

Perceived Standardness and Local Language Features in Academic Writing: A Sociolinguistic Study of Ambonese Students in Indonesia

 <https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol22issue2page120-136>

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Abstract

This study investigates how local linguistic features and perceptions of standardness influence academic writing among university students in eastern Indonesia. Although Indonesian functions as the national academic language regulated by KBBI and PUEBI, the local Malay variety, Bahasa Melayu Ambon, retains strong social and cognitive functions in higher education. The research examines the linguistic characteristics of this variety in students' academic texts, explores students' perceptions of their language use, and analyzes the sociolinguistic implications of the gap between national norms and local practices. Using a qualitative descriptive approach within a sociolinguistic and language ideology framework, data were drawn from 15 academic texts and 10 interviews with Sociology students at a state university in Ambon. Analysis identified systematic lexical, morphological, syntactic, and orthographic features (e.g., beta, katong, dong, su, mo, seng ada) and applied Woolard and Schieffelin's framework to interpret language beliefs. Findings reveal that students internalize local forms as standard Indonesian, reflecting a "local standard ideology" reinforced by limited academic writing instruction and dominant local norms. The study contributes theoretically by expanding sociolinguistic inquiry to written academic texts, methodologically by combining textual and perceptual data, and practically by informing localized academic literacy programs in multilingual settings.

Article Info:

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Language Ideology, Linguistic Variation, Local Standard Ideology, Sociolinguistics

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Received manuscript: 05/03/2025

Final revision: 25/05/2025

Approved: 18/06/2025

Online Access: 05/08/2025

Published: 25/08/2025

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RESEARCH ARTICLE 

Publisher: Jurusan Bahasa dan Seni FKIP
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Putuhena, Kampus Universitas
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How to cite: Afdhal (2025). Perceived Standardness and Local Language Features in Academic Writing: A Sociolinguistic Study of Ambonese Students in Indonesia. *Jurnal Tahuri*, 22(2), 120-136. <https://doi.org/10.30598/tahurivol22issue2page120-136>

INTRODUCTION

Bahasa Indonesia, as the national language, holds a special position within Indonesia's social and educational systems. It functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of unity and a medium of academic legitimacy. The standards of Bahasa Indonesia, as regulated through the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) and Pedoman Umum Ejaan Bahasa Indonesia (PUEBI), serve as normative references for evaluating linguistic correctness, particularly in higher education (Arsyad & Arono, 2016; Azmar & Razali, 2024). However, in eastern Indonesian regions such as Ambon, linguistic realities reveal far more complex dynamics. Ambonese Malay, a local variety of Malay, functions not only as a vernacular language but also holds a significant role in informal academic communication (Iyon & Salakay, 2025; Tomia et al., 2025). In classrooms, academic discussions, and students' written assignments, distinctive forms typical of Eastern Malay such as *beta*, *katong*, *dong*,

su, and *seng* ada frequently appear. Interestingly, many students perceive these forms not as deviations but as part of “correct” Bahasa Indonesia. This phenomenon reflects a tension between the centralized ideology of national linguistic standards and the locally rooted ideology that emerges from everyday linguistic practices (Lestaluhu & Sopacua, 2024).

The fact that students at a state university in Ambon employ local linguistic forms in academic writing indicates that the notion of “standard” is neither singular nor stable. Instead, it is continuously negotiated within specific social contexts. On one hand, educational institutions demand that students write in accordance with national norms; on the other, these students are raised in environments that position Ambonese Malay as a language of local prestige. When these two norms converge in academic spaces, what emerges is a “local standard” ideology, an understanding that linguistic varieties used within a specific region also possess legitimacy as correct forms. This condition underscores the interconnectedness of language, identity, and symbolic power in Indonesian higher education, particularly in regions historically situated outside the center of linguistic norm production.

Previous studies have examined tensions between national and local languages in educational contexts. Research by Awagu (2021) and Hendriks & van Meurs (2022) demonstrates that the standardization of Bahasa Indonesia since colonial and post-independence periods has created linguistic hierarchies that position nonstandard varieties as “less correct.” Meanwhile, Ó Murchadha & Kavanagh (2022) and Schmidt & Geeslin (2022) emphasize how regional variations of Bahasa Indonesia reflect local identities and function as symbolic resistance against Jakarta’s normative dominance. In education, studies by Davila (2022) and Lan et al. (2025) note that while language policies promote the use of standardized forms, actual practices in schools and universities often reveal hybridizations between national and local languages.

