therefore, while *Kabhanti* can be broadly categorized as "satirical poetry," its unique structural freedom and pragmatic role as a social tool mark it as a distinct tradition demanding analysis on its own cultural terms.

(1) *Male-male amompali*
If I go for a walk
Nekopadewakahano
In a village with waka
Tabea dafombeuti
Except being noticed
Idi nongari laloku
SI am not excited
Nobatala ngkira-ngkira
The intention and plan are canceled

This example shows the variation in the number of lines and the absence of a fixed rhyme pattern, which are typical features of *Kabhanti Kantola*. This structural flexibility allows speakers to adjust the *Kabhanti* according to the context of the performance. Thus, although it is generically referred to as a "pantun," Muna *Kabhanti* is a unique genre of oral literature that reflects the Muna people's cultural adaptation to the needs of dynamic oral communication. In addition to *Kabhanti Kantola*, the Muna community generally recognizes two other types of *Kabhanti*: *Kabhanti Gambusu* and *Kabhanti Modero*, each with its own distinctive form and style of delivery. Structurally, *Kabhanti Modero* and *Kabhanti Gambusu* typically consist of two or four lines per stanza. The performance contexts of the three types also differ: *Kabhanti Modero* and *Kabhanti Kantola* are usually sung in groups, while *Kabhanti Gambusu* can be performed solo. *Kabhanti Gambusu* is accompanied by the traditional music of the *gambus*, which gives it a special character and sets it apart from the other two types.

From the perspective of the level of meaning comprehension, *Kabhanti* can be divided into three types. First, *Kabhanti* without implicature. This type of *Kabhanti* can be understood literally, and the speaker's intention is clearly depicted in the lyrics of the *Kabhanti*. As Yule (1996, p. 40) notes, literal meaning refers

to what is explicitly stated, requiring no inference beyond the linguistic form itself. Second, *Kabhanti* with direct implicature, which is easy to understand literally because the utterance is delivered in clear everyday sentences, yet it still contains implicit meaning. The implicature in this type of *Kabhanti* can be quickly interpreted through the context of the conversation. Grice (1975) points out that a statement can suggest a meaning or idea not directly expressed in the words. Take, for instance, the phrase "Oh, my bag is so heavy." While it's easy to grasp its literal sense, it might also serve as an indirect plea for assistance from the listener. This interpretation stems from our shared social understanding of how people react when they see someone struggling with a weighty object. Levinson (1983, p. 101) further elaborates that implicature operates on the assumption that speakers and listeners adhere to cooperative principles, enabling them to infer unstated meanings. Similarly, Thomas (1995, p. 58) emphasizes that implicature is a pragmatic process that relies on contextual knowledge, shared cultural norms, and interlocutors' expectations during interaction.

Third, *Kabhanti* with cultural symbols, a type of *Kabhanti* that relies on local cultural symbols. The utterance in this type of *Kabhanti* cannot be immediately understood, as the hearer must first comprehend the cultural references or symbols used. In Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics framework, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and determined by social conventions within a language community. As Chandler (2007, p. 64) explains, the sign signified relation depends on cultural codes that guide interpretation, meaning that symbols are socially produced and learned rather than naturally fixed. Thibault (1997) expanded this view by emphasizing that signs not only function within an abstract linguistic system, but are also shaped and interpreted through dynamic social and cultural practices. Hall (1997) further argues that meaning is constructed within representation symbols acquire significance only within specific cultural frameworks that regulate how audiences decode them. Thus, in *Kabhanti* with cultural symbols, understanding local symbols (signifiers) is crucial for the hearer to access the intended meaning (signified). The interpretation process of this type of *Kabhanti* is twofold: first, understanding the symbol, and then revealing the speaker's communicative purpose.

Figure 2. *Pobhanti* activity

Pobhanti is the term used by the Muna people to refer to the activity of exchanging *Kabhanti* orally. This activity is commonly conducted during various events or public celebrations and involves two groups (usually male and female) taking turns to exchange *Kabhanti*. Both parties will continue taking turns until one of them declares the desire to end the activity through their *Kabhanti* lyrics. *Kabhanti* in the context of

Pobhanti cannot be prepared in advance, as the speaker must follow the spontaneously agreed theme and directly respond to the content of the interlocutor's *Kabhanti*. One of the most frequent themes raised is love, because in addition to serving as entertainment, *Pobhanti* also becomes a social interaction space where young people of the past got to know each other and search for partners. This explains why *Kabhanti* with the theme of love is the most commonly found, both in the direct practice of *Pobhanti* and in written archives.

In addition to being a platform for exchanging poetry, *Pobhanti* also has an emotional and psychological dimension that can be quite challenging. The *Kabhanti* lyrics often contain sharp sarcasm. The politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) states that every individual has a need to maintain their positive face (the desire to be appreciated) and negative face (the desire not to be interfered with) in an interaction. Avoiding things that can threaten face (FTA) in communication is crucial in order to prevent embarrassment or loss of face in front of others. Considering the words used in the *Kabhanti* lyrics, it is important to investigate how well this politeness theory applies in Muna society. Interestingly, sharp sarcasm is legitimized within the *Pobhanti* activity. For example, the use of negative words or the explicit mention of a target's traits through their clothing attributes.

