Vol. 12, No. 1, 2026, pp. 168-176
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29210/1202627213

Contents lists available at Journal IICET

Jurnal EDUCATIO (Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia)
ISSN: 2476-9886 (Print) ISSN: 2477-0302 (Electronic)

Journal homepage: https://jurnal.iicet.org/index.php/j-edu

Persuasive and humanistic language strategies in islamic preaching: audience perception and politeness theory

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 15th, 2026
Revised Aug 20th, 2026
Accepted Sep 17th, 2026

Keyword:

Audience reception,
Islamic preaching,
Perceived politeness,
Persuasive language,
Humanistic communication

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how jamaah interpret persuasive and humanistic language as politeness in Alkhairaat preaching in Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. It extends speaker-oriented facework accounts by treating participants' evaluations as primary evidence and by connecting linguistic form with contextual appropriateness, perceived respect, psychological comfort, message accessibility, and potential acceptance. Using a qualitative interpretive design, the study drew on semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected congregants who met the operational criterion of active participation—attendance at least twice monthly for a minimum of one year—and eight sermon transcripts selected through purposive maximum-variation selection across sermon topics and preaching occasions during the same fieldwork period for triangulation. Interview data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis through familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Thematic sufficiency was reached after 13 interviews and confirmed in two additional interviews; five participants reviewed summary interpretations, and the coding framework was peer-debriefed by a second researcher. Four dimensions shaped perceived politeness: simplicity and comprehensibility; persuasive and humanistic communication; criticism without humiliation; and humour, stories, and analogy. Unlike models that infer politeness mainly from speaker strategies, the proposed audience-centred account shows that politeness is an evaluative outcome produced when discourse fits listeners' knowledge, dignity, and emotional needs. The findings are context-bound and require cross-congregational validation.

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Introduction

Politeness is a central element of effective communication because it influences whether a message is received as respectful, acceptable, and appropriate. In religious communication, this function is especially important because preaching does not merely transmit information. It also seeks to guide moral reflection, encourage behavioural change, and strengthen religious commitment. A message that is doctrinally correct can still lose its persuasive force when listeners experience its delivery as harsh, distant, humiliating, or difficult to understand. Conversely, religious advice can be received positively when it is delivered in a way that makes listeners feel respected and included in the communicative process (Aldhaheri et al., 2026).

Much research on politeness has traditionally concentrated on the speaker's linguistic choices. Attention is commonly directed to forms such as indirect expressions, hedges, honorifics, mitigation, deference, solidarity markers, and other devices that speakers use to manage interpersonal relations. This approach is useful for describing how politeness is encoded, yet it does not fully answer a second question that is equally important: whether the audience actually experiences those forms as polite. Politeness is not only produced by speakers; it is also interpreted and evaluated by hearers within particular social, cultural, and institutional circumstances.

An audience-centred perspective becomes particularly relevant in preaching. The da'i occupies a position of religious authority and is expected to communicate guidance, correction, and moral reminders. These functions can involve potentially sensitive messages about religious practice, personal conduct, family life, or social behaviour. Because the communication is asymmetrical and morally consequential, the way correction is framed can influence whether the audience responds with openness or resistance. Listeners may accept direct guidance when it is embedded in trust and empathy, while even formally polite language may be rejected when it is perceived as judgmental or emotionally coercive (Federici, 2025).

The present study focused on Alkhairaat preaching in Palu, Central Sulawesi. Alkhairaat has a long tradition of religious education and community preaching in eastern Indonesia. Its preaching occurs within a sociocultural setting in which Islamic discourse interacts with local linguistic practices and broader Sulawesi cultural sensibilities. In this context, the audience is not a passive recipient of religious messages. Jamaah evaluate the preacher's language in relation to their educational background, prior religious knowledge, everyday experiences, emotional condition, and familiarity with local language and social norms.

A key problem in the existing study of religious politeness is the limited empirical attention given to the audience's own evaluative voice. Many analyses begin with sermon recordings or transcripts and classify speech acts, politeness strategies, rhetorical devices, or linguistic forms. Such analysis explains what the preacher does linguistically, but it cannot by itself establish how the congregation experiences those choices. A form that appears indirect or deferential to an analyst may not be perceived as respectful by listeners, while a comparatively direct form may be experienced as considerate when it is clear, familiar, and delivered within a relationship of trust (Borut et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2026; Ribino, 2023).