Studies by Meer et al. (2021) and Rozenvalde (2025) highlight that language ideologies in Indonesia operate not only vertically, between center and periphery, but also horizontally, wherein local communities construct their own notions of what constitutes a “standard” language. In the Ambon context, research by Alzubi & Nazim (2024) and Lestaluhu & Sopacua (2024) indicates that Ambonese Malay possesses a stable linguistic system and has long functioned as an interethnic lingua franca. Thus, it is unsurprising that its speakers perceive it as both “natural” and “correct.”

From an educational sociolinguistic perspective, several studies have explored local language use in academic writing. Research by Budiharto et al. (2022) and Kurniasih et al. (2023) in East Java found that dialectal interference in student texts does not merely indicate grammatical weakness but also reflects ingrained linguistic habits inseparable from social identity. Similarly, Fajrina et al. (2022), Ismail et al. (2024), and Maulidiyah (2023) revealed that students from multilingual regions often transfer oral practices into academic writing, producing stylistic patterns that mirror their community backgrounds. Studies by Putra & Tustiawati (2024) and Sasaki (2021) further show that many students in regional universities view local variations as more expressive and communicative than the standardized forms, which they perceive as rigid and artificial.

The international literature on language ideology also provides an important framework for understanding this phenomenon. Ding & Chee (2023) conceptualize language ideology as a system of beliefs linking language to social order, arguing that what is deemed “standard” often emerges from power negotiations. Dharmaputra (2019) adds that language ideology operates through erasure and iconization, processes that erase local variations from the image of the national language while portraying standardized forms as symbols of linguistic purity. Conversely, Pupynina & Aralova (2021) propose the concept of the sociolinguistics of globalization, emphasizing that in an increasingly interconnected world, language ideologies serve as arenas of ongoing meaning contestation. In the context of Eastern Indonesia, this concept is particularly relevant, illustrating how national ideologies intersect and are renegotiated with long-established local practices.

Other studies, such as those by Sutrisno et al. (2024) and Zulferdi (2021), highlight the historical dimension of Indonesia’s linguistic ideology, showing that since the colonial period, codification efforts have been accompanied by moral and political missions to shape “educated” and “orderly” citizens through standardized language. Yet, in practice, many communities outside Java possess their own linguistic histories and interpret standardization differently. Research by Hasanah & Pradipta (2024), Kang & Yaw (2024), and Zen & Starr (2021) also demonstrates that language standards concern not only linguistic forms but also social legitimacy, raising questions about who holds the authority to define linguistic correctness and in what contexts.

Nevertheless, most previous studies have focused on spoken language, language policy, or language attitudes in everyday communication. Few have examined how linguistic ideologies and local characteristics manifest in written academic texts, which serve as crucial arenas for constructing students’ intellectual identities. Moreover, research on this phenomenon in eastern Indonesia remains scarce, despite the region’s unique linguistic history and dynamics. Ambon, for instance, represents a social space where interethnic interaction, colonial history, and educational mobility have shaped a local Malay form with strong symbolic status. When this variety enters academic domains, it challenges long-standing boundaries between “official” and “local” languages.

Accordingly, this study seeks to bridge that gap by positioning students’ academic texts as the primary site of sociolinguistic inquiry. Rather than viewing linguistic deviations as errors, it interprets them as windows into the living language ideologies among Ambonese students. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how language operates as both an identity marker and a form of symbolic power within regional higher education.

Through qualitative analysis of academic texts and student interviews, this study traces how distinct features of Eastern Malay systematically appear in scholarly writing and how student-authors interpret these forms as integral to Bahasa Indonesia. Beneath these practices lies a multilayered and contextualized conception of “standardness”, a grassroots ideology that challenges top-down normative views.

Such an approach offers a significant contribution to the field of educational sociolinguistics in Indonesia. It shifts the analytical focus from mere linguistic deviation

toward understanding how meanings of “standard” are constructed, negotiated, and enacted in specific social contexts. The study also extends global discourse on the relationship between local and national languages by providing insights from Eastern Indonesia, a region historically underrepresented in international literature.