Recent studies suggest that sarcasm and teasing can function as socially acceptable ways to negotiate power and intimacy, depending on the cultural norms governing facework (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017; Locher & Watts, 2023). In the context of Muna society, the use of sarcasm in *Pobhanti* can be interpreted as a culturally sanctioned expression of social bonding and moral evaluation, reflecting local norms about indirect criticism and face management.

(2) *Awura idi La topi-topi La topi-topi*
I saw someone wearing a hat

Notikendane bhela bhela randaku
My heart started to pound

Awura idi La topi-topi La topi-topi
I saw someone wearing a hat

Notikendane bhela bhela randaku
My heart started to pound

As an interactive form of speech, communication strategies in *Kabhanti* become crucial, especially when used to express feelings, sarcasm, or negotiate meaning. *Kabhanti* does not follow fixed rules; the speaker must develop various pragmatic tactics to ensure the message is conveyed. These strategic choices not only reflect the extent to which universal politeness principles apply in *Pobhanti* activities, but also demonstrate how the Muna people frame sensitive interactions through their unique cultural framework (Goffman, 1974). Sarcasm and indirect criticism in oral traditions can function as strategic tools to manage social relationships and convey moral evaluations in culturally appropriate ways (Zhu, 2024; Jameel, 2023). In this way, *Kabhanti* successfully conveys complex messages while maintaining social norms and local aesthetic values.

Research on *Kabhanti* has been conducted from various perspectives. However, only two studies have examined this tradition from a linguistic viewpoint. Aderlaepe et al. (2006) analyzed semiotics in *Kantola* lyrics, while Apriatin (2016) focused on the metaphors found in *Kabhanti* lyrics. This pattern aligns with a common trend in the study of Southeast Asian oral poetry, such as *pantun*, where research often prioritizes discussions of structural rules, aesthetic beauty, and metaphorical content. This study addresses a critical locus in pragmatics and linguistic anthropology: the linguistic management of institutionalized impoliteness**.** While politeness theories have extensively mapped how speakers mitigate threats, Kabhanti presents a compelling counterpoint a tradition where face-threatening acts (FTAs) are

not minimized but strategically employed as a sanctioned social tool. The core linguistic mechanisms enabling this "licensed aggression"—the specific mitigation strategies that allow direct criticism to be delivered without causing social rupture—remain unexamined. This gap is significant because it overlooks the very feature that defines Kabhanti's uniqueness and its sophistication as a pragmatic system. By systematically analyzing these strategies, this research moves beyond applying existing theory to using Kabhanti as a case study to refine it. The findings aim to recalibrate the universality of politeness models by demonstrating how cultural values can reshape the fundamental function of linguistic acts from maintaining face to strategically managing social friction.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach**,** which enables a deep exploration of the linguistic and cultural dimensions of *Kabhanti* as practiced in the Muna community. The analysis uses Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. This theory helps identify and understand ways people show politeness in communication. The study also uses a sociopragmatic perspective from Spencer-Oatey (2000). This perspective examines how local cultural norms impact the use and understanding of politeness strategies in different communities.

Data were collected through a literature review (articles, journals, books, and documents related to the Muna *Kabhanti* tradition) as well as in-depth interviews with cultural practitioners, such as *Kabhanti* poets, speakers, and members of the community involved in the *Pobhanti* tradition. A total of 12 informants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of 6 experienced *Kabhanti* performers and 6 community elders known for their deep knowledge of Muna oral traditions**.** The main objectives of the study are: (1) to identify the politeness strategies used in *Kabhanti*, and (2) to test whether this cultural practice aligns with or deviates from Brown and Levinson's universal politeness principles.

The analysis involves mapping linguistic strategies in *Kabhanti* lyrics, particularly those that have the potential to be face-threatening acts (FTAs), and then classifying them based on the concepts of positive face (the desire to be respected) and negative face (freedom from interference). In addition, interviews were used to understand the community's perceptions of the boundaries of sarcasm in *Kabhanti* and the mechanisms for conflict avoidance. To ensure interpretive reliability, multiple strategies were employed: (1) triangulation through cross-verification between interview data, documented texts, and field observations; (2) member checking by discussing preliminary findings with key informants to validate interpretations; and (3) peer debriefing with fellow researchers specializing in pragmatics and cultural linguistics.

The analytical process involved a constant comparative method, where findings from the literature review and interview data were systematically triangulated with the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. This was not merely to check for alignment, but more importantly, to identify and interpret specific points of divergence where local cultural values necessitate modifications or even a subversion of the theoretical predictions. For instance, the theoretical classification of satire as a clear face-threatening act was critically examined against its actual, culturally-sanctioned function in *Kabhanti* performances. Through this rigorous approach, the study moves beyond a simple application of the theory and instead uses the *Kabhanti* data to engage in a critical dialogue with it. The ultimate aim is to provide a contextually rich understanding of politeness dynamics within the Muna oral tradition and to propose culturally-grounded insights that contribute to refining sociopragmatic theories for cross-cultural application.

