


Local Wisdom and Javanese Politeness in Service Encounters around Central Java Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Javanese politeness values, or *unggah-ungguh*, shape communication between waiters and guests in student cafés around leading universities in Semarang, Salatiga, and Surakarta, Central Java. Despite the increasing recognition of intercultural communication in hospitality studies, little attention has been paid to the role of local politeness systems in shaping service interactions. The study aimed to identify how Javanese politeness values are expressed and negotiated in daily hospitality encounters and how these practices influence customer satisfaction. Participants consisted of twenty-four café waiters and six managers, recruited through purposive sampling based on their fluency in Javanese and direct involvement in customer service. Data were collected through participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal group discussions, and analyzed using a thematic qualitative approach. The analysis focused on six key values of Javanese etiquette: *sumanak* (friendliness), *sabar lan sareh* (patience and calmness), *tepa slira* (empathy), *andhap asor* (humility), *empan papan* (situational appropriateness), and *nuju prana* (pleasing others). The findings reveal that consistent application of these values fosters harmonious interaction, strengthens relational bonds, and creates a culturally distinctive atmosphere in the cafés. The study concludes that Javanese politeness functions as a communicative strategy that integrates professionalism with local wisdom, offering insights for culturally grounded hospitality training and intercultural communication research.

Keywords: *andhap asor, hospitality, Javanese politeness, local wisdom, service encounters, unggah-ungguh*

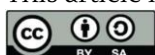
INTRODUCTION

Service encounters in the hospitality industry represent crucial moments where professional conduct meets cultural expectations, yet the influence of

indigenous politeness systems remains underexplored in service communication research (Kim & Baker, 2023; Wang, 2015). In multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Indonesia, local politeness norms play a vital role in shaping interpersonal interactions. This is particularly evident in Central Java, where the Javanese etiquette system, *unggah-ungguh*, governs social relationships through values such as *sumânak* (friendliness), *sabar lan sareh* (calmness and patience), *tepa slira* (empathy), *andhap asor* (humility), *empan papan* (situational appropriateness), and *nuju prana* (pleasing others) (Purnomo, 2019; Sumekto et al., 2021). These values collectively form a moral foundation of respectful communication. However, how they are operationalized within professional hospitality settings, particularly in informal service spaces such as student cafés, remains insufficiently examined in academic research.

Scholars in hospitality and intercultural communication have increasingly emphasized the importance of culturally grounded interaction in fostering guest satisfaction and service excellence (Noorani, 2024). Existing studies show that staff who adapt their communication to local and intercultural expectations tend to establish stronger rapport and achieve more positive customer experiences (Kim & Baker, 2023). At the same time, technological developments continue to reshape the hospitality landscape, creating new expectations for efficiency and responsiveness in service encounters (Kansakar, Munir, & Shabani, 2017). In Indonesia, several studies have noted that Javanese service providers often employ *unggah-ungguh*-based communication strategies to express respect, warmth, and relational sensitivity toward guests (Purnomo, 2019). Fauzi (2024) further underscores that *unggah-ungguh* constitutes a culturally rooted framework of politeness, reinforcing its relevance to contemporary service encounters. Yet, most of this research has concentrated on hotels or tour-guiding contexts rather than small-scale food and beverage services such as cafés or student-oriented eateries. These cafés, frequented by university students in Semarang, Salatiga, and Surakarta, serve as microcosms of cultural and generational interaction, where professionalism and local politeness values visibly intersect (Panuntun, 2021; Adisti, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention, cross-cultural communication research in hospitality remains largely shaped by Western theoretical frameworks, which often prioritize individual autonomy and directness. Such perspectives provide limited recognition of indigenous politeness systems as communicative capital. Studies in Asian contexts have begun to address this imbalance by showing how *kearifan lokal* (local wisdom) supports face management and relational harmony in interaction (Mutiarra, 2023). In the



Javanese worldview, politeness represents not only a linguistic strategy but also a moral stance rooted in empathy, humility, and self-control (Jauhari, 2025; Purnomo, 2025), aligning with sociopragmatic theories that position politeness as culturally embedded rather than universal (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011).

Yet a significant empirical gap remains: little is known about how Javanese politeness values are enacted in everyday hospitality encounters or how they shape guests' perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (Nareswari & Sobari, 2024; Tampil Purba et al., 2022). This gap is especially relevant in the context of globalized education and tourism, where student cafés around universities function as intercultural meeting points blending local identity with professional service standards (Haeruddin et al., 2022; Parta, 2022). Understanding communicative practices in these cafés provides insight into how local politeness values are negotiated in contemporary hospitality settings.