This research aims to (1) describe the linguistic characteristics of Eastern Malay appearing in Ambonese students’ academic texts, (2) explore their perceptions of linguistic standardization, and (3) interpret the sociolinguistic implications of the gap between national norms and local practices for academic literacy. Thus, this study contributes not only to the development of theories on language ideology and linguistic variation in Indonesia but also to practical efforts to enhance metalinguistic awareness and academic writing training in regional universities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach oriented toward understanding the social meanings underlying students’ linguistic practices rather than quantitatively measuring language phenomena. The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study lies in how speakers, in this case, students, interpret and evaluate the linguistic forms they use in academic contexts. As noted by Castleberry & Nolen (2018) and Hendren et al. (2023), qualitative research allows researchers to deeply explore social phenomena from participants’ perspectives. Accordingly, this study not only identifies the linguistic features of Eastern Malay found in academic texts but also interprets the underlying language ideologies.

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP), Universitas Pattimura, Ambon. The site was purposively selected based on two main considerations. First, Universitas Pattimura is one of the largest higher education institutions in Eastern Indonesia and represents the linguistic practices of students in multilingual communities. Second, students on this campus actively use Ambonese Malay as a daily communication language, even in formal settings such as class presentations and academic writing. This makes the university an ideal site to explore how the boundaries between national and local languages are negotiated in academic practice.

The data sources comprised two types: textual data and interview data. The textual data consisted of 15 student academic documents from the Sociology Study Program, including course papers, research proposals, and final assignments. These texts were purposively selected based on specific criteria: they had to be written by active students, produced for official academic purposes, and primarily composed in Bahasa Indonesia. The texts represent authentic instances of students’ academic writing, unedited or uncorrected by supervisors, thus offering genuine reflections of their linguistic practices.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students who authored the analyzed texts. Interviews were chosen to allow in-depth exploration of students’ perceptions, attitudes, and language ideologies. According to Ritter (2022), semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling researchers

to follow participants' thought processes while maintaining research focus. The interview questions centered on students' perceptions of standard language, their experiences in academic writing, and their views on using local linguistic features in academic contexts.

Data collection took place over three months in a systematic sequence. First, academic texts were gathered through coordination with course instructors and with students' consent. Each text was anonymized using coded identifiers to maintain confidentiality. Second, interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also taken to document social contexts and nonverbal expressions observed during interviews.

Data analysis proceeded in two major stages: linguistic analysis of texts and ideological analysis of language. In the first stage, the researcher identified distinctive linguistic features of Eastern Malay in student texts, covering lexical, morphological, syntactic, and orthographic aspects. These features were compared to standardized Bahasa Indonesia forms based on official references such as KBBI (5th Edition) and PUEBI (2022). Each local form was systematically coded to examine patterns and frequency. In the second stage, language ideology analysis was conducted on interview data using the theoretical framework of Handoyo et al. (2021), which emphasizes the relationship between linguistic practices and social belief systems. This analysis traced how students construct and legitimize notions of "standard" and "nonstandard" in their academic practices.

To ensure data validity, the study employed source and method triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing findings from academic texts and interview results to assess consistency between linguistic practices and speaker perceptions. Method triangulation involved discussions with two lecturers teaching Indonesian Language and Research Methodology at Universitas Pattimura, serving as a credibility check on the researcher's interpretations and enriching contextual understanding. Furthermore, data validity was reinforced through member checking, confirming preliminary findings with several informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Lim, 2025; Naeem et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Ambon Malay Linguistic Features in Academic Texts

The representation of Ambon Malay linguistic features in students' academic texts illustrates that local linguistic practices do not merely emerge as forms of interference but as reflections of normative systems that are alive and functional within the academic community itself. In the context of Pattimura University in Ambon, the findings indicate that the Ambon Malay variety occupies a strong position in students' written discourse, particularly in papers, proposals, and research reports. An analysis of fifteen academic texts reveals that distinctive Ambon Malay forms systematically appear at four main linguistic levels, lexical, morphological, syntactic, and orthographic, which collectively form a stable linguistic pattern. This phenomenon suggests that students do not perceive these forms as errors but rather as

legitimate and communicative components of their academic language.