The interview evidence underlying this article indicates that jamaah often describe Alkhairaat preaching using terms such as polite, simple, understandable, non-offensive, persuasive, and humanistic. These descriptions suggest that perceived politeness extends beyond lexical softness (Oliver, 2022). Listeners attend to whether the preacher adapts to the audience, explains religious ideas accessibly, avoids humiliating individuals, creates emotional comfort, relates teaching to daily life, and leaves room for voluntary reflection rather than coercion. This creates a research gap between speaker-centred classifications of politeness and audience-centred evaluations of communicative experience.

Based on this background, the research problems were formulated in two related questions: (1) How do jamaah perceive the linguistic politeness used by Alkhairaat da'i in religious preaching? and (2) What makes religious language feel polite to its intended audience?

To answer these research questions, this study aimed to explain how jamaah perceive the linguistic politeness used by Alkhairaat da'i in religious preaching and to identify the communicative dimensions that make religious language feel polite to its intended audience. The study also sought to formulate a qualitative conceptual model connecting linguistic form, contextual appropriateness, perceived respect, psychological comfort, message accessibility, and potential acceptance.

Method

This study used a qualitative interpretive approach with a sociopragmatic orientation. The data were derived from interview material collected as part of a broader investigation of Alkhairaat preaching in Palu, Central Sulawesi. The broader project also included recorded and transcribed sermons, while the present analysis focused on jamaah perceptions. The sociopragmatic orientation guided attention to how language choices were evaluated in relation to social roles, preaching norms, local linguistic practices, dignity, and contextual appropriateness.

Participants were 15 jamaah selected purposively because they actively participated in Alkhairaat preaching activities and had first-hand exposure to the preaching style examined. Active participation was operationalised as attendance at least twice monthly for a minimum of one year. This criterion ensured that the interview data represented sustained direct experience rather than general impressions of Islamic

preaching. Recruitment reached thematic sufficiency after 13 interviews and was confirmed through two additional interviews.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format and examined perceptions of the da'i's language, clarity and accessibility, criticism or religious correction, emotional tone, humour and storytelling, analogy and everyday examples, and the appropriateness of local-language use. A common set of core topics was used across participants, while follow-up questions explored issues raised spontaneously. This flexibility allowed the categories to remain grounded in the participants' descriptions of comfort, respect, and comprehensibility (Craig et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023).

Interview material was analysed through repeated reading and reflexive thematic coding. Observations were coded, compared across participants, refined iteratively, and grouped into broader thematic clusters. The coding framework was peer-debriefed by a second researcher, and five participants reviewed summary interpretations. Four principal dimensions emerged: simplicity and comprehensibility; persuasive and humanistic communication; criticism without humiliation; and humour, stories, and analogy (Wu et al., 2025).

Interview findings were triangulated with eight sermon transcripts selected purposively to represent variation in sermon topics and preaching occasions during the same fieldwork period. The comparison examined whether audience descriptions of examples, local language, criticism, humour, and narrative corresponded with observable sermon practices. The study was not designed for statistical generalisation. Active participants may have held relatively favourable prior attitudes, and the findings should therefore be understood as a context-bound qualitative account rather than a numerical estimate of all congregational responses (Luetke et al., 2023; Simmerlein, 2025).

Results and Discussions

The analysis produced four closely related dimensions of audience-perceived politeness. These dimensions were developed from recurring evaluative patterns across interviews and were checked against the sermon material. In this qualitative study, prominence refers to repeated and analytically meaningful patterns rather than a statistical threshold. The four dimensions are presented systematically below and summarised in Table 1 (Jessiman et al., 2022; Schwarz et al., 2022; Stoltz & Grahn, 2021).

The first dimension was simplicity and comprehensibility. Jamaah repeatedly valued preaching that used plain language, familiar expressions, and examples drawn from daily life. Ahmad Bukhari highlighted the usefulness of everyday examples and inspirational stories because they helped listeners absorb and apply religious teaching. Faiz associated simple delivery with easier comprehension, while Fahruddin noted that the use of local language in appropriate situations could make the communication feel closer and more considerate. Yanwar Ardiansa also connected clarity, pacing, and orderly delivery with an overall judgment that the preaching was polite and well delivered.

