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When Women Are the Bosses: Linguistic Strategies in Managing Problematic Discourses

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ABSTRACT

The exercise of power in leadership may involve conflicts, especially in precarious situations. Politeness strategies come into practice to cushion the aftermath of face-threatening acts that presumably trigger tension. This study aims to shed light on female leaders' linguistic strategies in managing problematic discourses involving older male subordinates in the Indonesian university context. The naturalistic data was obtained from recorded meetings.

The study results depict that the female leader employs both direct and indirect strategies in handling problematic issues, especially when the female leader has to face up to senior subordinates. She adopts direct strategies to convey important messages that have to be obeyed by the employees. On the other hand, she adheres to the cultural norms that oblige younger people to show respect to older people by using indirect strategies. The politeness strategies employed in her utterances show how culture shapes communication approaches. In general, a female leader has to have a range of sophisticated linguistic competence in a high-rank managerial position.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is favored as a masculine area in a patriarchal society, especially in the Indonesian culture. Male stereotypes (i.e., ambitious, confident, and assertive) are considered leadership qualities (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Gender stereotypes have been discussed in a myriad of publications (Cépeda et al., 2021; Kotek et al., 2021; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Ide, 1992, among others). Also, research on language and gender defines stereotypes of male and female language. Female speakers are more emphatic, indirect, and cooperative by using tag questions, hedges, and softeners (Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Carli, 1990). Men are more aggressive, direct, blunt, and assertive (Case, 1995). Females tend to avoid conflict by supporting and agreeing, whereas males are more confrontational, competitive, and deal with conflict. In workplace interactions, masculine traits are characterized by domination,

interruption, confrontation, and competitiveness (Burrell et al., 1992). Thus, masculine styles are valued highly and become workplace norms (Case, 1993). Other studies confirm that gender behaviors in organizations shift depending on the situation. Both females and males in positions of authority may adapt their leadership styles accordingly (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Moreover, patriarchy is not a static phenomenon and can be transformed or modified over time in different mediums (Benstead, 2021). This *patriarchal bargain* currently endows women with opportunities to occupy leadership positions. Many women take part in leadership, which is considered a masculine spot, with greater social acceptance (Hejase et al., 2013).

Leaders, who have authority over others, use language to control and constrain subordinates' contributions (Fairclough, 1989). They employ sets of language strategies to enact leadership

practices. Communication in leadership takes place in many organizational activities. One of the essential activities in an institution is meetings. Meetings can be arenas where leaders authorize their power, give instructions, and control the institution. On the other hand, subordinates, as meeting participants, can also share opinions, get information, and report problems. Strategic decisions are made in an organizational meeting, and work-related problems are solved (Asmuss & Svennevig, 2009). Problems in the workplace are diverse in urgency and complexity. Meeting participants raise issues, and communication takes place in the negotiation process. Negotiation in meetings among participants comprises various points of view and is not always palpable. Meeting members with goals and interests will likely defend their opinions. On top of that, disagreement and tension are inevitable consequences.

Disagreement, disputes, and refusals in verbal communication may result in conflict (Sornig, 1977; Pearson, 1986; Brenneis, 1988). They are instances of dispreferred acts because these acts may shake social harmony and affect group solidarity. They are classified as Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce the concept of 'face' whereby people have a positive face that needs to be enhanced by others and a negative face that needs to be maintained. Communicative acts, positive or negative, affect 'face.' Sets of lexicons used to disagree, dispute, and refuse are also considered FTAs.

Interactions in meetings involve many FTAs. People generally tend to protect the face and avoid conflicts by indirectly expressing potentially threatening face acts and mitigating their propositions to save face, which is linguistically termed 'politeness strategies' (Brown-Levinson, 1987). To be polite, one has to minimize the threat to face and use more indirect methods in delivering messages, especially when the message may generate tensions.

Previous studies have covered the array of social contexts where people deal with problematic discourses or controversies in interactions. Angouri and Locher (2012) study the form of disagreement (i.e., mitigated/unmitigated and explicit/implicit). Sifianou (2012) argues that disagreement is perplexing since it is a multidirectional and

multifunctional act. Not only face-to-face interaction but disagreement on social media such as Twitter is also analyzed by Almutairi (2021). Refusals have also obtained growing attention. Félix-Brasdefer (2006) investigates the use of refusals in formal and informal contexts in the Mexican Spanish community. Daly et al. (2004) reveal the socio-pragmatic strategy in expressing refusals, whinges, and complaints in NZ factories. Scholars have also explored language use in light of gender differences in problematic communications. In workplace contexts, men are more aggressive than women (i.e. Holmes, 2000).

