

## When Words Offend: A Study of Indonesian Political Speech

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i6.1594>

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how political speech in Indonesia functions as a catalyst for public anger by violating cultural norms of respectful communication, or *tata bicara*. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it examines five controversial statements made by public officials between 2023 and 2024, analyzing how linguistic choices – such as tone, vocabulary, and framing – trigger emotional backlash. Data were collected from televised interviews, press conferences, and online news reports that documented these public statements. The selected data represent speech events that sparked significant public debate and reactions on social media. Findings reveal recurring patterns of superiority language, blame-shifting, and a lack of empathy, all of which undermine expectations of humility and politeness in political discourse. Drawing on Politeness Theory, Speech Act Theory, and sociolinguistic insights, the study argues that public anger is not just a reaction to policy, but to the emotional and moral dissonance created by disrespectful speech. In the Indonesian context, language is deeply tied to social harmony; when violated, it becomes a site of moral contestation. The research highlights the urgent need for empathetic authority in political communication.

**Keywords:** *Language, Public Speech, Politics, Critical Discourse Analysis*

#### Article History:

Received 14<sup>th</sup> October 2025

Accepted 29<sup>th</sup> November 2025

Published 02<sup>nd</sup> December 2025



## INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a vehicle of communication but a reflection of power, emotion, and ideology. Within sociolinguistics, language is understood as a social practice that both constructs and reveals human relationships, social hierarchies, and collective emotions. As Holmes (2021) notes, language both “expresses and shapes social meaning,” allowing individuals to position themselves within networks of authority, solidarity, and affect. Yet this very capacity to express meaning makes language a volatile force – capable not only of uniting but also dividing communities. When linguistic forms carry emotional undertones, they can transform ordinary discourse into a field of social tension and collective reaction. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Indonesia, where public sensitivity toward the ethics of speech – *tata bicara* – is deeply tied to moral and cultural expectations.

In Indonesian society, the way a person speaks reflects not only their intention but also their moral character. Words are evaluated not merely by their content but by tone, choice of vocabulary, and perceived respectfulness. This cultural logic becomes especially visible in the sphere of political communication, where every public statement is scrutinized for its alignment with social values of *kesantunan* (politeness) and *rasa hormat* (respect). Over the past few years, several political utterances – delivered in interviews, parliamentary discussions, or social media

posts—have triggered widespread anger and disappointment among citizens. These remarks, often perceived as dismissive, insensitive, or emotionally charged, became viral moments that exposed the fragile relationship between authority and the public. What appears to be a simple speech act from a politician frequently escalates into a moral debate over tone and appropriateness.

A particularly illustrative example of this phenomenon emerged in mid-2024, when several public statements made by members of parliament went viral for their controversial choice of words. One politician's remark, labeling citizens as "stupid" in the context of economic debates, was widely condemned as offensive and demeaning. Another politician sparked backlash after refusing to be "equated with ordinary people," a statement that many Indonesians interpreted as elitist and detached from the public's struggles. Though these utterances were made in different contexts, they share similar linguistic characteristics: they contain evaluative and hierarchical language that implies superiority, disregard, or disconnection from the general populace. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, these remarks violated the cultural expectations of humility and respect that are central to Indonesian communicative norms. The resulting outrage, amplified by digital media, illustrates how linguistic violations of *tata bicara* can quickly evolve into moral and emotional crises within the public sphere.

This recurring pattern demonstrates that in Indonesia, language has become a catalyst for public anger and emotion. When a politician uses sarcasm, harsh criticism, or an assertive tone, it is not only interpreted as rhetorical strategy but as a breach of *tata bicara*—the culturally grounded norm that expects those in power to speak with humility and decorum. As Rahardi (2019) observes, "Indonesian politeness involves a harmony between firmness and humility; once that balance is lost, speech becomes confrontation rather than communication." The emotional backlash that follows such utterances—expressed through online outrage, critical news coverage, and moral commentary—reflects how deeply linguistic form is connected to the collective sense of respect and justice in Indonesian public life.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, these outbursts reveal that language operates as emotional performance. It is not the factual message alone that provokes anger but how it is delivered—the choice of pronouns, the tone of address, or even facial expressions accompanying speech. In contexts of unequal power, such as between politicians and citizens, words can function as symbols of distance or arrogance. Fairclough (2015) argues that discourse reproduces power relations through subtle linguistic choices; hence, when political figures adopt a patronizing or defensive tone, the public may perceive it as a reinforcement of hierarchy and disregard. The anger that emerges is not spontaneous but socially mediated—it arises from a shared understanding that those in authority should communicate with empathy and accountability.