Results and Discussion

The mitigation strategies found in *Kabhanti* can generally be classified into two broad categories: *on-record* and *off-record*. In performances that revolve around the theme of affection, speakers do not usually employ direct or forceful expressions. Instead, they show a strong tendency to protect the hearer's negative face, meaning they avoid language that could restrict the hearer's freedom of response or demand immediate agreement. This choice of strategy reflects a cultural emphasis on respecting the hearer's autonomy and ensuring that interactions remain harmonious. Even in situations where the exchange has a competitive or

playful tone, the use of mitigation softens the impact of the speech act, allowing both parties to interact without feelings of hostility or discomfort. In this way, speakers can still communicate their desires, intentions, or expectations, but they do so in a subtle and indirect manner.

The off-record strategy is the most dominant approach employed by the Muna community when performing *Kabhanti*. In the context of *Pobhanti*, this strategy can be observed in two main forms: *Kabhanti* with direct implicature and symbolic cultural *Kabhanti*. In the first form, meaning can be inferred from the linguistic construction even though it is not explicitly stated. The second form makes use of cultural symbols, metaphors, and traditional references that carry layered meanings, often pointing to critique or satire. Both forms depend heavily on implicit communication, which allows speakers to articulate sensitive opinions without explicitly confronting the listener. This indirectness does not weaken the message; rather, it gives the utterance depth, subtlety, and cultural resonance. In the culturally symbolic Kabhanti lies the dilemma of the universal politeness theory, as the Muna community employs their own ways of mitigating conflict.

On-Record

The on-record strategy in Muna Kabhanti is dominant in the type of Kabhanti without implicature. In this form, the speaker conveys the message directly but still applies mitigation strategies to prevent the potential face threat from causing open conflict. Euphemism and hedging are two basic techniques employed to lower the severity of the threat to the hearer's face. This creates a culturally distinctive "mitigated directness" that prioritizes relational harmony even in unambiguous communication, challenging the universal applicability of bald on-record strategies. These are typical features, where clarity of meaning is preserved while minimizing interpersonal tension.

a. Euphemism

By substituting pointed or sensitive terms or phrases with softer, more socially acceptable ones, the speaker lessens the severity of an utter statement. An example of this euphemism can be seen in the choice of the word *mbara* in the following *Kabhanti*.

(3) *Okahalino odaseise odaseise*
How difficult for us to unite
Hadae bela tao pomba-pombara
Could it be that you are pretending to be reluctant

While Kabhanti (3) undoubtedly constitutes a face-threatening act by questioning the hearer's intentions, it simultaneously demonstrates how the Muna culture strategically navigates such threats through linguistic finesse. Rather than merely avoiding FTAs—as Brown and Levinson's framework might predict—the speaker actively engages in face-work through lexical mitigation. The deliberate selection of *mbara* (reluctant) over its more direct synonyms like *bhans*i, *kido*, or *raku* reflects a cultural calculus of politeness that prioritizes relational harmony over absolute clarity. This practice challenges the universalist presumption that FTAs are inherently disruptive; here, the FTA becomes a medium for demonstrating linguistic skill and social intelligence. The use of euphemism thus functions not merely as a politeness strategy but as a cultural performance that transforms potential conflict into an exhibition of communicative competence Another important point is the presence of a special register used exclusively in the oral literature of the Muna language. Fowler (1988) emphasizes that word choice in literature serves to create a particular emotional effect. In addition to *mbara*, there is also the word *tabhe*, which has a negative connotation and is used exclusively in oral literature.

(4) *Amaimo amangkako*
I will follow you
Tamaka kotabhe kanau
But don't reject me

The use of *tabhe* (to push away) in Kabhanti (4) offers a rich site for critical theoretical discussion. From a pragmatic perspective, it exemplifies a culture-specific self-face-threatening act that complexifies Brown and Levinson's (1987) model. The speaker strategically adopts a posture of extreme vulnerability, mitigating the hearer's negative face threat by conspicuously damaging their own positive face. This move challenges the theory's focus on mitigating threats *to the other* by highlighting a strategy of mitigation through self-abasement. Simultaneously, from a stylistic viewpoint, *tabhe* functions as a marked register item in the sense of Fowler (1988). Its literal meaning is leveraged to create a specific emotional effect of deep pathos and social asymmetry. The convergence of these two dimensions—pragmatic strategy and literary stylization—explains why *tabhe* is restricted to oral literature: its raw pragmatic force is too potent for daily interaction, but in Kabhanti, it is elevated into a performative tool that showcases both communicative competence and cultural values.

b. Hedging

Building on the use of euphemism, Kabhanti performers further deploy hedging as a sophisticated politeness strategy, offering a nuanced case study that expands the theoretical understanding of mitigation. While hedging is broadly defined as the use of linguistic devices to soften a statement's force or obscure its intensity (Fraser, 2010), its application in Kabhanti moves beyond a mere reduction of confrontation. It functions as a strategic ambiguity that allows speakers to articulate potent criticisms or delicate feelings while providing both speaker and hearer with plausible deniability. This practice critically engages with Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework by demonstrating that politeness is not merely about "softening" an FTA, but often about orchestrating layered meanings where the literal utterance coexists with a more critical implied message.