Various factors have been revealed in selecting particular communication strategies in problematic discourses, such as gender, culture, age, power, distance, the weight of imposition, contexts, and so forth. Further to this, Thimm et al. (2003) claim that gender is not always the most salient factor determining linguistic strategies. The weight of imposition is one of the important factors in selecting communication strategies Scollon and Scollon (2001). The weight of imposition is the urgency level of the issue. Leaders generally hinge on the imposition's weight and avoid taking risks that may threaten the organization.

Furthermore, age and seniority are significant variables in Asian countries (Samransamruajkit & Getkham, 2015), and the same holds for the Indonesian context (Wardani & Uyun, 2017). Parents teach children to respect older people, listen to them, and be polite. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Coupland and Coupland (1988) claim that intergenerational differences may favor senior people. Older adults are considered more experienced and have more achievements. To quote Dwyer (2020: 151), "The more senior a person, the more power they have." Therefore, senior colleagues have 'power' even though they are in lower rank positions. The age of the interlocutor could influence communication strategies.

With gender stereotypes postulated, what discursive strategies women use in leadership communication in Indonesia remains an enigma. Hence, attempting to fill a gap in the literature, this study addresses the following question: What linguistic strategies do Indonesian female leaders utilize in managing problematic discourses that involve older male subordinates at the university

level? This study will contribute to understanding female leaders' communication approaches in higher-educational institutions in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This qualitative study aims at gaining insights into female leaders' linguistic strategies. There was no attempt to generalize the information. However, the data represents a wide array of communication strategies. Linguistic strategies of the woman leader under investigation are elicited in different meetings on various academic issues with conflict potentials.

This study draws on video recordings of faculty meetings at a university in Indonesia. The dataset contains more than eight hours of online meetings conducted between June 2021 and October 2021. The details of the meetings and sensitive issues are not discussed to protect confidentiality. The name of participants, places, locations, and everything that indicate the actual setting in the excerpts are pseudonyms.

Participants

The participants of this study are a 40-years old female faculty leader (Maia) and male heads of departments (Yannie and Edi) who are in their 50s and 60s. Maia is the meeting chair who prepares a structured agenda, topic, and goals for the meetings. She often employs a more prolonged, uninterrupted, monologic communication style associated with masculine discourse. In leading the meetings, Maia starts with a brief introductory talk on the meetings' agenda and main points. She later allows meeting participants to ask questions and raise problems during the discussion session. She goes through each of the participants' questions and ideas and provides recommendations and decisions for them with a brief explanation and reason.

The other participants, Yannie and Edi, lead two departments under the faculty management. Both of them are more senior and older than Maia. Yannie, the head of Department X, had a long career as a headmaster in a local school before joining the faculty. Edi is the Head of Department Y. He has thirty-seven years of work experience and will retire in the next three years. Furthermore, meeting attendees were mixed-sex, with female and male heads of departments and study program

coordinators. Around 25 to 30 participants attended each of the regular coordination meetings held by the faculty.

Procedures

The video recordings were transcribed at the initial stage using the ELAN annotation tool. Conversations containing problematic issues were selected. Then, utterances containing linguistic devices threatening the hearer's face were identified. The utterances are produced by either the female leader or the senior male subordinates as meeting participants. The female leader under investigation was interviewed. The identified excerpts were consulted with her. The female leader commented on our linguistic analysis and recounted her intentions in considerably ambiguous utterances. Finally, the selected linguistic strategies were established and the data was interpreted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study is constructed from the video recordings of the regular meetings at the faculty discussing problematic issues around the implementation of the new national educational policy called 'Merdeka Belajar – Kampus Merdeka' (MBKM or Independent Learning – Independent campus). This new policy allows university students to complete up to three semesters – or equal to 60 credits out of their mandatory 144 credits – through various models of off-campus learning, including research assistant, teaching assistant, internship, entrepreneurship projects, and student exchange. The discussions centered around students' teaching-assistant fieldwork for one semester in some schools in the province. Both senior male heads of departments, Yannie and Edi are not content with the implementation of the new policy. Given their long work experience and seniority, they believe the old ways are still reliable and solid. During their discussion, Yannie and Edi express their hesitancy to accept the policy changes and negotiate ways to implement them. The data is provided in the Appendix section.