In this light, speech acts become emotionally charged events. Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1979) Speech Act Theory helps explain this: every utterance performs an action—it can promise, insult, command, or provoke. In Indonesian political discourse, what is meant as a clarification (illocutionary act) can easily be perceived as an insult (perlocutionary effect), depending on the emotional and cultural framing. For instance, defensive or condescending statements—especially those made in the context of public controversies—often trigger collective anger because they are read not as reasoned responses but as dismissals of public concern. The resulting outrage reveals the gap between linguistic intention and social perception, a central concern in sociolinguistics.

Furthermore, the rise of digital media intensifies this emotional dynamic. As D'Errico et al. (2021) explain, online discourse fosters "affective contagion," where emotion spreads rapidly across digital networks. In Indonesia, political comments that appear provocative or disrespectful are immediately amplified by netizens through retweets, memes, and reaction

videos. This transformation of speech into social media spectacle shows that the emotional life of language extends beyond its original context. Anger becomes a collective performance—an emotional dialogue between the speaker and the audience, mediated by language and technology.

This situation points to a deeper sociocultural issue: the erosion of *tata bicara* in public communication. In traditional Indonesian discourse, speech is expected to maintain social harmony (*rukun*) and emotional restraint (*menahan diri*). The ability to speak politely and sensitively is not only a personal virtue but also a social obligation. When this linguistic norm is disregarded, especially by those in positions of authority, it signals moral disruption. The backlash that follows is not just disapproval but an assertion of collective moral order—the public reclaiming the right to define what constitutes respectful language.

Therefore, the relationship between language and emotion in Indonesia must be understood through both sociolinguistic and cultural lenses. Anger in this context is not a mere psychological response but a sociolinguistic phenomenon—an index of disrupted moral communication. When political discourse violates the implicit contract of politeness and respect, language becomes the trigger of social emotion. In other words, public anger is not directed merely at words, but at what those words symbolize: the neglect of shared linguistic ethics that form the foundation of Indonesian social life.

This research, then, situates itself within this intersection of language, emotion, and morality. By examining how public speech—particularly in political settings—elicits emotional reactions, it aims to reveal the sociolinguistic mechanisms through which anger is produced, circulated, and sustained. It draws upon the frameworks of Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015) to analyze how linguistic strategies and violations of *tata bicara* become catalysts for collective emotion. The focus is not on the political content itself, but on how language use—through tone, framing, and choice of expression—shapes emotional responses in Indonesian society.

Ultimately, this exploration seeks to understand the power of words in shaping emotional landscapes. In Indonesia, to speak publicly is not merely to inform but to perform one's social and moral identity. Every utterance carries the potential to maintain or rupture social harmony. When language fails to respect cultural expectations, it becomes a mirror of broader anxieties about leadership, morality, and respect. Thus, in the sociolinguistic reality of Indonesia, words do not merely describe the world—they create emotional worlds in which citizens negotiate meaning, authority, and justice.

## METHOD

This study employs a **qualitative research design** using **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as the primary framework. The purpose is to uncover how linguistic choices in political discourse can trigger public anger and emotional reactions within Indonesian society. CDA is suitable for this study because it enables the examination of power relations, ideology, and social inequality as reflected in language use (Fairclough, 1995).

### Data Source

The data consist of **five public speech transcripts and media statements** made by government or political figures between 2025. These texts were selected purposively based on their relevance to public reactions and media coverage indicating that the statements provoked anger or controversy. The data are taken from credible online news portals and official recordings.

### Research Procedure

The data collection process involved identifying 2025 parliamentary statements that met the criteria above, collecting transcripts or transcription-based excerpts from recordings, and organizing them into analyzable textual units. Each statement was then examined through three main analytical focuses: (1) Lexical choice – analyzing evaluative adjectives, pronouns, labeling expressions, and emotionally loaded terms. (2) Modality – examining expressions of authority, certainty, obligation, or dismissal. (3) Pragmatic function – identifying the illocutionary intentions (e.g., blaming, rejecting, asserting superiority) and potential perlocutionary effects that contributed to public anger.

This systematic approach ensures that linguistic form, speaker intention, and cultural interpretation are studied in relation to one another.

Instrument

The main instrument in this study is the **researcher herself**, who functions as the key analytical tool in interpreting language use and contextual meaning. Analytical notes and discourse maps were also used to record linguistic patterns and ideological cues found in the data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA model: (1) Textual analysis – examining vocabulary, modality, and speech acts used by political figures. (2) Discursive practice analysis – exploring how such utterances were produced and circulated in media contexts. (4) Social practice analysis – relating the findings to Indonesian *tata bicara* and cultural norms of politeness.