To address the limited attention to local politeness systems in hospitality research, this study investigates how Javanese politeness values (*unggah-ungguh*) are realized in waiter–guest communication within student cafés around leading universities in Semarang, Salatiga, and Surakarta. Specifically, it aims to (1) identify the politeness strategies employed by waiters, (2) examine how these strategies contribute to interpersonal rapport and guest satisfaction, and (3) analyze their implications for culturally grounded hospitality practices. Theoretically, the study contributes to pragmatics and intercultural communication by positioning *unggah-ungguh* as communicative capital that harmonizes professionalism and local wisdom (Kristina, 2018; Radojevic et al., 2019). Practically, its findings are expected to inform hospitality education and service training by demonstrating the value of integrating local politeness systems into service excellence frameworks (Handani et al., 2022; Winata & Merrilees, 2017).

The guiding research question is: How are Javanese politeness values (*unggah-ungguh*) realized in waiter–guest interactions in student cafés around universities in Central Java, and how does their enactment affect the quality of service interactions and guest satisfaction?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine how Javanese politeness values (*unggah-ungguh*) are enacted in waiter–guest communication within student cafés located around major universities in Central Java. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth

exploration of meaning, context, and interactional nuance within naturally occurring conversations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Epistemologically, the study adopts an interpretivist orientation, viewing language as socially situated action and politeness as co-constructed within interactional contexts.

Research Sites and Participants

The study was conducted in nine student cafés across Semarang, Salatiga, and Surakarta, surrounding six major universities: Diponegoro University, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Satya Wacana Christian University, IAIN Salatiga, Universitas Sebelas Maret, and Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta. Sites were purposively selected to capture diverse service atmospheres: traditional, semi-modern, and modern, as well as multilingual interactional settings (Patton, 2015).

Participants comprised 27 waiters and waitresses (15 females, 12 males; aged 19–27) and 18 local customers (9 females, 9 males; aged 18–25). All were native Javanese speakers with varying bilingual proficiency in Indonesian and English. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained after the study objectives were explained. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Universitas Surakarta.

Data Collection Procedures

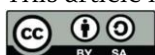
Data were gathered over a three-month period (February–April 2025) through non-participant observation, audio recording, and semi-structured interviews.

Observations and Recordings

Naturally occurring service interactions were observed with participants' consent. Each session lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Thirty-six interactions (12 from each city) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using conversation-analytic conventions, with attention to pragmatic markers, speech level usage (*ngoko*, *krama madya*, *krama inggil*), and paralinguistic cues such as tone, hesitation, and laughter (Heritage, 2018). Field notes captured contextual details including gesture, facial expression, and interpersonal distance.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Fifteen waiters and nine regular customers participated in follow-up interviews conducted in Javanese and Indonesian (30–45 minutes each). The interviews explored communicative intent, choice of speech level, interpretations of



politeness, and the negotiation between professionalism and cultural appropriateness. All interviews were translated into English for analysis. The interview protocol was validated by two experts in pragmatics and Javanese linguistics to ensure conceptual clarity (Ary et al., 2019).

Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

The analysis was informed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management model. Together, these frameworks guided the interpretation of (1) speech acts, (2) face orientation, and (3) relational and sociocultural goals embedded in service encounters.

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2020) interactive model consisting of:

1. Data Condensation: open-coding of transcripts to identify recurring expressions and behaviors related to politeness values (e.g., respectful address forms, indirect requests, humble self-positioning, empathic responses).
2. Data Display: grouping codes into broader categories linked to Javanese politeness principles such as *sumânak*, *sabar lan sareh*, *tepa slira*, and *andhap asor*.
3. Conclusion Drawing: interpreting how politeness values were realized and negotiated in interpersonal communication.

Triangulation across observations, transcripts, and interviews enhanced analytic credibility. Member checking was conducted with several participants, who confirmed the contextual accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description (Geertz, 1973) was used to ensure transferability by presenting relevant social and cultural details.