Excerpt 1

Yannie expresses his disagreement against the teaching-assistant fieldwork offered to his students as a part of the implementation of MBKM. Students who join the fieldwork do not

attend regular classes. Their 20 credits for that semester are completed through fieldwork. In Yannie's opinion, the students will not be able to accumulate sufficient knowledge to achieve the fifth semester's learning target through fieldwork alone. Thus, Yannie believes that students who sign up for the fieldwork will still need to attend lectures available for that semester to learn knowledge from theoretical perspectives (lines 4-5).

By drawing attention to his extensive experiences as a school principal, Yannie tries to convince Maia about his authority on the issue. He asserts that not all school principals and teachers have excellent competencies in their field to qualify as competent mentors for the fieldwork students during their teaching assistant program (lines 15-16). Students learning processes and targets may be at risk in this case

Yannie highlights his superiority publicly in the meeting to demonstrate to Maia and other participants that his concern and disagreement have reasonable grounds. Yannie's way of highlighting his status can be seen as patronizing instead of a persuasive act (line 6). He uses the expression "Ibuk yakinlah... [You have to trust me]" to further strengthen his standing. In this situation, his condescending style appears to threaten Maia as the leader of the meeting and a person of a higher status in the faculty's managerial. To reinforce his opinion, Yannie states that he had an extensive experience as a school principal prior to his career at the university (line 6). *Malang melintang* is an Indonesian phrase commonly used to emphasize one's well-established reputation in a field.

Yannie further expresses his disagreement against Maia's concern that lecturers may use their authority to force fieldwork students to do the same amount of classroom work as non-fieldwork students if they are required to join regular classrooms. This circumstance may unfairly create an extended study load as the students must also satisfy the fieldwork's learning requirements (lines 10-12). Yannie accuses Maia of placing negative assumptions or, in Yannie's words, "prasangka buruk" (line 10) on their fellow lecturers. According to Rees-Miller (2000), the use of accusatory force is a part of the aggravated disagreement. In expressing an accusation, a speaker usually uses indexical second-person pronouns. However,

Yannie's typical use of the inclusive pronoun "Kita" [we] actually helps soften his critique of Maia's decision (line 11). This helps displace the pressure from Maia as the target of the critique to 'all of us'.

Composing age and seniority factors, excerpt 1 displays that power is negotiable. People with lower institutional rank may exercise their power by expressing their disagreement in a blunt and direct way to their superiors. Excerpt 1 provides some evidence that age and seniority may outweigh hierarchical power. Different from theories on language and power suggesting that lower-status individuals use a more indirect and polite style (Holmes, 1995), our data demonstrate that the speakers of a lower rank but older choose not to soften their arguments when speaking to their younger superior. Even further, they utter a form of accusation toward their superior. In this situation, defending one's point of view is more crucial than saving the addressee's face and the speaker does not mitigate disagreement (Kotthoff, 1993).

Maia responds in several steps before finalizing her decision regarding Yannie's request to instruct fieldwork students to learn theories by joining regular classes during their fieldwork. Firstly, Maia thanks Yannie for raising his opinions (line 17). Secondly, Maia expresses reciprocity as an involvement strategy to proclaim that she is on the interlocutor's side. She expresses her agreement with Yannie's points regarding the necessity of theoretical knowledge for fieldwork students (lines 18-19). Despite being directly 'attacked' by her older subordinate, Maia chooses to maintain politeness and saves the interlocutor's face by using the two strategies. Furthermore, Maia's choice to use the word 'pembekalan' (line 20) depicts another strategy to avoid direct opposition to Yannie's ideas. The word 'pembekalan' means 'orientation', or in other words, pre-fieldwork sessions, which is different from requiring the students to attend conventional classroom learning during their fieldwork, as suggested by Yannie. This word choice reflects Maia's strategy to avoid conflict. In this case, she facilitates Yannie's opinion about students' need to learn the theories. However, she suggests that the theory should not be taught by requiring fieldwork students to sit in regular classes but in specific pre-fieldwork orientation classes

(lines 18-20).