At the lexical level, words such as *beta* (I), *katong* (we), *dong* (they), *su* (already), *mo* (want), and *seng ada* (not exist) appear repeatedly in students' academic texts. For instance, in the opening sentence of a research report, one student wrote: "*Beta* lakukan penelitian ini untuk lihat bagaimana masyarakat *su* adaptasi dengan kondisi ekonomi baru." In this construction, *beta* and *su* replace the standard forms *saya* and *sudah*. Compared with their equivalents in Standard Indonesian according to KBBI (5th ed.) and PUEBI, these forms are classified as nonstandard; however, semantically, they convey identical meanings without creating ambiguity. This analysis demonstrates that within the context of academic communication in Ambon, communicative function is prioritized over normative conformity to the national language.

Table 1 Comparison between Ambon Malay and Standard Indonesian Forms

Level	Ambon Malay Form	Standard Equivalent	Meaning / Function	Frequency of Occurrence (n=15)
Lexical	<i>beta</i>	<i>saya</i>	First-person singular pronoun	12
Lexical	<i>katong</i>	<i>kami / kita</i>	First-person plural pronoun	10
Lexical	<i>dong</i>	<i>mereka</i>	Third-person plural pronoun	9
Morphological	<i>su</i>	<i>sudah</i>	Perfective aspect marker	14
Morphological	<i>mo</i>	<i>mau</i>	Marker of intention	13
Lexical	<i>seng ada</i>	<i>tidak ada</i>	Existential negation	8

Source: Primary data from text analysis (2025)

At the morphological level, word form reduction becomes a salient feature. Forms such as *su* for *sudah* or *mo* for *mau* are not random but show a consistent phonological pattern aligned with the principle of phonetic economy typical of Eastern Malay varieties. In interviews, several students explained that using these forms feels more "natural" and "flowing" in writing because it reflects how they think and speak in daily life. One informant, M.N., stated that when he writes in a "too formal" form, his writing feels "not like himself." This statement highlights an orientation toward linguistic authenticity, shaping how students negotiate their academic identity through language.

Syntactically, students' academic texts also exhibit strong influence from Ambon Malay structures. The subject–predicate–object order is generally maintained but often includes unique constructions such as *pung* as a possessive marker, as in "*Beta* analisis masyarakat *pung* cara hidup di daerah pesisir." In Standard Indonesian, this would read, "*Saya* menganalisis cara hidup masyarakat di daerah pesisir." The use of *pung* (from *punya*) as a possessive particle serves as an indicator of how Ambon Malay structures form a distinct and productive syntactic system. Observations from fifteen texts show that such structures

appear in nearly two-thirds of all sentences containing possessive or descriptive relations.

Orthographically, students' writing follows phonetic conventions that approximate everyday pronunciation. For example, the phrase *seng ada* is written as it is pronounced rather than as *tidak ada*, following the standard spelling. This reveals a tendency to write as one speaks, demonstrating a close relationship between orality and literacy in the Ambon context. Field observations in computer labs and student discussion spaces show that when students work in groups, they often articulate sentences aloud before writing them. In this process, Ambon Malay is fully used as the language of thought and writing. This phenomenon indicates that linguistic representation in academic texts is deeply rooted in the social practices and collective interactions within the university.

Interestingly, the emergence of these local forms cannot be reduced to mere "errors" or "ignorance of standard norms." Rather, as Woolard (2020) explains through the concept of local normativity, each linguistic community possesses internal norms that define what is appropriate, natural, and legitimate in a given communicative context. In this case, Pattimura University students construct local forms as local standards, a linguistic norm that is socially recognized even if not institutionally acknowledged by the national education system. This finding aligns with the idea that language is a social practice governed by context and power relations, not merely by top-down normative regulations.

In in-depth interviews, several students even mentioned that lecturers rarely correct the use of local forms in written assignments, as long as the content is considered strong and well-argued. Classroom observations support this: during thesis supervision sessions, both lecturers and students frequently alternate between Standard Indonesian and Ambon Malay without losing clarity or academic formality. This illustrates that "standardness" in the Ambon context is relative and negotiated rather than imposed absolutely.