Through this approach, the study reveals how inappropriate linguistic expressions by those in power may disrupt social harmony and violate cultural expectations of respectful communication.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

| No | Speaker & Context                                               | Controversial Statement                                                                                                                                 | CDA-Based Analysis                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Suggested Linguistic & Cultural Alternative                                                                                           |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Ahmad Sahroni, responding to public anger over DPR salary raise | <i>“Mental manusia yang begitu adalah mental orang tertolol sedunia. Catat nih, orang yang cuma bilang bubarin DPR itu adalah orang tolol sedunia.”</i> | The phrase “orang tolol sedunia” reflects a <b>derogatory and aggressive tone</b> that enacts linguistic violence. From a CDA perspective, it constructs a <i>we versus they</i> dichotomy, positioning citizens who criticize the DPR as intellectually inferior. This type of expression reinforces <b>power asymmetry</b> and undermines social solidarity. In sociolinguistic terms, such a statement violates <i>tata bicara politik</i> , | <i>“Kami memahami kekecewaan masyarakat terhadap kebijakan DPR. Kritik adalah hal yang penting bagi kami untuk memperbaiki diri.”</i> |

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|   |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                         | which requires respectful and controlled speech from authority figures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2 | Ahmad Sahroni, during a national protest        | <i>"Rakyat juga jangan semena-mena... kalau dilakukan semena-mena nggak mau."</i>                                                                       | The repetition of "semena-mena" constructs a moral judgment against citizens, implying they are equally at fault. CDA highlights <b>discursive deflection</b> , where responsibility is linguistically shifted from the speaker to the public. This rhetorical strategy downplays institutional accountability and presents the speaker as a victim of public irrationality. | <i>"Kami berharap masyarakat tetap menyampaikan aspirasinya dengan cara yang tertib, dan kami di DPR juga berkomitmen mendengarkan dengan hati-hati."</i>              |
| 3 | Nafa Urbach, justifying high housing allowances | <i>"Anggota Dewan itu kan enggak orang Jakarta semua, guys... mereka diwajibkan kontrak rumahnya dekat-dekat Senayan supaya memudahkan menuju DPR."</i> | The use of informal markers ("guys") and self-centered justification highlights a <b>personalization of privilege</b> . CDA identifies this as <i>elitist self-legitimation</i> , where linguistic informality masks institutional insensitivity. By centering her own inconvenience, the speaker fails to align her speech with the empathy expected from public figures.   | <i>"Kami memahami bahwa tunjangan ini menimbulkan persepsi negatif. Karena itu, transparansi dan evaluasi perlu dilakukan agar masyarakat tahu tujuan sebenarnya."</i> |
| 4 | Annisa, commenting on public protests           | <i>"Kalau demo secara personal, buat apa? Kalau bisa kita diskusi secara langsung, supaya bicara dari hati ke hati."</i>                                | Though appearing polite, this statement trivializes protest by implying it is unnecessary. CDA shows <b>discursive control through rationalization</b> , where the speaker legitimizes only certain types of citizen expression.                                                                                                                                             | <i>"Kami menghargai setiap aspirasi masyarakat, baik melalui aksi maupun dialog. Kami akan berupaya membuka ruang komunikasi yang lebih mudah diakses."</i>            |

|   |                                                                         |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                                                                         |                                                                                                                           | The tone subtly invalidates emotional and collective action. In <i>tata bicara</i> , it shows a lack of empathic acknowledgment of people's limited access to institutional dialogue.                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 5 | Dedy Sitorus, reacting to comparison between DPR and low-income workers | "Ketika DPR dibandingkan dengan rakyat jelata yang katakan tukang becak atau buruh, di situ anda mengalami sesat logika." | The term " <i>rakyat jelata</i> " explicitly reinforces social hierarchy. CDA exposes <b>elitist discourse</b> that constructs symbolic distance between state officials and ordinary citizens. The phrase " <i>sesat logika</i> " delegitimizes the journalist's perspective, exemplifying <b>discursive domination</b> . Such language breaches <i>tata bicara</i> principles of humility and respect. | "Perbandingan itu memang tampak kontras, tapi kami memahami keresahan masyarakat. Kami akan berupaya agar kebijakan kami tidak menimbulkan kesenjangan yang semakin lebar." |

Use Beyond the five data points, several *discursive patterns* emerged across all samples:

### Consistent Use of Superiority Language

multiple statements, politicians employ lexical markers of superiority (*tolol*, *rakyat jelata*, *semena-mena*) that symbolize vertical distance between elites and the public. Such language choices serve to maintain authority while suppressing dissent – a key feature of what van Dijk (2015) describes as *elite discourse reproduction* in political communication.