Even though Maia assiduously avoids direct confrontation with the senior subordinate, she enhances her face by defending her position and carefully rejecting Yannie's accusation. Maia straightforwardly repudiated Yannie's claim that her decision was based on negative assumptions. Maia says, "...Saya tidak berasumsi jelek sebenarnya..." [I didn't make a negative assumption actually] (line 21). She repeats this statement by saying, "jadi tidak e atas asumsi e saya..." [So it is not based on my own assumption...] (line 25). She further explains that her concern came from students' complaints (lines 21-24).

Maia uses a clear directive style when communicating non-negotiable matters, such as ensuring students' safety, "Nah dosen pengampu itu juga harus direm... [And the lecturers must also be controlled...]" (line 27) and "...Tidak ada panggilan-panggilan harus datang ke tempat... [There must not be any requirement (for the students) to be physically present in classes]" (line 37). Meanwhile, when doing the authority sharing, she uses the conditional clause "jika [if]" several times as in "Kalo memang itu dipikir perlu oleh Prodi... [If the department considers it necessary] (line 19), "Kalo memang mereka pengen mahasiswa ikut dalam perkuliahan... [If they (the lecturers) want the students to join classes..." (line 28), and "(if) Jurusan dan prodi itu berkeputusan bahwa itu wajib... [(if) the department and the program consider it compulsory..." (line 39). By doing this, Maia seeks a compromise by resorting to the flexibility of the policy and giving the departments the opportunity to examine their situations and decide what is best for the students. However, these are only allowed by obeying non-negotiable conditions that she mentioned before, such as the necessity to run the sessions online to prevent students from traveling from fieldwork to their campus, which may risk their safety. Maia also reminds Yannie about the necessity to use a flexible approach in dealing with potential problems that may occur if they run online sessions, such as a bad internet connection, as fieldwork sites are mostly in remote areas. As she points out, "...tapi kan kalo di lapangan ya seperti itu. Nanti mahasiswa lapor sinyalnya tidak bagus itu memang harus banyak peng pemakluman... [... but that's the reality in

the field. If later the students report they have a bad internet connection, it must be understood...]" (lines 30-32).

Maia questions how the theory sessions will be organized (lines 34-41). This includes how many sessions are required and what learning model is going to be implemented. These questions prepped her to continue pointing out the complexity of that situation. Maia implies several cautions for departments that want to run theory sessions for the fieldwork students. She demands that a straightforward procedure on how the sessions will be run must be carefully drawn and agreed upon by all relevant parties to guarantee students' focus on the fieldwork and their safety. In this part of the response, Maia tries to balance using her authority to give direct instructions on non-negotiable matters, such as prioritising safety, ensuring the meetings are run online, and sharing the authority with Yannie and other department heads as well as lecturers. Running the meetings online is important as the fieldwork is part of the national program where university students are sent to underprivileged schools mostly located in remote areas to allow them to experience learning from real problems in the diversity of Indonesian educational situations.

Using normatively feminine linguistic strategies, Maia involves meeting participants to maintain social harmony in the team. In particular, she observes that Yannie raises a number of complaints that she needs to address directly but tactfully, as any decision in the meeting would significantly affect the students' situation. Maia is directive about making students' safety a priority but allows room for the departments and lecturers to draw detailed procedures. What concerns her more is the importance of making the procedures clear to all parties, as she asserts, "...silakan dibuatkan di dalam dokumen kesepakatan [please put all these in the fieldwork contractual agreement]" (lines 39-40).

In this excerpt, a senior male subordinate, despite his lower status, is not concerned with face-saving. Without softening his utterance, he directly expresses his disagreement and accuses his superior. On the other hand, Maia, as the superior, with the attack from her subordinate, utilizes a more polite style. She respects Yannie as an older

subordinate. Even though the issue discussed has a high weight of imposition, she appreciates the good intentions and shows considerable flexibility regarding Yannie's proposal but facilitates the borderline. She avoids showing aggression even toward her subordinates.

Excerpt 2

Excerpt 2 comprises a discussion on the 20-credit Teaching Assistant Program. Edi sends 13 of his fifth-semester students to do the program for one semester. According to the new policy, the maximum number of credits for fieldwork, such as the teaching assistant program, is 20 credits per semester. In this excerpt, Edi negotiates if the 13 students can be allowed to register for another 2-credit course because the regular credit load for semester 5 is 22 credits. This means Edi asks for discretion to allow students to combine the 20-credit teaching assistant program and the 2-credit course of regular classroom learning.