These responses show that comprehensibility was not treated as a separate technical quality unrelated to politeness. For the jamaah, making a complex religious message understandable could itself function as an act of respect. A preacher who adjusted vocabulary and explanation to the audience's level of knowledge was perceived as attending to the audience's needs. In this sense, perceived politeness can be expressed as the combination of respectful language, comprehensibility, and contextual adaptationElaborate or highly formal language did not automatically create a stronger sense of politeness if it reduced the audience's ability to follow the message. In Islamic preaching, the use of familiar and locally accessible language can improve public understanding and make religious messages more meaningful to the audience (Dungcik, 2024).

The second dimension was persuasive and humanistic communication. Participants generally described the da'i as avoiding excessive anger, intimidation, and fear-based pressure. Advice was more acceptable when it was delivered through invitation, explanation, prayer, moral encouragement, and a calm emotional tone. This suggests that listeners evaluate politeness at the level of communicative stance. They attend not only to what is said but also to the attitude toward the audience that is conveyed through tone, framing, and the overall relationship established during the sermon (Palangyos & Ulla, 2025).

A humanistic stance was associated with warmth, patience, empathy, and the sense that the preacher was addressing shared human struggles rather than positioning the congregation merely as objects of correction. Even a direct statement could be received positively when the surrounding communication conveyed genuine concern for the listeners' wellbeing. Conversely, formally softened language could still be experienced as impolite if the underlying tone appeared condemning, condescending, or coercive. This finding reinforces the distinction between linguistic form and audience evaluation (Lam et al., 2022).

The third dimension was criticism without humiliation. Religious preaching necessarily includes moral reminders and correction, making criticism a particularly important test of politeness. Jamaah did not indicate that correction should be removed from preaching. Rather, they preferred criticism that was framed as advice, reflection, moral motivation, or a general principle that listeners could apply to themselves (Wolrath & Nina, 2022). Correction was considered more acceptable when it preserved dignity and avoided singling out, shaming, or publicly exposing an individual's perceived failure.

The distinction between accusation and invitation was especially important. When the da'i framed a moral issue as a question for self-reflection or as a shared principle, listeners retained room to evaluate their own conduct voluntarily. This reduced the psychological pressure associated with correction while preserving its religious meaning. The finding suggests that, within preaching, framing-level mitigation may matter more to listeners than the presence of isolated polite expressions. What protects the audience's dignity is not simply a softened word, but the broader way the act of correction is organized (Carel & Kidd, 2021).

The fourth dimension was the use of humour, stories, and analogy. Jamaah valued these rhetorical resources because they made sermons more lively and made abstract religious ideas easier to connect with lived experience. Humour could sustain attention, signal approachability, and reduce tension during difficult topics. Stories and analogies translated doctrinal concepts into situations involving family relationships, work, local social customs, and other familiar experiences. Their value was therefore not merely entertainment; they supported both comprehension and emotional accessibility (Pang & Ruan, 2024).

Table 1. Audience-centred dimensions of perceived politeness

Dimension	Linguistic / discursive correlate	Functional significance for jamaah
Simplicity and comprehensibility	Plain vocabulary; everyday examples; occasional use of local (Kaili) language	Signals respect for the audience's educational and linguistic background; enables comprehension and application
Persuasive and humanistic communication	Invitations, advice, calming explanations; avoidance of anger or excessive fear appeals	Communicates an empathetic and non-coercive relational stance toward the congregation
Criticism without humiliation	Correction framed as reflection, moral motivation, and general principle rather than direct accusation	Preserves audience dignity while retaining the legitimacy and moral force of correction
Humour, stories, and analogy	Anecdotes, jokes, and analogies drawn from familiar daily experience	Sustains engagement; makes abstract doctrine experientially accessible; softens the emotional impact of correction

Taken together, the four dimensions show that perceived politeness operates as a multidimensional social experience. The audience does not simply ask whether the preacher used a polite expression. Jamaah also consider whether the preacher understands their social circumstances, speaks at an accessible level, protects them from humiliation, produces emotional comfort, relates teaching to everyday life, and allows space for understanding rather than coercion. These criteria combine linguistic, pedagogical, relational, and affective elements, indicating that politeness in preaching is inseparable from the audience's broader experience of being respected.

The findings therefore extend a purely form-based view of politeness. Linguistic choices remain important because vocabulary, sentence form, rhetorical organisation, and local-language use provide the material through which the message is delivered. However, those forms acquire their communicative value only when they fit the social context. The same expression can be interpreted differently depending on the audience's background, the moral sensitivity of the topic, the relationship between preacher and congregation, and the emotional tone of delivery. Contextual appropriateness is thus a central bridge between linguistic form and perceived respect.

