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Research Article

## The Use of Name as Self-reference in WhatsApp Chats: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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### A B S T R A C T

This sociolinguistic study investigates the phenomena of using names as self-references on the chats of WhatsApp. It specifically aims to figure out why names are used for replacing first-person singular pronouns. To achieve this purpose, ten participants of WhatsApp users were purposefully selected. The participants were selected because they always used their own names in addressing themselves when texting via WhatsApp. Based on the analyzed authentic data in Indonesian, the most frequent reason for using a name as self-reference is due to the needs to establish politeness in one hand and to maintain closeness in another hand. Further, the majority of phenomena of using names as self-references occur mostly in communication between different social statuses. This linguistic strategy is mostly employed by an interlocutor with lower social status to the other one with higher social status. Most of the participants who used their own names as self-references are originally from Sundanese culture. It is expected that the findings of this study provide the insight into Indonesian communicative strategies in digital society especially in the pedagogical context.

## INTRODUCTION

To the present time, people in general refer to themselves as the first person pronouns when communicating with others. In particular, however, there has been the emergence of using names or proper nouns as first-person singular pronouns in communication. This phenomenon can be linked to the recent research revealing a communication issue identified as illeism, namely when people use self-reference to refer to themselves in the third person (Elledge, 2017). This linguistic case has developed

due the reasons for addressing properly in accordance with social factors. Speakers can select from a wide range of variations in addressing themselves, such as their relationship to their interlocutor's sex, age, or social class (Christofaki, 2018).

In many languages, pronouns function like definite noun phrases. It is thought of as a part of the group of modifiers that can lexicalize definite features. According to Bergen & Chang (2005), personal pronouns may produce or explicitly refer to a particular thing. They are substituted for nouns to enable more succinct speech and writing. As

stated by Ortigues (1978), they are among the most commonly used words and have psychological significance since they are employed in conversation to separate oneself from other people. In English, the fundamental grammatical categories for personal pronouns are divided into first, second, and third person (Lyons, 1968). In Indonesian, though the case in general is similar, the division is more specific. For referring to English 'I', there are 'saya' and 'aku' in Indonesian. The former is more formal than the latter. Besides, while 'we' in English can refer to the first person together with second person or first person along with third person, in Indonesian 'we' is divided into 'kami' (they and I) and 'kita' (you and I). In Bangkanese Malay, the case is similar to Indonesian, namely 'kamen' (they and I) and 'kite' (you and I).

Nowadays, we live in the age of technology which has become the greatest innovation in all aspects of human life. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has rapidly gained a position in society in recent years. Since ICT has numerous advantages, its efficacy is determined by how and why it is utilized and integrated. With the development of information and communication technology, information can now be obtained quickly and in an easy-to-use way. Social media and social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp make it possible to obtain and retrieve information quickly and easily from anywhere at any time. Due to these applications, information is becoming more integrated into our everyday lives.

The public may be informed, educated, and entertained by social media. As pointed out by Boyd & Ellison (2007), social media sites have been increasingly popular over the past ten years. Among today's various social media platforms, WhatsApp is currently the most widely used communication application, particularly for instant mobile messages (Church & De Oliveira, 2013).

Through WhatsApp as one of the instant messaging services gaining popularity in the world recently (Lantarón, 2018; Merelo & Tricas García, 2013), the users can share and exchange texts, photos, videos, audio, documents, even location. This application requires the users to have specialized software installed on their cell phones as well as internet connection. Additionally, WhatsApp gives its users access to extra social information. For instance, users may see whether a contact is online while they are typing. WhatsApp users can also see the last time when their friends opened the application. The last feature offered by WhatsApp is delivery notifications, which show once the message is sent and when it reaches the recipient's device. The success of WhatsApp may be attributed to a variety of factors, namely its ability to facilitate conversations that flow almost

naturally, its capacity to foster a feeling of community, its accessibility and affordability, and its simplicity in terms of usage for communication (Church & De Oliveira, 2013).

To the present time, the language use on WhatsApp communication has been studied from different linguistic aspects due to the typical characteristics of this platform. One of linguistic fields examining the language of WhatsApp has been addressed to Sociolinguistics that sees language in terms of its social context. To illustrate, one of sociolinguistic researched topics on WhatsApp chats is language in relation to politeness (Al-natour & Banat, 2023; Hussein et al., 2023; Mulyono et al., 2019; Shalihah & Winarsih, 2023). However, among the sociolinguistic studies on the language use of WhatsApp chats including in relation to politeness, to the best of our knowledge, none has examined the phenomenon of using name as self-reference for replacing a first-singular pronoun. In line with this problem, the present study focuses on answering the following question: why is a person's own name used as self-reference in WhatsApp chats?