Students' Perception of Standard and Local Varieties

Students' perceptions of the standard and local varieties reveal a complex dynamic between regional linguistic identity and normative awareness of the national language. Among students at Pattimura University, Ambon, interview results indicate that most respondents do not perceive a sharp dichotomy between Standard Indonesian and Ambon Malay. Instead, they situate the two varieties within a functional continuum, where Ambon Malay is regarded as a natural part of Indonesian used contextually. This reflects how the national language ideology emphasizing formal uniformity is reinterpreted locally into a more flexible and situational form.

In interviews, informants such as L.S. and D.M. expressed that they view Ambon Malay as "the way Ambonese people speak Indonesian." For them, using forms such as *beta* or *katong* in academic writing is not erroneous because these forms are "understood by everyone" and are "still Indonesian." This perspective reflects the internalization of what may be termed localized standardness, the belief that linguistic norms can be locally determined based on mutual understanding within the community (Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Lan et al., 2025). In other words, for Ambon students, "standard" is not entirely dictated by institutions such as KBBI or PUEBI, but rather by everyday communicative practices.

A key dimension of this perception is the belief that Ambon Malay is more expressive and communicative than the standard variety. Many informants stated that the local language feels “more alive,” “more sincere,” and “more emotionally connected.” When writing academic tasks, they often feel that Standard Indonesian makes their writing “too rigid” and “sounds unlike themselves.” One informant, Y.P., explained that when attempting to write entirely in standard language, he felt as if he was “writing for someone else, not for himself.” From a sociolinguistic perspective, this indicates that language functions not merely as an academic communication tool but also as a medium for expressing identity and social authenticity.

Field observations around campus corroborate this finding. In student discussion rooms and during academic advising sessions, both lecturers and students frequently alternate between Ambon Malay and Standard Indonesian without communication barriers. For instance, during research proposal presentations, students often begin with phrases such as, “Jadi, *beta* mau jelaskan dulu latar belakang masalah ini.” There are no corrections from lecturers; in fact, some respond in the same variety. This situation shows that within the local academic ecosystem, Ambon Malay has gained pragmatic legitimacy, it serves as a socially accepted academic language even if it lacks formal recognition.

From the perspective of language ideology theory, this phenomenon can be explained through the language ideology framework (Flores, 2020), which defines language ideology as a belief system linking language to social, moral, and identity values. In the case of Ambon students, the local language is not merely understood as a communication tool but as a symbol of solidarity and regional belonging. When students assert that Ambon Malay is “our version of Indonesian,” they are, in essence, asserting local power and agency in determining what is legitimate linguistic form. This signifies a shift from a top-down national ideology to a bottom-up local ideology, where the meaning of “standard” is socially negotiated.

Field data also show that many students have low metalinguistic awareness regarding the formal differences between standard and nonstandard varieties. Many admitted they were unaware that forms such as *seng* ada or *pung* are nonstandard Indonesian. When asked how they assess good academic writing, most stated that “good” writing depends on coherence and logical argumentation rather than conformity to linguistic norms. This underscores a limited metalinguistic awareness, the reflective understanding of linguistic structures and norms (Megah & Noor, 2021; Schneider, 2022). Such low awareness does not necessarily indicate deficiency; instead, it reveals that students’ linguistic norms are socially, rather than formally, constructed.

The social processes underlying this perception can be traced to their learning and interaction experiences on campus. In many classes, the medium of instruction used by lecturers is a mixture of Indonesian and Ambon Malay. Students are accustomed to hearing expressions like “*katong* bahas dulu bagian ini” or “su jelas kah maksudnya?” as part of daily academic communication. This creates a linguistic ecology that reinforces Ambon Malay’s social function as a local academic language. For example, in the faculty reading room,

students were observed helping one another edit papers using mixed language without feeling compelled to adhere to the standard. Such interactions show that academic linguistic norms in Ambon are collectively constructed through practice rather than formal regulation.

Conceptually, students' perceptions of standard and local varieties reveal a dialectic between national ideology and local reality. The national language ideology in Indonesia promotes Bahasa Indonesia as a symbol of unity and modernity, but in practice, Ambonese students construct their own version of "standard." Referring to the language standardness perception theory, linguistic standardness is not objective but socially constructed through experience, education, and linguistic environment. In this context, Ambonese students evaluate language not based on prescriptive rules but on familiarity and communicative function.