This audience-centred interpretation also clarifies why the categories used by listeners may differ from those used by linguistic analysts. Jamaah did not organise their evaluations around technical labels for politeness strategies. They spoke instead about clarity, comfort, being respected, not being cornered, the usefulness of familiar examples, and the acceptability of correction. These are first-hand evaluative categories grounded in the experience of receiving a sermon. They reveal aspects of communicative success that cannot be fully recovered from a transcript alone (Mbonye & Seeley, 2020; Rasenberg et al., 2022).

The relationship between religious authority and politeness is another important implication. Preaching is a one-to-many institutional event in which the da'i possesses recognised moral and religious authority. One might assume that such authority reduces the need for mitigation. The interview evidence suggests the opposite tendency. Because the moral stakes are high, jamaah appear especially attentive to whether authority

is exercised in a way that preserves dignity and emotional security. The more consequential the correction, the more important the humanistic framing of that correction becomes (Alzaidi et al., 2025).

Across the existing literature used in this manuscript, the findings show both convergence and a specific contextual contribution. Studies of politeness and impoliteness support the distinction between linguistic form and audience evaluation (Federici, 2025; Oliver, 2022; Ribino, 2023; Wodak et al., 2021). Research on sermon rhetoric and religious communication supports the roles of persuasion, authority, context, and audience adaptation (Al-hamzi et al., 2023; Aldhaheri et al., 2026; Luetke et al., 2023; Palangyos & Ulla, 2025; Simmerlein, 2025). Studies concerned with listening, accessibility, emotional experience, narrative, and message reception help explain why clarity, comfort, dignity, and familiar rhetorical resources matter to jamaah (Barlow et al., 2023; Borut et al., 2025; Carel & Kidd, 2021). The present study integrates these concerns into four audience-centred dimensions within Alkhairaat preaching.

Table 2. Comparison of the findings with sources already used in the manuscript

Prior study and focus	Convergence or limitation	Contribution of the present study
(Al-hamzi et al., 2023): deixis in Yemeni Friday sermons	Shows that person, spatial, and social deixis position the preacher and congregation within sermon discourse; it remains primarily speaker- and text-centred.	Adds jamaah evaluations of whether those linguistic choices are experienced as clear, respectful, and socially appropriate.
(Aldhaheri et al., 2026): persuasion strategies in Friday sermons	Confirms that persuasive strategies are shaped by religious purpose and intercultural context; audience experience is not its principal analytical focus.	Explains how persuasive delivery becomes politeness when listeners perceive respect, emotional comfort, and freedom from coercion.
(Alzaidi et al., 2025): persuasion in Prophetic Hadiths of tolerance	Links tolerance-oriented persuasion with cognitive framing and religious values; it analyses textual strategies rather than congregational responses.	Provides reception-based evidence that dignity-preserving correction supports openness to religious guidance.
(Dungcik, 2024): local language and understanding of religious messages	Supports the value of familiar language for public comprehension; it gives less attention to politeness as an evaluative outcome.	Connects local-language accessibility with perceived recognition of the jamaah's linguistic and cultural background.
(Federici, 2025): politeness in online support communication	Demonstrates that politeness depends on vulnerability, relational needs, and communicative context outside religious preaching.	Extends this contextual insight to asymmetrical preacher-jamaah interaction and morally sensitive correction.
(Oliver, 2022): metapragmatic evaluations of (im)politeness	Shows that evaluations of politeness are expressed through participants' own descriptive language; the setting is literary rather than religious.	Treats jamaah terms such as simple, understandable, non-offensive, and humanistic as primary analytical evidence.
(Palangyos & Ulla, 2025): persuasion, proclamation, and power in sermons	Highlights how sermon rhetoric combines persuasion and religious authority; it does not centre listeners' interpretations of that authority.	Distinguishes authority experienced as respectful guidance from authority experienced as intimidation or coercion.
(Rangkuti et al., 2022): speech acts and politeness in Islamic preaching	Identifies speech acts and politeness strategies used by da'i in Medan and their sociocultural conditioning; analysis remains mainly discourse-oriented.	Adds sustained audience testimony explaining why particular strategies preserve dignity and feel polite to jamaah.
(Hisham et al., 2023): rhetoric of persuasion in religious talk	Supports the importance of rhetorical appeals in religious persuasion; audience-perceived comfort and humiliation avoidance are not fully developed.	Integrates persuasion with humanistic tone, voluntary reflection, and the emotional conditions of message reception.
(Wodak et al., 2021): institutional normalisation of impoliteness	Shows that institutional norms and power can legitimise impolite discourse; the evidence comes from political press conferences.	Demonstrates how jamaah evaluate the ethical exercise of religious authority, especially during correction.
(Fernandez-quintanilla, 2020): narrative empathy and reader response	Shows that narrative response involves affective interpretation; it examines literary readers rather than sermon audiences.	Explains how stories and analogies create emotional accessibility and connect doctrine with lived experience.
(Lam et al., 2022): message form and elaboration	Demonstrates that presentation format affects message processing in health communication; it does not address Islamic preaching or politeness.	Shows qualitatively how accessible explanations and familiar examples help jamaah understand and engage with religious messages.
(Rasenberg et al., 2022): communicative alignment and shared meaning	Emphasises alignment in developing shared understanding; it is not concerned with religious authority or moral correction.	Relates contextual and linguistic adaptation to comprehension and perceived respect in preaching.
(Whittle & Maitlis, 2023):	Explains how language supports meaning	Applies meaning-making insight to the