## METHOD

The present qualitative study employed purposive sampling to obtain the authentic data. Ten participants were selected purposively by this study because they often used their own names for replacing the first person singular pronoun when texting on WhatsApp. Further, their chats that contained their names as self-reference were selected and analyzed.

After their chats were analyzed in the form of sentence and word unit, the ten participants were requested to fill in a questionnaire. They were asked about the reason why they used their own name rather than using first -person singular pronoun to refer to themselves. Further, to extend the socio-cultural aspect of this study, the participants were asked about their mother tongue as well as their ethnic backgrounds.

To understand the data of the present study, the sociolinguistic theory of Bucholtz & Hall (2005) was employed. Based on their sociolinguistic approach, self-reference is classified as a sociolinguistic strategy because it is employed to create social alignment or to set social distance between interlocutors.

In terms of varieties, the language used as the data of the present study in general is Indonesian. However, the Indonesian variety used by the participants were not the formal style, rather the casual one. This, nevertheless, is not a problem as long as the language use is natural and authentic. Further, in the display of the extracts, the names of participants are written in the shortened forms. In other

words, the words shown in the data excerpts are authentic except the names of the writers because they have been modified. This is done due to ethical reasons.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The general purpose of this study is to reveal the use of name for replacing the first person singular pronoun in WhatsApp communication. In particular, the aim of this study is to disclose the reasons behind its use. Based on the analysis of ten authentic data, the reasons why names were used for replacing the first person singular pronouns on WhatsApp are shown in table 1.

**Table 1** The reasons for using name for replacing first singular pronoun

No.	Reasons	Occurrences
1	For being more polite and socially close	4 (40%)
2	For being more socially close	2 (20%)
3	For being more polite	1 (10%)
4	For being more comfortable	1 (10%)
5	Miscellany	2 (20%)

As displayed in table 1, there are four identified reasons behind the use of name for replacing first-person singular pronoun. The majority of participants, namely four participants (40%) used their own names for establishing politeness in one hand and for maintaining closeness in another hand. Using someone's own name is considered politer but socially closer than using *saya* (I). The second frequent reason for using one's own name is associated with 'for being polite'. Two participants (20%) participants claimed that using their own names is considered politer than using *saya* (I). Further, one participant (10%) used his/her name only for establishing politeness and another one (10%) did this only for creating comfort. Other factors (20%) are classified as miscellany because they are not related to sociolinguistic reasons. The use of one's own name as self-reference on WhatsApp chat is displayed in the following extracts.

### Ordinate to superordinate relationship

The chats from a student to a lecturer

*Assalamualaikum Sir Alhamdulillah Riz wisuda Sir.* Data-1

*Assalamualaikum Sir Praise to Allah Riz graduates Sir.*

*Baik sir, tinggal Dit ya sir, Bel lagi tanyain.* Data-3

*Alright sir, the one who has not sent the assignment is only Dit, Bel is still asking him.*

*Maaf sir kepenget, Mar gatau, maaf ya Sir.* Data-4

*Sorry sir, miss-touched, Mar did not intend that, sorry ya Sir.*

*Nur ingin menyampaikan bahwa besok nur tidak bisa mengikuti Matkulnya sir Dikarenakan nur lagi sakit sir* Data 10

*Nur wants to inform that tomorrow nur will not be able to attend Sir's class Because nur is sick.* Data-10

The chats from a younger friend to the older one

*Assalamuallaikum a, Sul bisa kesana skrng?* Data-7

*Assalamualaikum big brother, can Sul get there now?*

*Ini digacoan, kalo Rud nunggu disini gmna?* Data-8

*This is at gacoan, how if Rud waits here?*

### Ordinate to Ordinate Relationship

Chat from a friend to a friend of the same age

*Ay mau ke kelas dulu ya.* Data-5

*Ay wanna go to the class first ya.*

*Gal udah di rumah nih.* Data-9

*Gal is already at home.*

Further, most of the speakers who used their names as self-reference in Whatsapp chats are originally from West Java. In other words, their dominant ethnic groups and first language are Sundanese, namely 60%. The rest is from other ethnic backgrounds, namely 20% for Bangkanese, and 10% for each of Betawi and Javanese.

Based on the findings of the present sociolinguistic study, as stated earlier, it is known that the most common factor for choosing that linguistic behavior is the intention for becoming politer in one hand and for avoiding social distance in another hand. The use of one's own name rather than first-singular-pronoun in addressing himself/herself occurs not only in hierarchic social relationship, but also in the equal social relationship. However, in general, the personal name for replacing first person singular pronoun in WhatsApp chats was used mostly by a person with lower social status to an interlocutor of higher social status. Most of the participants using personal name for replacing first person singular pronoun in WhatsApp chats were Sundanese.