A key analytical insight is that this hedging operates systematically across linguistic levels. At the morphological level, the prefix *po-* combined with reduplication in forms like *po-mbara-mbara* semantically transforms *mbara* ('reluctant') into 'pretending to be reluctant.' This is not a simple softening but a pragmatic metamorphosis; it shifts the speech act from a direct expression of feeling to a commentary on the *performance* of that feeling, thereby creating interpretive distance. Concurrently, at the lexical level, hedging is realized through the deliberate selection of vocabulary that intentionally obscures the speaker's intention, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

(5) *Kahalino oalumera-oalumera*
How hard for me to give my blessing
Hadae bela pae-pae omensuru
Could it be that this is not continuously

Kabhanti (5) provides a compelling illustration of how hedging functions as a strategic tool for managing social face in delicate situations. The speaker's expression of doubt regarding their partner's faithfulness is strategically encoded not as a direct accusation using highly charged lexical items like *mendu*a (to cheat), but through the hedging phrase *pae omensuru* ('not continuously'). This lexical choice is critically significant; it constitutes a form of strategic misdirection. By focusing on the *temporal inconsistency* of the partner's attention rather than labeling the act as infidelity, the speaker performs a critical face-work maneuver. This strategy mitigates a severe threat to the hearer's positive face (their desire to be seen as a faithful partner) by downscaling the accusation from a matter of moral transgression to one of intermittent behavior. Consequently, the FTA is not merely softened but reframed, allowing the speaker to voice a profound suspicion while leaving room for denial and avoiding a direct confrontation that would rupture the relationship.

Off-Record
a. *Kabhanti* with Direct Implicature

(6) P: *Amangko ngkaniniku*
I give you my affection
Bhara olumera kanau dua
Will you bless me?

(7) W: *Alumera amangka hae*
How can I bless you
Isintu kobhaindono
You already have someone else

The interaction in Kabhanti (6) and (7) exemplifies a sophisticated balancing act of face management, where both speakers collaboratively navigate a high-stakes rejection. While the female speaker's (W) response inherently constitutes a threat to the male speaker's (P) positive face (his desire for acceptance), it is strategically executed through an off-record politeness strategy. She avoids a direct "no" by invoking an external, objective fact—that the man already has a partner. This maneuver of attribution shifting is critical; it reframes the rejection not as a personal refusal, but as a necessary adherence to a shared social norm (the unacceptability of infidelity). Consequently, the face threat is mitigated because the man's face is not directly damaged by the woman, but by the pre-existing social constraint. This practice demonstrates a nuanced understanding of Brown and Levinson's model, revealing how in Muna culture, the most effective politeness often involves obliquely invoking communal rules to perform the "dirty work" of confrontation, thereby preserving harmony and allowing both parties to save face.

(8) P: *Hinggamo kobhaindono*
Even though someone already has me
Lumera amokodua
if you approve, I will be unfaithful

(9) W: *Domondo dofokodua*
If we can be betrayed
Karanta dontaguemo
a torn sarong is already provided

The male speaker's persistence in the face of initial rejection in *Kabhanti* (8) compels a strategic shift in the female speaker's rebuttal. This evolution moves the rejection from a framework of external social obligation the normative argument that the man is already committed to one of internal, subjective well-being. This shift is critical, as it transcends mere descriptive account of "what" is said and reveals "why" the strategy changes: it represents a tactical escalation. By invoking the potential for personal suffering and using the sarcastic metaphor of the "*sarung rombeng*" (worn-out sarong) that a second wife must endure, the speaker no longer just polishes social norms but actively defends her personal agency. This move can be interpreted through the lens of Politeness Theory, where the initial rejection constitutes a 'negative face' act (restricting the man's freedom), but this subsequent shift is a more profound 'positive face' defense (asserting and protecting the woman's own self-image and emotional territory from a threatening imposition). The sarcasm, therefore, is not merely a stylistic choice but a critical discursive tool that allows for a potent, self-protective rejection while mitigating the directness of the refusal, demonstrating a sophisticated negotiation between cultural expression and individual psychological preservation.

b. Symbolic Cultural *Kabhanti*

Instead of metaphors, semiotic elements dominate cultural symbolic *Kabhanti*. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of this type of *Kabhanti*, participants need to be familiar with these cultural symbols to grasp the intention behind the *Kabhanti* being expressed. This type of Kabhanti is typically chosen when the intended message is considered too sensitive, making other communicative strategies insufficient to conceal the degree of its sensitivity.