Edi delivers his inquiry in a confrontational way. Throughout the exchange, he repeatedly asks Maia to confirm that some regulations regarding how MBKM is carried out are a follow-up of her previous statements. Edi uses the statement "Kata Ibu tadi... [As you said, Maam]" and emphasizes, "Kan itu [Correct?]". With this emphasis, "Correct?", Edi places Maia at a point to directly respond and acknowledge her statements. Edi actually waits until Maia says "Yes" before continuing his talk, as seen in lines 1 to 5. Aiming to confront Maia's initial idea, Edi escalates the tension by using the word kasar 'blunt/rude' (line 1).

In the context of this meeting, where people involved are not only seeking clarification about the implementation of the new policy but also negotiating flexibility in that implementation, Edi's use of the tag question "kan itu... [correct/right/Isn't it so?]" at the end of his statements can be understood in multiple ways. A tag question can be used to confront an addressee to accept the speaker's proposition (Heritage, 2002). Heritage (2002) adds that speakers can use this type of question to articulate their points of view or positions. The tag question may also mean clarification seeking or one's intention to verify his/her understanding of the policy. Nevertheless, the exchange between

Edi and Maia may also reflect Edi's strategy to lead Maia into a decision that favours his situation. This intention can be identified from the way Edi built his proposition by firstly highlighting how the obligation to obey the policy has placed him with minimal choice. As he says in lines 4-5, "we're no longer free". Here, Edi points out that the word "merdeka", which means independence or freedom, in the policy's name contradicts the situation where Edi and other department heads actually do not have an option other than obeying the policy even though some aspects of its implementation appear to disadvantage their students. In accordance with Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), the strategy of disagreement displayed in the data falls into Contradiction (i.e., if A utters P, then B utters ~P). Here, Maia is placed in a difficult position as she needs to mitigate the situation and admit the weakness of the proposed implementation scheme. It is understandable if she will need to allow room for Edi's negotiation.

The way Edi challenges Maia's proposition is a face-threatening act. To counter it, Maia has some options; carrying out an "offensive" or "defensive" strategy (Culpeper et al., 2003). Maia responds to each of Edi's question tags with a brief answer, "Yes". This simple 'Yes' shows that Maia is careful not to add a further explanation and chooses to let Edi complete his statement. Considering what Edi's inquiry may mean, further explanation from Maia may appear defensive or even trigger a debate. In this case, her simple "Yes" can be seen as an intention to lead Edi to move to his actual inquiry, which he does.

In this part of their exchange, Edi continues to discuss the disadvantage on the students' side if they are asked to strictly follow the maximum 20-credit regulation. Edi explains in lines 10 to 11 that students who choose to join the Teaching Assistant Program will have to wait for one year until the 2-credit course X is offered again in the next odd semester. The students will also miss an opportunity to attend a national seminar with their classmates, which is one of the course's requirements. In this context, Edi's disagreement is cloaked in the guise of an unfavorable impact on Maia's agenda.

Edi expresses his actual inquiry in lines 20 to 24. Edi asks what he has to do if the thirteen

students interested in registering for the Teaching Assistant Program also want to register for the X course. This means Maia has to make an exception and allows the students to register for 22 credits for the semester. Edi repeats the question in line 26. In lines 21-24, he also explains a strategy he had used for students who signed up for another MBKM program in the previous semester. While the students were allowed to do the extra two credits in addition to their 20-credit program, the two credits' registration and grade were not formally recorded that semester but were delayed until the next semester. So the study load they formally reported for the semester still met the MBKM regulation of a maximum of 20 credits. In lines 25 to 26, Edi asks if Maia allows him to use the same strategy for the thirteen students joining the MBKM's Teaching Assistant Program. Again in this part, he proposes the request by highlighting that he does not have many options because MBKM is mandatory. This last statement is a strategy to place more weight on his proposition.

After listening to Edi's complete inquiry, Maia responds by firstly saying thank you. She does not directly respond to the inquiry but leads Edi to answer her questions as she seeks more clarity on the situation (lines 28-29). Maia also seeks clarification on the course structure for fifth-semester students in Edi's department. Then Maia seeks clarification about the national seminar that Edi mentioned as a part of the X course. She asks whether the course requires students to prepare for the seminar before attending it or if they still need to attend weekly lecture meetings, which are usually run for 16 sessions per semester (lines 35-37). Edi confirms that in their curriculum, semester 5 offers 22 credits (line 42).