Prior study and focus	Convergence or limitation	Contribution of the present study
language in sensemaking	construction in organisational settings; its theoretical context differs from congregational discourse.	way jamaah connect religious teaching with everyday experience.
(Wu et al., 2025): conversational silence and rapport management	Shows that relational meaning depends on context and rapport rather than isolated linguistic forms; it does not examine preaching.	Develops an audience-centred sequence linking linguistic form, contextual fit, perceived respect, comfort, accessibility, and potential acceptance.

Qualitative conceptual model of perceived politeness

Linguistic form -> Contextual appropriateness -> Perceived respect -> Psychological comfort -> Message accessibility -> Potential acceptance

The interaction among the findings can be represented as a qualitative conceptual sequence: linguistic form -> contextual appropriateness -> perceived respect -> psychological comfort -> message accessibility -> potential acceptance. This sequence should not be interpreted as a statistically tested causal model. It is an organising model derived from the recurring relationships described by participants. It illustrates how concrete linguistic and rhetorical choices can become meaningful to listeners through their fit with the social situation and through the emotional and relational effects they produce (Whittle & Maitlis, 2023).

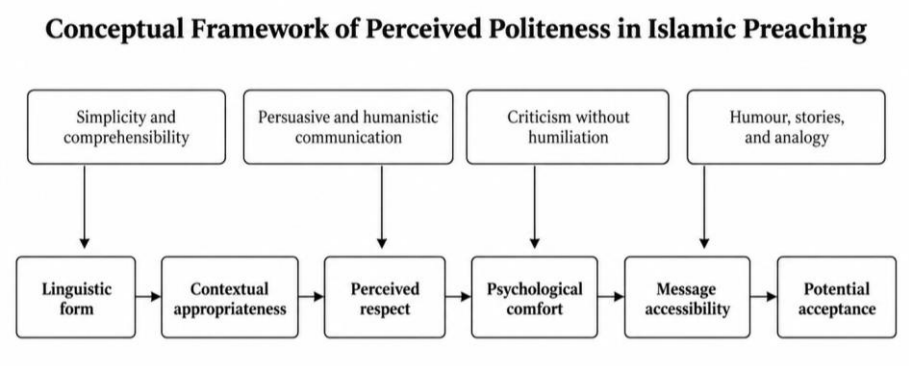


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of perceived politeness in Islamic preaching

At the first stage, linguistic form includes plain vocabulary, everyday examples, humour, stories, analogy, and the selective use of local language. Contextual appropriateness refers to the fit between those choices and the audience's educational background, religious knowledge, linguistic familiarity, and immediate social circumstances. Perceived respect emerges when listeners interpret those choices as evidence that the preacher recognises their dignity and communicative needs. Psychological comfort refers to freedom from unnecessary fear, humiliation, or coercion, particularly when correction is involved. In Islamic preaching, politeness strategies allow preachers to offer advice and criticism while maintaining respect, harmony, and consideration for the audience's social and cultural background (Rangkuti et al., 2022).