(10) *Hingga tana kondokemo*
Although many monkeys threaten
Galuku te La Donggala
My garden in La Doggala
Taatumunggu-tunggumo
I will just watch over it
Kona kawu aosina
So that, I will not beg
Amora ngkobughouno
Seeing people with young corn

The interpretation of *Kabhanti* (10) hinges upon a shared cultural lexicon, where words like *ndoke* (another man), *galu* (wife), and *bughou* (harmonious relationship) function as symbolic keys. This reliance on cultural symbolism moves the discourse beyond literal meaning and into the realm of shared social knowledge, a concept central to Semiotic Theory. The effectiveness of the message is contingent on the hearer's ability to decode these symbols within the specific performance context of Pobhanti. Analytically, the speaker's declaration that he will not let the presence of *ndoke* destabilize his *bughou* with his *galu* transcends a mere promise of fidelity. It can be critically interpreted as a public performance of a specific masculinity, one that prioritizes emotional restraint, trust, and the preservation of social harmony over possessive jealousy. The implied message, therefore, is not just about safeguarding a marriage but about upholding a cultural ideal of male conduct that values relational integrity over individual ego, reinforcing the social contract within the community.

Between Satire or Politeness in Cultural Symbolic Kabhanti

Kabhanti is a form of cultural expression that serves various functions, including as an educational medium and a tool for upholding social norms. One of its primary functions is as a medium for delivering subtle satire, especially when a message is considered too taboo or sensitive to be expressed directly.In this regard, *Kabhanti*'s use of symbols serves to lower the possibility of interpersonal conflict by means of indirect communication techniques. This mirrors the off-record politeness technique outlined by Brown and Levinson, whereby the speaker decides to convey their intentions subtly in order to preserve social harmony and safeguard the face of the listener to capture the meaning of this type of *Kabhanti*, the hearer must possess knowledge of the cultural symbols used. Therefore, this strategy occupies the highest position in the form of mitigation because it allows the message to be conveyed without damaging the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

Although the use of cultural symbolic *Kabhanti* offers a subtle politeness strategy, there are two challenges in its practice. First, the cultural symbols used in *Kabhanti* are generally still understood by most members of the community. This indicates that the semiotic elements used are not a complete obfuscation of meaning, but rather a cultural representation widely recognized. In cultural semiotics, as explained by Lotman (2022), such symbols function as “units of collective meaning” that transmit social values and the ideology of the community. Therefore, although the communication is indirect, the cultural symbols in *Kabhanti* can still be understood because they play a significant role in maintaining the continuity of shared meaning and reinforcing the cultural identity of the Muna community. As an example, in the following excerpt of *Kabhanti*:

(11) …….

Somesosopino kamba.
The one who will sip the flower

Mbungaedha nobarumo
The tuberose rejoices with delight

Minaamo namekirie koda tungguno ngkarete
The parrot guarding the garden is no longer remembered
……..

The majority of the Muna community understands that the words *kamba* or *mbungaedha* symbolize a woman or a girl. Meanwhile, the phrase *koda tungguno karete* refers to a man who is the fiancé of the girl. Such vocabulary is part of a literary register, which is a form of language that is specifically used in the context of aesthetics and Muna culture. One of the processes in the traditional engagement ceremony is even called *defenagho tungguno karete*, meaning 'to ask whether the woman already has a fiancé'. The use of this phrase in the context of the ceremony shows that its symbolic meaning has become part of the collective knowledge of the community. This means that the interpretation of symbols in *Kabhanti* is not vague; it allows the message to be conveyed clearly while still maintaining politeness norms in social interactions.

The symbolic nature that is not entirely vague makes the message in *Kabhanti* understandable to participants in the *pobhanti* or other audiences who are not directly addressed. This situation creates the potential for a broad and open interpretation. As a result, social tensions may arise, especially if the message conveyed is sensitive or touches on the dignity of certain individuals. Given this possibility, *Kabhanti* participants need to clarify who the speech is intended for. This clarification is important to avoid misunderstandings and maintain harmony in interactions.

Secondly, as explained earlier, in the context of a *pobhanti* performance, the speaker needs to clarify the target or intended party through the choice and arrangement of the *Kabhanti* lyrics. This action has two opposing impacts. The positive impact is that clarity of the target helps the audience to grasp the symbolic meaning contained in the lyrics. The context and identity of the target greatly influence the overall interpretation, and this understanding is important for the interlocutor to provide the appropriate *Kabhanti* response. However, the negative impact is that this clarity may directly threaten the face of the hearer. When *Kabhanti* is explicitly directed at a particular individual, the message becomes more personal and can cause embarrassment or conflict, especially if the content of the *Kabhanti* touches on sensitive matters related to the background of the target.

For example, in *Kabhanti* (10), the word *ndoke* was initially symbolized as another man, while *bughou* represents a harmonious relationship. However, if the context changes, *ndoke* can be interpreted as a threat, and *bughou* may become a symbol for a young wife. This change in meaning shows that the addressing in *Kabhanti* influences how the message is understood by the audience. Clarity of the target is important, but on the other hand, it can also potentially pose a threat to face (FTA), especially if the symbolic meaning used touches on sensitive issues.