Ethical Considerations

All participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and verbal consent was secured for all observations and recordings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of waiter–guest interactions in student cafés across Semarang, Salatiga, and Surakarta demonstrates that Javanese politeness values remain central in shaping service communication, even within youth-dominated, semi-urban hospitality environments. Across all observations and interviews, six interrelated values emerged consistently: *sumânak* (warm friendliness), *sabar lan sareh* (calmness and patience), *tepa slira* (empathy), and *andhap asor* (humility),

empan papan (situational appropriateness), and *nuju prana* (pleasing others). These values were expressed linguistically through speech-level adjustments and interactional strategies aimed at balancing professionalism with cultural harmony.

While these values correspond to Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive and negative politeness strategies, they extend beyond face-saving functions by embedding politeness within moral and relational obligations. For example, *andhap asor* is not merely avoidance of imposition but an ethical stance of humility rooted in Javanese spirituality. Likewise, *tepa slira* parallels Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport-management principle of empathy, yet it presupposes a communal, rather than individual, self. These findings challenge the universality of Western face theory and highlight how communicative conduct is shaped by local moral orders.

From a broader Asian perspective, *unggah-ungguh* differs from systems such as Japanese *keigo* or Korean *chonsonhwa*, which rely on codified, hierarchical linguistic markers. Javanese politeness is comparatively flexible and anchored in *empan papan*, the moral discernment of what is appropriate in each situation. Such elasticity allows speakers to maintain harmony without rigidly reproducing social distance, positioning *unggah-ungguh* as a culturally distinct contribution to global pragmatics.

Linguistic Expressions of the Six Core Values

1. *Empan Papan* (Situational Appropriateness)

Waiters routinely shifted between *krama madya* and *ngoko alus* depending on familiarity and context. This adaptive code-switching exemplifies *empan papan*. For instance, a waiter in Salatiga used the polite form *nuwun sewu, Mbak* when interacting with unfamiliar guests, but shifted to *ngoko alus* with regulars. These findings align with studies showing that Javanese politeness is situationally negotiated rather than fixed (Sumekto et al., 2021; Purnomo, 2019).

2. *Andhap Asor* (Humility)

Humility was expressed through tone lowering, avoidance of direct disagreement, and deferential posture. While this resembles Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness, *andhap asor* carries a deeper moral significance, namely humility as virtue (Wibawa & Nafalski, 2010; Adisti, 2018). As one waiter noted, "*Even if customers are younger, we must still talk politely because politeness shows who we are as Javanese.*" This reflects Panuntun's (2021) concept of ethical hospitality as *budi pekerti* in practice.

3. *Sumânak* and *Sabar lan Sareh* (Friendliness, Patience, Calmness)

Warm greetings, small talk, and gentle laughter marked *sumânak*, contributing to rapport and comfort. These affective behaviors echo hospitality literature emphasizing emotional engagement (Nareswari & Sobari, 2024; Tampil Purba et al., 2022). However, unlike purely transactional friendliness, Javanese *sumânak* is tempered by *sareh*, the calm composure expected in social interaction (Kristina, 2018), creating a uniquely balanced emotional style.

4. *Tepa Slira* (Empathy)

Empathy emerged as a crucial element for maintaining harmony. Waiters emphasized understanding customers’ moods, modifying speech level, and using soft tone to prevent conflict. This aligns with Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) emphasis on empathy in sustaining rapport and parallels hospitality studies showing that emotional intelligence enhances service quality (Noorani, 2024; Handani et al., 2022). In Javanese culture, however, empathy is moralized through the value of *rukun* (social harmony), not merely emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012).

5. *Nuju Prana* (Pleasing Others)

Small gestures such as offering extra napkins, smiling, or providing unsolicited assistance illustrated *nuju prana*, reinforcing positive impressions and reflecting the Javanese commitment to making others feel comfortable and appreciated.

Table 1. Javanese Politeness Values in Waiter–Guest Interactions

No	Core Value	Pragmatic Function	Example Expression	Communicative Effect
1	<i>Sumânak</i> (friendliness)	Builds initial rapport	<i>“Monggo, silakan duduk, Mas.”</i>	Creates warmth, reduces distance
2	<i>Sabar lan sareh</i> (patience & calmness)	Maintains composure	Soft tone, delayed responses	Prevents conflict; conveys professionalism
3	<i>Tepa slira</i> (empathy)	Anticipates guest needs	Adjusting language to guest mood	Enhances satisfaction and trust
4	<i>Andhap asor</i> (humility)	Lowers self-positioning	Avoiding direct refusal	Shows respect and moral integrity
5	<i>Empan papan</i> (situational appropriateness)	Adjusts speech level	Switching from <i>krama</i> to <i>ngoko alus</i>	Achieves social balance