This phenomenon also reflects a subtle form of resistance to the ideology of linguistic homogenization. By continuing to use local forms in academic texts, students indirectly assert that the national language can have multiple forms and voices according to its cultural context. Ambon Malay thus represents a local standard ideology, a system in which local norms serve as the main reference without rejecting the national language's existence. As one informant, E.T., stated, "Kalau semua orang di sini pakai bahasa Ambon, berarti itu juga bahasa Indonesia-nya kita." This view encapsulates how students reposition the national language within a local framework, making it a shared entity rooted in their lived experiences.

Local Standard Ideology in the Academic Context

The phenomenon of local standard ideology among students at Pattimura University, Ambon, reflects how the local language attains symbolic legitimacy within the academic sphere. Amid a national linguistic system that emphasizes uniformity through standardized Indonesian, students have constructed their own normative framework rooted in everyday academic practices. Ambon Malay is no longer positioned merely as an informal or domestic variety, but as a legitimate and valued medium of scholarly communication. This ideology has not emerged through official policy but through repeated and collectively accepted social practices, demonstrating that "standards" in language need not always originate from the center, they can emerge organically and participatorily from below.

The process of forming this local standard ideology can be observed in the ways students interact in their daily academic activities. Observations from several classrooms and thesis supervision sessions in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) show that lecturers and students often alternate between Ambon Malay and Standard Indonesian without any sense of guilt or awareness of violating linguistic norms. For instance, in class discussions, a lecturer may casually say, "*Katong* lihat dulu teori ini cocok atau *seng*" ("Let's see whether this theory fits or not"), and students respond in the same variety without any communication barrier. Such interactions, occurring continuously, establish communicative habits that are internalized as normal and even academic. In an interview, an informant, R.N., stated that "on campus, when people speak too formally, it feels strange and stiff." This remark indicates that the local linguistic norm has shifted in function, from a marker of informality to a symbol of academic familiarity and solidarity.

In this context, the university functions as a site for the reproduction of language ideologies that are not always top-down. It becomes an arena where national and local ideologies meet, negotiate, and coexist. In Ambon, the university is not merely a knowledge-transmitting institution but also a space for constructing distinctive linguistic values. Field observations reveal that academic activities such as seminars, proposal presentations, and group discussions often employ hybrid language varieties. Lecturers accept and even encourage this phenomenon because the local language is perceived as more capable of “warming the atmosphere” and “bridging understanding” between students and the subject matter. When students use expressions like *beta* pikir teori ini cocok dengan data (“I think this theory fits the data”), lecturers do not treat them as errors but as authentic expressions of students’ thought processes shaped within a multilingual environment.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of peripheral multilingualism as discussed by Ó Murchadha and Kavanagh (2022), which suggests that peripheral communities tend to develop their own linguistic systems grounded in their social experience and colonial histories. In Ambon, its geographic and historical position as a port city has long fostered an open linguistic space, where Ambon Malay has stabilized as a regional lingua franca. With the advent of modern education, the local language was not displaced but adapted, gaining new functions in academic settings. This process can be described as bottom-up standardization, a form of linguistic standardization emerging from social practice rather than formal policy. Hence, Ambon Malay within the academic domain can be seen as a negotiated outcome between functional, affective, and identity-based needs of the campus community.

Interviews with informants further underscore that this local standard ideology functions not merely as a linguistic habit but as a belief system. Informant M.L. stated that using Ambon Malay on campus made them feel “more confident” and “better able to explain things clearly.” For these students, the local language is not an obstacle to academic success but a bridge for understanding complex concepts in familiar terms. In this sense, language serves as an epistemic tool enabling students to negotiate scientific meaning in ways consistent with their cultural background. This perspective reveals that local standard ideology also acts as a form of resistance to the homogenization of academic language, which often prioritizes formal correctness over sociocultural relevance.

Socially, this ideology is maintained and reinforced by the relatively homogeneous linguistic ecology of the campus. Most students and lecturers come from the Maluku region, making Ambon Malay the dominant medium of communication in both formal and informal settings. Observations of student organization activities, for example, show that reports and internal communications frequently contain local forms such as *seng* ada, *dong*, or *pung*. These documents are still regarded as official and valid without the need for adjustment to standard Indonesian. This demonstrates that local academic norms have accommodated linguistic forms nationally considered nonstandard. In other words, the university has become not only a reproducer of national language ideology but also a producer of localized versions of linguistic standardness.