Through understanding the thought processes of the Muna community, it becomes clear that although delivering sarcasm through *Kabhanti* has its challenges, this practice is still legitimized for several reasons. First, *Kabhanti* is regarded as an inseparable part of the local cultural heritage and has become a means to convey criticism aesthetically in a socially organized and preserved atmosphere. As a form of oral cultural expression, *Kabhanti* is not merely an entertainment tool, but also a platform for conveying profound social messages. Criticism and social messages in *Kabhanti* function to ensure that the behavior of the community remains in line with the ethical values embedded in Muna culture (Taena et al., 2016). Second, this strategy is still seen as more polite for addressing sensitive issues compared to stating them directly. In the context of the Muna community's speech culture, this method of delivery reflects the skillfulness in maintaining social relationships. As a result, messages with critical or sarcastic undertones can still be reasonably

accepted by the hearer. Through the use of semiotic symbols embedded in poetic expressions, speakers encode critical meanings in ways that align with cultural norms. These symbols allow for layered interpretation, enabling sensitive messages to be delivered without overt confrontation. Recent studies have demonstrated that indirect forms of criticism, such as sarcasm and irony, are commonly used in oral traditions to navigate social hierarchies and maintain harmony, especially in high-context cultures where implicit communication is valued (Du et al., 2024; Berrios, 2025; Blasko et al., 2021).

(7) *Kala foratoeemu dheka nekaridundu*
Go and speak to the young plant

Koe nosdhaanea la bhalubi ngkaanaana
Don't put your hope in that youthful male

Umbe nandomo kabhotu nolapasimo
An agreement has indeed been made

Nando wawono inia
Long before this

Tamaka pada belahi koe fosihala lahaea
However don't blame others

Fehala mpada mbutomu
Blame yourself instead

Rame sabhara ngakarame
All the places of festivity

Keseno ngkaraehamu
You adored them all

Soomu nsolalomua opodagaane kadeki
You want to trade it first

Bara alahando daga
Merchant's goods

Tabea lumaiwonga maka omopakeda
Only when it's become loose, you want put it on

Ingko-ingkodahi ini
To this parrot

Tamaka pada lahaemo somboreno
Then who is really the fool

Somealano ngkalausa
To wear what's been discarded

Kalausa pata tipande
A discarded thing with no known owner

If the symbols in this *Kabhanti* are understood comprehensively, the hearer will realize that the content of this *Kabhanti* is a sarcastic remark from a man to his fiancée, a woman who is seen as not behaving appropriately. The woman frequently travels and socializes with many men, causing disappointment from her fiance, who then considers breaking off the engagement. The situation in *Kabhanti* (12), which involves personal or moral issues, is considered too sensitive to be addressed directly. Therefore, conveying it through cultural symbols in *Kabhanti* is seen as a more acceptable way within the community. Although the hearers and audience have the potential to understand the full content of the *Kabhanti*, La Lufini (56), a customary leader of the Muna community, states that such issues should be delivered in the form of *Kabhanti*. In this way, the meaning remains comprehensible to those familiar with the cultural symbols, but the delivery avoids open confrontation and maintains social harmony.
Finally, Sidu (2011) explains that the sharpness of *Kabhanti* has an important social function, which is to test the patience of its participants. Therefore, the response to the sarcasm thrown must also be delivered through *Kabhanti*, not with anger or open confrontation. Responding to sarcasme with dignity is viewed as a reflection of maturity and skill in language. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory states that sarcasm falls under the category of Face Threatening Acts (FTA), which can provoke a response in the form of an FTA as well, in the form of defensive or confrontational reactions. Similarly, in *Pobhanti*, participants are fully aware that their involvement in this tradition opens the opportunity to receive sarcasm. However, the Muna community has its own cultural mechanism for managing this potential, which is to reply to sarcasm through *Kabhanti*, not with expressions of anger. This shows the existence of cultural norms that regulate social conflict to be channeled through symbolic and aesthetic means, not aggressively (Hymes, 1972; Silverstein, 2004). This perspective is also reflected in the unwritten rules accompanying the performances. In the Modero *Pobhanti* event, for example, there is an opening lyric calling for no grudges between the participants, emphasizing that the main purpose of the performance is not to sharpen conflicts but to provide an expressive space that remains within the bounds of collective ethics.

(8) *Kadai nokodohomu dapopalenda mokesa*
Conflict must be avoided, let us excahnage sarcasm in a good manner

Tolandomo kamokulahi dapopalenda mokesa
The elders hope that we exchange sarcasm in a good manner

This *Kabhanti* serves as the opening *Kabhanti* or as an introduction before moving on to the core *Kabhanti*, this opening *Kabhanti* also aims to remind or make participants, especially those who are new, aware of the unwritten rule not to respond to a *Kabhanti* with anger, but with another Kabhanti, thus ensuring that the communication remains within the framework of politeness and harmony.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that mitigation in *Kabhanti*, as performed by the Muna community, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a deeply embedded cultural practice that reflects a local system of politeness, conflict management, and social artistry. The strategies identified on-record and off-record illustrate a complex interplay between directness and indirectness, each serving the community's overarching goal of maintaining social harmony and relational balance. The mitigation strategies in *Kabhanti* are not only mechanisms for reducing the threat of conflict but also aesthetic performances that demonstrate rhetorical skill and emotional intelligence. They challenge the universal assumptions of politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), revealing that politeness is not simply a matter of mitigating Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), but a cultural performance negotiated through collective norms and shared symbolism.