### Linguistic Shifting of Blame

Instead of addressing structural criticism, speakers redirected emotional responsibility to the public, often framing the masses as irrational or ungrateful. This discursive move neutralizes institutional accountability while shaping public perception of power legitimacy.

### Absence of Empathic Register

The findings show that emotional empathy – crucial in the *tata bicara* framework – is largely absent. Instead of using conciliatory linguistic strategies such as acknowledgment, inclusive pronouns (*kita*), or appreciation markers (*kami memahami*, *kami menghargai*), the politicians' language prioritizes defense and justification.

### Violation of Tata Bicara Norms

*Tata bicara politik Indonesia* upholds communication ethics that promote andhap asor (humility) and rukun (harmony). These five cases reveal the erosion of these values in elite discourse. When leaders speak harshly or defensively, they inadvertently disrupt the social balance of *unggah-ungguh basa* (speech hierarchy), triggering collective emotional backlash.

### Extended Discussion

The analysis underscores how language becomes both a catalyst and amplifier of social anger. Public outrage did not arise solely from policy decisions like the DPR's salary raise but from the way these issues were linguistically addressed. According to Fairclough (2013), CDA views language as a form of social practice that reflects and reproduces power relations. In this context, the language of Indonesian politicians exemplifies how discursive arrogance can escalate tension rather than mitigate it.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, *tata bicara* provides a local ethical framework for understanding communicative conduct. In Indonesian political culture, language is expected to perform not only informative but also affective and moral functions — it must guide, unite, and respect the public's emotional reality. However, the data show a reversal of this norm: words meant to assert authority instead became triggers of alienation.

Furthermore, these discursive patterns illustrate how modern political speech in Indonesia is shifting toward *performative populism*, where emotion and spectacle outweigh substance and respect. This shift marks a sociolinguistic degradation, where communicative etiquette once grounded in mutual respect is being replaced by reactionary rhetoric.

Restoring linguistic balance requires leaders to practice empathetic authority, a form of political communication where firmness is expressed through measured and inclusive language. In practical terms, this means replacing derogatory remarks with *acknowledgment-based speech acts* — statements that both validate public sentiment and reaffirm institutional responsibility.

In sum, language in Indonesian politics operates not merely as a tool of persuasion but as a mirror of societal ethics. When words are chosen without consideration of cultural norms like *tata bicara*, they transform from communicative instruments into social accelerators of anger. Thus, the findings affirm that the heart of Indonesia's political discourse crisis lies not in disagreement itself, but in the failure to linguistically embody empathy, humility, and respect.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that language in Indonesian political discourse operates not merely as a medium of information but as an instrument that reflects power, emotion, and moral responsibility. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show that public anger often arises from violations of *tata bicara*—the cultural expectation of polite, harmonious, and respectful speech. Political utterances containing derogatory remarks, defensive framing, or superiority-laden expressions become triggers of social tension because they contradict Indonesian norms of communicative humility. Across the data, three dominant discursive patterns emerged. First, superiority language appeared in phrases such as “*orang tertolol sedunia*” and “*rakyat jelata*,” which construct vertical distance between officials and citizens. Second, blame-shifting strategies were evident in statements like “*rakyat juga jangan semena-mena*,” which redirect responsibility toward the public rather than acknowledging institutional accountability. Third, an absence of empathy was consistently observed, as politicians rarely used acknowledgment markers or inclusive pronouns, leading their speech to sound dismissive rather than responsive to public sentiment. These patterns illustrate that public outrage is not solely a reaction to policy decisions, but a response to how political issues are framed linguistically. Words perceived as arrogant, sarcastic, or emotionally detached undermine social harmony by violating collective expectations of humility and mutual respect. Consequently, political communication in Indonesia must shift toward empathetic authority—a discourse style that balances firmness with humility and prioritizes inclusivity, respect, and cultural sensitivity. In the Indonesian sociocultural context, language does more than convey information: it shapes emotional and ethical relations between leaders and the public. When political actors uphold *tata*

bicara through measured and empathetic speech, they preserve social harmony and strengthen public trust in democratic communication.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to Sir Rahmadsyah Rangkuti for his invaluable guidance, insightful feedback, and continuous encouragement throughout the development of this research. This article was collaboratively written by Heri Setiawan Lubis, Jhonson Loeis, and T. Muhammad Raihan. The authors also extend their appreciation to all individuals and parties who provided support and assistance during the preparation of this manuscript.

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