When compared with other contexts in Eastern Indonesia, similar phenomena are observed in regional sociolinguistic research. At Nusa Cendana University in Kupang, for instance, Kupang Malay is often used in academic discussions and written assignments because it is considered more communicative and “more in tune” with interaction between students and lecturers. Likewise, in Ternate, Dharmaputra (2019) found that Ternate Malay plays a similar role in academic contexts, particularly in classroom discourse. Such patterns reinforce the argument that in Indonesia’s peripheral regions, local standard ideologies develop due to strong communicative needs and tightly knit region-based social networks. In this context, universities are not merely language users but ideological agents that, often unconsciously, legitimize the pluralization of linguistic norms at the local level.

Textual analysis of student writings in Ambon further indicates that forms such as *beta*, *su*, *mo*, and *seng* *ada* appear consistently in academic texts without any awareness that these forms diverge from national standards. Interestingly, students perceive the use of these forms as enhancing rather than diminishing the quality of their writing. They believe that local readers will understand them more easily. This points to an autonomous and established linguistic belief system: the local language serves not only as a means of expression but also as a representation of communicative competence recognized within the academic community. Accordingly, the local standard ideology in Ambon can be seen as a manifestation of collective linguistic consciousness that shifts the locus of linguistic legitimacy from national institutions to local communities.

Within the theoretical frameworks of Schneider (2022) and Woolard (2020), this phenomenon demonstrates that peripheral regions are not merely recipients of linguistic norms imposed from the center but also producers of legitimate linguistic meanings and conventions within their own contexts. In other words, linguistic standards can be pluricentric, having multiple centers of legitimacy recognized by different communities. In Ambon, that center of legitimacy lies not in Jakarta or within national language institutions, but in the academic spaces where language is practiced, negotiated, and lived on a daily basis.

The Gap between National Norms and Local Practice

The tension between national linguistic norms and local practices in Ambon’s higher education context reveals a complex interplay between the prescriptivism of standardized Indonesian and the descriptivism of Ambon Malay usage in academic situations. On one hand, national language policies, through the Pedoman Umum Ejaan Bahasa Indonesia (PUEBI) and the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), establish official standards for language use in education and academic writing. On the other hand, everyday linguistic practices in classrooms, discussions, and student writing reflect the persistence of robust local norms. Ambon Malay, with its distinct lexical and syntactic system, functions not merely as an informal medium but as a language that mediates how students think and write about their social realities.

Field observations in several academic writing classes at Pattimura University and STKIP Ambon show that Ambon Malay elements frequently appear unconsciously, both in

discussions and in students' academic writing drafts. For example, student research reports often contain sentences such as "*Katong* su buat observasi di lapangan" ("We've done field observation") or "*Dong seng* ada respon waktu wawancara" ("They didn't respond during the interview"). Lecturers usually correct these forms, but such corrections rarely involve reflective explanations about the differences between standard and nonstandard varieties. Consequently, students interpret such corrections merely as stylistic adjustments rather than as part of a broader linguistic shift.

Interviews with an informant, L.S., a final-year student, reveal that many students perceive Ambon Malay as part of Indonesian itself. L.S. stated that words like *katong* or *beta* feel "more natural" and "more sincere" in expressing social experiences. This perspective reflects a strong local language ideology in which linguistic forms are deemed legitimate as long as they represent the speaker's identity and lived experience (Luke, 2018; Sah, 2021). Thus, linguistic practice becomes not just a technical issue but also one of social legitimacy tied to regional identity.

In this context, the gap between national norms and local practice extends beyond grammar, it also involves epistemic and linguistic justice dimensions. Lan et al. (2025) refer to such situations as forms of linguistic inequality, wherein centralized language policies fail to accommodate linguistic diversity and autonomy in peripheral regions. Ambonese students, for instance, write within a linguistic system that is meaningful and logical to them, yet this system is often deemed "nonacademic" by institutions adhering to national standards. Over time, this can produce epistemic barriers, where students from peripheral areas struggle to articulate scientific ideas in forms considered "correct" by central authorities.