The dominance of off-record strategies in *Pobhanti* performances particularly *Kabhanti* with direct implicature and symbolic cultural *Kabhanti* highlights a cultural preference for implicit communication. This implicitness aligns with the Muna community's high-context communicative orientation, where meaning is embedded in shared cultural references, metaphors, and social knowledge. Through indirect speech, performers can express affection, critique, or satire without explicitly confronting the listener. Rather than weakening the message, this indirectness enriches it with depth, subtlety, and poetic resonance. Such strategies embody what Goffman (1967) calls "face-work" not the avoidance of conflict, but its aesthetic transformation into an act of social cooperation. By embedding critique in poetic and symbolic forms, the speaker upholds communal values while preserving both their own and the hearer's dignity.

On-record mitigation, meanwhile, represents a more delicate balance between clarity and social tact. The Muna community's *Kabhanti tanpa implikatur* (non-implicature *Kabhanti*) shows that directness can coexist with politeness when appropriately softened through linguistic devices like euphemism and hedging. Euphemism, exemplified in lexical choices such as *mbara* (reluctant) and *tabhe* (to reject), serves as a culturally specific face-saving strategy. Instead of avoiding confrontation entirely, speakers reframe potential conflict through refined vocabulary that maintains the core meaning but lessens emotional intensity. The substitution of more forceful terms with softer alternatives demonstrates a principle of *mitigated directness*, where openness and restraint coalesce. As Fowler (1988) notes, lexical selection in literary discourse is never arbitrary it is designed to evoke emotional resonance. Thus, in *Kabhanti*, euphemism is not only a tool for politeness but also an artistic device that heightens affective and aesthetic impact.

Hedging in *Kabhanti* adds another dimension to mitigation. Morphological and lexical devices such as reduplication (*po-mbara-mbara*) create semantic ambiguity that allows speakers to imply critique without asserting it directly. This strategy enables plausible deniability, protecting both the speaker's and hearer's faces. In doing so, Muna performers extend the scope of Fraser's (2010) definition of hedging beyond a mere softening of statements; it becomes a performative and interpretive resource. The use of temporal ambiguity in expressions like *pae omensuru* ('not continuously') illustrates how suspicion or disapproval can be expressed in an understated yet intelligible manner. By framing accusation as temporal inconsistency rather than moral wrongdoing, the speaker repositions the act from moral judgment to experiential observation transforming potential hostility into reflective discourse.

Off-record strategies such as those in *Kabhanti* (6–9) showcase the social intelligence embedded in rejection and response. Instead of direct confrontation, the speakers rely on attributional shifts invoking external social norms or metaphoric reasoning to deflect responsibility. This technique aligns with what Brown and Levinson describe as "negative politeness," yet it transcends it by embedding communal ethics within personal interaction. In *Kabhanti* (8–9), the use of sarcasm and metaphor ("a torn sarong is already provided") serves as a form of defensive politeness protecting the speaker's positive face while asserting agency. Sarcasm here is not aggression but a strategic, self-protective negotiation of personal dignity.

The most culturally distinctive form, however, lies in *symbolic cultural Kabhanti*. In this mode, mitigation is realized through shared semiotic knowledge, transforming sensitive issues into coded performances. Lotman's (2022) semiotic theory provides an apt lens to interpret this practice: cultural symbols function as "collective units of meaning" that transmit ethical and ideological values. In *Kabhanti* (10–12), terms such as *ndoke*, *bughou*, and *kamba* embody culturally specific associations that allow speakers to address taboo subjects like infidelity or moral conduct without explicit naming. This strategy exemplifies the highest degree of mitigation not through ambiguity alone, but through socially shared understanding that conceals sensitivity behind aesthetic convention.

However, the dual nature of these symbols presents both strengths and challenges. On one hand, they allow messages to be communicated with cultural grace, maintaining the delicate equilibrium between criticism and politeness. On the other, their recognizability within the community may expose the target and risk face-threatening consequences. This tension underscores the social intelligence required in performing *Kabhanti*: the ability to balance symbolic transparency with interpersonal discretion. Thus,

effective *Kabhanti* performance depends on the performer's mastery of both linguistic art and contextual awareness.

From a broader perspective, *Kabhanti* serves as a socio-cultural institution that manages potential conflict through aestheticized communication. Its role extends beyond entertainment it functions as a ritualized space where social tensions can be expressed, negotiated, and resolved without violence or open hostility. As Taena et al. (2016) and Sidu (2011) argue, the use of sarcasm and satire in *Kabhanti* is not deviant but socially sanctioned, testing participants' composure and communicative competence. The opening *Kabhanti* in *Modero Pobhanti* which calls on participants to "exchange sarcasm in a good manner" epitomizes this principle. It institutionalizes civility within expressive freedom, ensuring that criticism remains within the bounds of collective ethics.