Message accessibility refers to the audience's ability to understand the religious content and connect it with practical life. Potential acceptance refers to openness to reflection, persuasion, and moral guidance. The model does not imply that acceptance is guaranteed whenever polite communication occurs. Religious persuasion is influenced by many personal and social factors. However, the findings indicate that respectful and accessible delivery can create more favourable communicative conditions for listeners to engage seriously with the message(Hisham et al., 2023).

The model also shifts the guiding question of politeness research from asking only whether an utterance contains polite features to asking why an utterance is experienced as polite in a particular social context. This shift encourages researchers to treat audience testimony as primary evidence rather than as a secondary confirmation of transcript analysis. It also supports inductive analysis in which categories such as comprehensibility, humiliation avoidance, emotional comfort, and contextual fit are allowed to emerge from the audience's own evaluative language (Fernandez-quintanilla, 2020).

From a practical perspective, the findings have implications for da'i training. Training programmes often emphasise doctrinal knowledge, rhetorical ability, and command of religious register. The present findings suggest that audience-adaptive communication should receive comparable attention. Preachers may benefit from developing the ability to estimate an audience's level of knowledge, translate complex concepts into accessible terms, use familiar examples without oversimplifying doctrine, frame moral correction as invitation rather than accusation, and use humour or narrative in ways that support comprehension and dignity.

The study also indicates that local linguistic resources can be valuable when used appropriately. The use of Kaili or other familiar local forms can reduce social distance and signal that the preacher is willing to meet the audience within its own communicative environment. This does not imply that local language is always necessary or that formal religious register should be abandoned. Rather, effective politeness involves flexible calibration between formality, authority, familiarity, and comprehensibility according to the needs of the specific congregation.

Several limitations should be considered. The qualitative sample consisted of active jamaah from one Alkhairaat preaching context in Palu and was not designed to represent all congregants statistically. Active participants may have been more positively disposed toward the preaching than occasional or disengaged listeners. Retrospective interviews were also dependent on participants' recollection and willingness to express criticism of recognised religious authorities. The four dimensions are interpretive themes rather than a validated measurement instrument, and triangulation with eight sermons cannot establish causal effects on acceptance. The findings are therefore transferable only to analytically similar social, linguistic, institutional, and cultural contexts until examined across other congregations and religious traditions.

Despite these limitations, the convergence of the interview themes provides a coherent account of what makes religious language feel polite in this context (Al-hamzi et al., 2023). The study shows that audience acceptance is supported by more than lexical softness. It is shaped by the combined effects of understandable language, contextual adaptation, humanistic tone, dignity-preserving correction, emotionally appropriate delivery, and rhetorical techniques that connect religious teaching with everyday experience.

Conclusions

The study concludes that jamaah perceive politeness in Alkhairaat preaching as a multidimensional communicative experience rather than as a property of isolated polite expressions. Four dimensions were consistently prominent: simplicity and comprehensibility; persuasive and humanistic communication; criticism without humiliation; and humour, stories, and analogy. These dimensions show that listeners interpret politeness through the fit between language and context, the respect communicated by the preacher, the emotional comfort created during interaction, and the accessibility of the religious message. Religious correction remains acceptable when it is framed as reflection and moral invitation rather than public accusation or coercion. The principal contribution of the study is an audience-centred model in which linguistic form is connected to contextual appropriateness, perceived respect, psychological comfort, message accessibility, and potential acceptance. This model complements speaker-centred analysis by showing that communicative success must also be evaluated from the perspective of the people who receive the message. Practically, the findings support greater attention to audience-adaptive competence in da'i training, including clear explanation, sensitivity to social and linguistic background, dignity-preserving correction, and the purposeful use of familiar examples, humour, and narrative. Further research should test the transferability of these dimensions across different congregations, religious traditions, and cultural settings. The conclusions are bounded by the qualitative sample, one Alkhairaat setting in Palu, and eight sermon transcripts. Accordingly, the four dimensions should be treated as a context-specific conceptual account and not as statistically generalisable categories until they are examined in broader congregational and cultural settings.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the jamaah who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the language used in Alkhairaat preaching in Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Their perspectives provided valuable insights for understanding politeness as an audience-centred communicative experience. We also appreciate the Alkhairaat preaching community, whose religious and communicative practices provided the contextual setting for this research. We are grateful to all parties who contributed to the completion of this study and the preparation of this manuscript.

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