No	Core Value	Pragmatic Function	Example Expression	Communicative Effect
6	<i>Nuju prana</i> (pleasing others)	Reinforces harmony	Offering extra napkins, warm smile	Leaves positive impression

Table 1 illustrates how these values operate linguistically and behaviorally to produce a hybrid communicative style that merges traditional courtesy with modern service professionalism. This supports Parta (2022) and Radojevic et al. (2019), who argue that hospitality communication in Indonesia is deeply moral rather than merely transactional.

Hybridization and Emerging Tensions

The interplay of the six values reveals a hybrid model of service communication: culturally grounded yet responsive to modern expectations. However, some tension arose. Younger waiters, particularly in Semarang, often prioritized speed and directness associated with urban professionalism. This generational shift (Jauhari, 2025; Mutiara, 2023) demonstrates pragmatic flexibility while retaining core elements of *andhap asor*, such as lowered intonation or softened facial expressions, reaffirming the endurance of Javanese habitus.

Cross-Cultural Anchoring

In comparing these findings with other politeness systems, *unggah-ungguh* emerges as an ethical disposition embedded in social and spiritual values, rather than a purely linguistic system. Unlike Japanese *keigo* or Korean *sonnim* culture, Javanese politeness emphasizes relational empathy and moral modesty (Panuntun, 2021; Sumekto et al., 2021). As such, Javanese hospitality represents a synthesis of linguistic, social, and moral elements that enriches global politeness scholarship.

Pedagogical Implications

Incorporating Javanese politeness principles into hospitality training offers practical benefits. As argued by Haeruddin et al. (2022), service education in Indonesia should integrate local cultural identity with global competencies. Embedding *unggah-ungguh* within communication training can foster authenticity, emotional intelligence, and guest satisfaction. Thus, this study contributes both to sociopragmatic theory and to culturally responsive hospitality pedagogy.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study focused on student cafés in three university cities, which may not represent broader hospitality contexts. Future research should extend to hotels, restaurants, and community-based tourism settings to examine variations across service domains. Employing digital conversation-analysis tools may also reveal micro-interactional elements, such as pauses, laughter, gesture synchronization, that deepen understanding of politeness as embodied practice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Javanese politeness, or *unggah-ungguh*, continues to function as a living communicative resource within the modern hospitality contexts of Central Java. The findings reveal that politeness in Javanese service encounters is not merely a linguistic choice but a *moral and relational practice* rooted in longstanding cultural philosophy. The six core values identified, namely *sumânak*, *sabar lan sareh*, *tepa slira*, *andhap asor*, *empan papan*, and *nuju prana*, operate collectively to sustain social harmony, balance hierarchical relations, and humanize professional communication. These values form a localized framework of communicative ethics that integrates affective warmth with situational awareness, offering an alternative paradigm to Western politeness theories that often prioritize individual autonomy.

Conceptually, these six values refine and extend existing politeness theories by showing that rapport management in Javanese culture is oriented not toward the protection of “face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987) but toward maintaining *rukun*, which refers to a state of moral, relational, and emotional equilibrium. This reconceptualization positions politeness not as strategic face-management but as an ethical orientation toward the well-being of others. Such a perspective challenges universalist assumptions in mainstream politeness scholarship and supports the view that relational ethics are culturally constituted and dynamically enacted. It also enriches rapport management theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) by demonstrating that moral sensibility, humility, and empathy are integral components of relational negotiation in non-Western service discourse.

From an intercultural-pragmatic standpoint, the study broadens the dialogue between Western and non-Western politeness paradigms by positioning *unggah-ungguh* as a model of *moral hospitality*, one that blends empathy, humility, and responsiveness within professional service encounters.

Theoretically, it offers an indigenous framework of relational management that bridges sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, and hospitality discourse. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of embedding local wisdom in hospitality training to foster authenticity, emotional resonance, and cultural grounding in guest interactions. Recognizing *unggah-ungguh* as both cultural heritage and communicative competence can enhance Indonesia's hospitality identity and contribute to a more humanized approach to global service professionalism.

Future research could explore how similar moralized politeness frameworks operate in other regions or intercultural contexts, thereby expanding and diversifying the sociopragmatic and hospitality literature.

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