Field conditions show that academic writing training in regional universities tends to remain normative, focused on correcting spelling and diction "errors" without exploring their sociolinguistic origins. In one Research Methodology in Language class, for instance, a lecturer corrected a student's use of *su* instead of *sudah* in a mini-research report. The student simply replaced the word without understanding why the change was required. This reflects low metalinguistic awareness, compounded by the absence of discursive spaces that treat linguistic variation as a form of diversity rather than deviation.

This mismatch is further illustrated by corpus data from Ambon student academic writings (n = 25):

Table 2 Frequency of Nonstandard Forms in Ambon Student Academic Writing

Type of Linguistic Feature	Example	Frequency	Standard Equivalent
Lexical	<i>katong, dong, beta</i>	112	<i>kami, mereka, saya</i>
Morphological	<i>su, mo, seng ada</i>	86	<i>sudah, mau, tidak ada</i>
Syntactic	S–V–O inversion structure	43	Standard S–P–O structure
Orthographic	Phonetic spelling (" <i>lae</i> ", " <i>par</i> ")	27	PUEBI-standard (" <i>lah</i> ", " <i>para</i> ")

Source: Primary text analysis data (2025)

The table 2 shows that local language interference is most dominant at the lexical and morphological levels, indicating students' emotional and cognitive attachment to the Ambon Malay system. Rather than being viewed as "errors," these forms should be understood as part of a socially stable and productive linguistic system. From this perspective, local norms function as regulatory systems recognized and practiced by their speech communities, even if they lack formal legitimacy from the center.

This phenomenon affirms that regional universities are not merely transmitters of the national language but also arenas where language ideologies are produced and negotiated. Classroom observations indicate that students frequently mix standard Indonesian with Ambon Malay in formal contexts, such as research presentations, without hesitation. Lecturers sometimes respond in the same mixed style, especially in informal classroom settings. Such interactions reflect bottom-up standardization, a process of linguistic normalization that emerges from social practice rather than national regulation (Richards, 2023; Zein et al., 2020).

Comparative studies from other Eastern Indonesian regions reinforce these findings. Research by Hima et al. (2021) in Ternate revealed that local linguistic features in academic writing similarly signal collective identity. Students in these regions tend to maintain local linguistic elements in academic contexts as symbols of a "regional voice." This phenomenon not only illustrates subtle resistance to central norms but also highlights a distinctive mechanism of linguistic adaptation within the context of peripheral multilingualism (Cladis, 2018; Li & Lan, 2022).

However, this tension between national norms and local practices has serious implications for academic literacy. Students writing within local linguistic frameworks often face difficulties adapting to national academic standards, particularly in publications or competitions governed by national norms. This creates a form of symbolic exclusion, not because students lack intellectual ability, but because they articulate knowledge through a different linguistic system. Such conditions suggest that higher education in peripheral regions must reconsider academic literacy approaches that are inclusive and linguistically just.

Sociologically, this gap reflects the asymmetrical relationship between the center and the periphery within Indonesia's linguistic order. Standard Indonesian, as a symbol of modernity and authority, remains idealized as the language of knowledge, while local varieties are relegated to subordinate positions. Yet everyday practices show that the authority of the national language is not entirely hegemonic, it is negotiated, localized, and reinterpreted within multilingual academic spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the linguistic practices of Ambonese students within academic contexts reflect a language ideology rooted in local experience, the local standard ideology, where forms of Ambon Malay are not perceived as deviations from the national standard language, but as legitimate and functional varieties for the representation of knowledge.

Through linguistic analysis and interviews, this research demonstrates that distinctive lexical and syntactic forms such as *beta*, *katong*, *dong*, *su*, *mo*, and *seng* ada are not errors, but expressions of a stable and internalized linguistic norm within the academic domain. Students' perceptions of linguistic standardness are shaped by social practices, the campus environment, and the lack of explicit instruction in academic writing, all of which collectively reinforce local norms as implicit references in writing. Accordingly, this study introduces a novel understanding of academic writing not merely as the application of national language rules, but as a social space where language ideologies are negotiated between the center and the periphery. Theoretically, the findings extend sociolinguistic inquiry into the realm of academic writing and propose a more contextual literacy approach, one that recognizes the validity of local linguistic systems without negating the authority of national standards.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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