In conclusion, mitigation strategies in *Kabhanti* represent a sophisticated cultural mechanism that intertwines politeness, performance, and poetic artistry. The Muna community's communicative system demonstrates that indirectness is not weakness but a refined form of social intelligence, where linguistic creativity serves as both shield and mirror of communal values. Far from being a mere avoidance of confrontation, *Kabhanti*'s mitigation strategies reaffirm the community's ethical core harmony, respect, and mutual understanding while celebrating the human capacity for eloquence amid potential conflict.

Conclusions

This study concludes that *Kabhanti Muna* represents a highly intricate system of licensed verbal aggression a socially sanctioned form of expressive conflict that refines and expands the framework of politeness theory established by Brown and Levinson (1987). Rather than viewing sarcasm, satire, and symbolic indirectness as violations of politeness norms, the Muna community transforms these communicative acts into culturally meaningful performances that sustain social equilibrium. While earlier research on *Kabhanti* (Aderlaepe et al., 2006; Apriatin, 2016) has primarily emphasized its aesthetic and symbolic features, this study moves beyond the literary appreciation of form and meaning to uncover its pragmatic and sociocultural functions. By examining *Kabhanti* through the lens of discourse pragmatics, we demonstrate how Muna speakers utilize strategic facework and layered symbolism to negotiate social tension, convey critique, and affirm communal values all within the boundaries of culturally legitimized politeness.

The findings suggest that the Muna notion of politeness is fundamentally different from the Western model's emphasis on individual face preservation. In *Kabhanti*, politeness is collective rather than individualistic it is a social contract that allows verbal confrontation within a ritualized frame. Through this framework, participants engage in controlled aggression, where linguistic creativity and emotional restraint are tested simultaneously. Such discursive behavior embodies what Goffman (1967) describes as "face-work as performance," yet in the Muna context, it transcends interpersonal dynamics to become a public art of moral calibration. Here, indirectness and irony do not signal avoidance; rather, they serve as linguistic instruments for constructive confrontation**,** enabling critique and emotional release while preserving communal harmony.

The study further identifies that off-record strategies, especially those found in cultural symbolic *Kabhanti*, represent the highest and most refined form of mitigation within Muna communicative practice. The pervasive use of metaphor, euphemism, and cultural semiotics reflects an advanced semiotic system where meaning is socially co-constructed rather than explicitly stated. Drawing from Lotman's (2022) theory of cultural semiotics, these symbolic expressions act as "collective units of meaning," transmitting moral values, social hierarchies, and ethical codes. The audience's ability to interpret these symbols correctly becomes a measure of cultural literacy and social intelligence. In this sense, *Kabhanti* functions not only as a mode of entertainment or poetic expression but as a pedagogical performance, teaching its participants the ethics of speech, patience, and relational management within the community.

At a theoretical level, the present findings call for a reconsideration of Brown and Levinson's universality claim in politeness theory. While the framework successfully identifies broad categories of politeness strategies on-record, off-record, and negative or positive politeness it fails to capture the culturally embedded logic that determines how these strategies are deployed. The Muna case illustrates that politeness cannot be universally defined as the avoidance of face-threatening acts (FTAs). Instead, it must

be understood as a culturally situated practice that can incorporate face-threatening discourse as an essential element of harmony maintenance. The Muna community's communicative ideology thus reframes politeness not as *non-confrontation* but as *disciplined confrontation* an interactive art that allows speakers to engage in emotional honesty and social critique within a regulated system of expression.

The concept of *licensed aggression* developed in this study therefore offers an alternative framework for analyzing non-Western pragmatic systems. It demonstrates that verbal conflict and politeness are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. Within *Kabhanti*, sarcasm and satire are not failures of decorum but deliberate tools of social regulation, where participants reaffirm shared norms by pushing against their boundaries in aesthetically mediated ways. This perspective reveals the cultural elasticity of politeness, showing that the same linguistic behavior such as irony or teasing can be perceived as offensive in one context but profoundly polite and artful in another.

The broader implication of this study is methodological and philosophical. Pragmatic theories must move beyond Eurocentric generalizations that privilege individual rationality and direct communication as universal ideals. Instead, they should embrace pluralist and decolonized perspectives that recognize local paradigms of communication as theoretically generative in their own right. In societies like the Muna, indirectness, metaphor, and ritualized criticism are not deviations from politeness; they constitute the very core of how civility and social intelligence are enacted. Thus, politeness should be redefined not as a universal set of strategies, but as a dynamic, culture dependent system of managing human interaction through moral, emotional, and aesthetic negotiation. Future research should extend this inquiry by comparing *Kabhanti* with other forms of oral poetic discourse in Southeast Asia such as *pantun*, *berbalas pantun*, or *syair* to explore how regional variations of verbal art construct alternative models of pragmatic behavior. Such cross-cultural studies would contribute to developing a global pragmatics of politeness, one that situates linguistic behavior within its ecological and cultural contexts, affirming that communicative harmony can emerge not only from restraint but also from creative confrontation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

There are no conflicts of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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