After the clarifications, Maia decides that Edi's students should be offered the X course in semester 6. In making this decision, Maia firmly guarantees that the faculty will take care of potential problems that may occur, including if they need to communicate and coordinate with the finance and IT departments. She guarantees that the academic and finance system will allow a class to be run for thirteen students, so they do not have to wait for one year until the course is offered again in the odd semester.

In refusing Edi's request to let students sign

up for 22 credits, Maia shows that she is careful about the situation's details. Her long exchange with Edi mostly involves clarification seeking of students' actual needs and situations and the study requirements according to the department's curriculum. She wants to ensure that students really focus on their teaching assistant program without the extra study load they need to attend the campus. The long exchange between her and Edi also reflects that her decision is well-thought, and she has considered multiple factors. The data shows that Edi, disregarding the asymmetrical power, expresses his dispute without politeness devices attached. Edi's interaction with Maia reflects that age and working experience overweight institutionalized power. On the other hand, given the institutionalized power, Maia goes in the opposite direction and does not apply aggravated forms.

The data displays that a woman leader still perceives that maintaining respectful communication with subordinates is important even in situations that involve face-threatening acts. Her strategies lessen the potential of confrontational situations and drive the discussion towards achieving agreement and solutions. This practice is in line with Goldberg et al. (2009). Unlike her subordinates, she avoids using linguistic devices that may insult the interlocutor. However, she is being direct in giving clear solutions to an issue that exhibits a high weight of imposition.

In general, both excerpts showed that the participant's age contributes more crucially to determining their politeness strategies in communicating ideas. This happened despite the asymmetrical power system between them as the heads of departments and the female leader representing the faculty's top management. The older the participants are, the more direct they can communicate with people, including those of a higher rank. Their seniority enhances their competitive approach toward the female leader. Their work experiences boost their self-confidence to challenge the institution's hierarchy without considering face-saving.

On receiving tactless critiques in front of other meeting members, the female leader does not use her authority to respond with equal bluntness. Instead, she remains tactful and polite

in her responses, reflecting her respect for the older subordinate. The cultural norms require younger people to respect older people regardless of their lower status in the hierarchy. She behaves in a way that saves both parties' faces. She even utilizes partial agreement to minimize the tension that might trigger conflict. She utilizes direct strategies to make instructions clear for everyone, particular ones concerning students' safety and the clarity of the program's procedures. However, in a facilitative manner, she also prioritizes cooperation and compromises with the subordinates regarding the details of the implementation of the institution's agenda. Flexibility is acceptable if it is executed with proper and legitimate methods.

In short, the female leader applies direct and indirect strategies and alternates between both in dealing with the problematic discourse that involves senior male subordinates. Direct strategies make her messages unambiguous to achieve institutional goals. In defending the institution's agenda, which exhibits a high weight of imposition, the female leader uses a more instructive style that reflects her higher authority.

The findings of this study reflect those of Baxter & Al A'ali (2016) who also found that female leaders utilize mixed strategies, both feminine stereotype strategies and masculine styles, in their communication. This study is also in line with Marra et al. (2006), who presented that skilful female leaders use direct masculine ways to achieve the organization's goals and indirect feminine styles to cooperate with people. The present study provides additional evidence to enhance our understanding of female leaders' communication strategies in higher-educational institutions in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the linguistic strategies used by Indonesian female leaders in managing problematic discourses during meetings in the university context. Theories of language and power suggest that people of a lower rank tend to communicate more indirectly (Steffen & Eagly, 1985; Lee, 2002). However, this study found that older male subordinates are more likely to use direct style (i.e., being blunt, accusing, patronizing, challenging, disputing, aggravating). In responding to the senior male subordinates, the female leader adopts indirect strategies as signals of solidarity to maintain the older participants' faces to gain support and engage all parties in accomplishing the tasks. In this case, she compensates for her directness by offering choices at the implementation level. The seniors can decide which one is more suitable for their conditions. In this way, she shares authority and saves the faces of the seniors.

This study presents evidence that women leaders demonstrate their ability to manage problematic issues, which require tactful use of a range of discursive competence and politeness strategies. The flexibility in building communication is the strength of women's leadership quality, particularly in the Indonesian context that adheres to the cultural value which places respect on older colleagues. Foremost, although this study represents a wide array of communication strategies, all possible alternative linguistic practices employed by female leaders in broader contexts might not have been examined. Further research could explore the female leader's linguistic approaches in other social domains.

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