Based on the existing literature, it has been pointed by Moravcsik (2013) that self-referencing in language can vary according to the type and level of social relationship between the interlocutors. In relation to Sundanese, it has been reiterated by Winiharti (2019) that the phenomena of self-reference in that language is correlated with the social status of the interlocutors as in Sundanese commonly there are three levels of speech, namely hard, soft, and very polite. As found in other languages in Java Archipelago

like Javanese and Maduran, the speech levels of Sundanese is influenced by hierarchical society as the result of empires in the past (Davies, 2010; Oakes, 2009; Sofyan, 2007). However, this phenomenon does not exist in the case of Bahasa Indonesia. To illustrate, first-person singular pronouns in Bahasa Indonesia are only 'saya' and 'aku'. The problem is that the use of 'saya' sounds too distant in terms of social relationship (Manns, 2012) while the use of 'aku' reflects 'individuality' and informality (Djenar, 2007; Manns, 2012; Murtisari et al., 2019).

The recent report of Murtisari et al. (2019) has also further disclosed that though there is a growing use of 'aku' by Indonesian students to their teachers, most of them still tend to choose 'saya' instead of 'aku'. The reasons for using 'saya' are because of its status of formality. On the other hand, when using the latter, the reasons of students from private schools are linked to the intention to be socially close to their teachers. This finding is enriched by the findings of the current study that apart from 'saya' or 'aku' (I), one's own name can be also used as self-reference by a student to his/her teacher.

This option of using personal name as self-referencing in WhatsApp communication with lecturers creates the 'intersection' between 'saya' as a quite formal tone and 'aku' as the informal counterpart. In other words, it is a sociolinguistic strategy to simultaneously maintain politeness and closeness when chatting with lecturers via social media.

Until now, there have been existing sociolinguistic studies investigating the language use in WhatsApp chats, especially in terms of politeness (See Al-natour & Banat, 2023; Hussein et al., 2023; Mulyono et al., 2019; Shalihah & Winarsih, 2023). All of these sociolinguistic studies have made use of academic setting as the context. The studies of Al-natour & Banat (2023), Mulyono et al. (2019), and Shalihah & Winarsih (2023) have relied on WhatsApp context between an educator (lecturer/teacher) and students while the analysis of Hussein et al. (2023) has relied only in WhatsApp context among educators. The current study entitled "The Use of Name as Self-reference in WhatsApp Chats: A Sociolinguistic Perspective" extends the existing literature by providing another sociolinguistic linguistic strategies for maintaining politeness and closeness, namely by replacing first-person singular pronoun with a name as self-reference.

According to the sociolinguistic approach of Bucholtz & Hall (2005), self-reference is considered as a sociolinguistic strategy because it is employed to create social alignment or to set social distance between interlocutors. The use of self-reference as linguistic and communicative strategy hints how an interlocutor sees

his/her social roles (Gumperz, 1982). This means that the different styles and uses of self-reference are affected by the different levels of social roles in society. In the present study, the dominant use of name self-reference is also affected by the different levels of social roles. These roles are also determined by the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of the interlocutors. The cultural or ethnic backgrounds of the interlocutors affect their choices on using names as self-references in WhatsApp chats.

It has been not known when the name for self-referencing in Indonesian society was firstly used. What has been known by the existing literature is that self-referencing in Indonesian society can vary through the time, as reported by Fitriana et al. (2020). In relation to the present study, all of the participants using their own names instead of 'I' are the young generation whose ages range from seventeen to twenty-five.

## CONCLUSION

The results obtained from this study indicate that using a name for replacing the pronoun of first singular person (self-reference) is a strategy for maintaining politeness, for avoiding social distance, for creating comfort, even for maintaining politeness in one hand and avoiding social distance in another hand. This study has clarified an alternative term of address for referring to oneself apart from using first-person singular pronoun like 'saya' or 'aku' (I) in WhatsApp communication.

Beyond its finding, the present study has only relied on ten participants on Whatsapp communication due to limited authentic data that could be collected. Subsequent studies are expected to employ more sufficient numbers of research participants. Other studies can also develop the present findings by making use of local or indigenous languages in Indonesia. While there has been a growing concern on the status of regional languages in Indonesia (Manar & Purwaningrum, 2021), there have also been sustaining opportunities to research them for the purpose of language codification (Manar, 2022). Hence the linguistic phenomena of self-reference in *nusantara* (Indonesia's archipelago) can be classified according to their typology.

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