

Language, Religion, and Identity Negotiation in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how language is used and negotiated by students (santri) in shaping their religious and social identities at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar, West Sumatra. The pesantren represents a complex multilingual social space where Arabic, Indonesian, and Minangkabau are alternately used across religious, academic, and everyday domains. Adopting a sociolinguistic ethnographic approach, the research employed participant observation, natural interaction recordings, and in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. Critical discourse analysis was applied to interpret how linguistic practices reflect ideologies, authority, and identity negotiations within the pesantren setting. The findings reveal that Arabic functions as a symbol of piety and religious authority, Indonesian serves as a medium of rationality and academic communication, while Minangkabau affirms intimacy and local identity. Code-switching and code-mixing among these languages are not random but reflect strategic positioning within the intersecting demands of religiosity, institutional discipline, and social solidarity. The study introduces the concept of linguistic piety negotiation, referring to the balancing process between religious devotion and national belonging through language use. This research contributes to sociolinguistic studies of identity by uncovering the interplay between religious and national language ideologies in modern Islamic education, an area rarely explored in Indonesia, and offers insights for understanding the ideological and unifying roles of language in multilingual Muslim communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren education in Indonesia has long been a crucial arena for shaping the religious and social identities of young Muslims. Amid the modernization of Islamic educational systems, an emerging phenomenon reveals the significant role of language in shaping values, beliefs, and identity within pesantren contexts (Khotimah & Rosidi, 2020; Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). Within these institutions, language functions not merely as a means of communication but also as a symbol of piety, a tool of social control, and a marker of scholarly authority. For instance, Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar in West Sumatra enforces the habitual use of Arabic and English within dormitories, while Indonesian is used in academic settings and Minangkabau in informal social interactions (Hidayah, 2021; Isbah & Sakhiyya, 2023). This multilingual environment creates a socially and ideologically rich space in which students constantly negotiate between religious devotion,

institutional discipline, and their social expressions as individuals rooted in local cultural contexts.

Such dynamics demonstrate that linguistic practices in modern pesantren cannot be understood solely as linguistic policy but must be viewed as socially and ideologically meaningful acts (Ahmed, 2021; Ibnu & Azman, 2022). In classrooms, Arabic is often idealized as a symbol of knowledge and piety; in dormitories, English represents modernity and global openness; and in informal spaces, Minangkabau or Indonesian reemerge as expressions of emotional closeness and social solidarity. This seemingly simple code-switching reflects the complex identity of pesantren students navigating intersections of religiosity, nationality, and locality (Altinyelken, 2022; Chapman, 2018). In Indonesia's multilingual and multicultural landscape, understanding such dynamics is essential not only for comprehending Islamic educational practices but also for examining how language serves as a medium for the production of values and power within religious social spaces.

The relationship between language, religion, and identity in Islamic educational institutions is not a new topic but remains highly relevant in evolving social contexts. Previous studies have shown that language plays a central role in religious socialization. Rissanen (2020) introduced the concept of religious language socialization, where individuals learn religious values through linguistically mediated practices within institutional frameworks. Stille (2021), in her study of women's piety in Egypt, revealed how both language and the body serve as media for internalizing religious values. Similarly, Triantoro and Ardiansyah (2018) demonstrated that the use of Arabic in Indonesian religious practices symbolizes authority and Islamic knowledge. In Malaysian Islamic schools, Sahin (2018) found that Arabic language use reinforces religious identity but simultaneously creates a symbolic hierarchy between "the religious" and "the secular."

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the relationship between language and identity has been extensively theorized. Gürbüz (2018) emphasizes that identity is not fixed but is constantly negotiated through linguistic practices. Likewise, Maulod (2022) and Rogozen-Soltar (2020) highlight how language choice indexes particular values, statuses, or ideologies in social interaction. Dumovich (2018) and Groeninck (2020) argue that language is inherently ideological, its use both reflects and reinforces prevailing social value systems. Within the modern pesantren context, Arabic serves not only as a medium of religious instruction but also as a symbol of morality, piety, and scholarly authority. Conversely, Indonesian is associated with rationality, modernity, and nationalism, while local languages such as Minangkabau preserve social intimacy and emotional connectedness.

Several empirical studies in Indonesia have examined multilingual practices in pesantren from various perspectives. Jahroni (2018) and Jamil (2019), for instance, explored how language area policies in modern pesantren influence students' motivation to learn Arabic and English. Their findings indicate that such policies contribute less to linguistic proficiency than to the shaping of social discipline. Dassi and Ruby (2023) found that Arabic is often used performatively to signal piety, whereas Indonesian serves to build solidarity and humor beyond formal contexts. Zein et al. (2020b) observed that in West Javanese pesantren,

English, originally introduced as a tool for modernization, was re-signified by students as a marker of social prestige and global competitiveness. Similarly, Gustine (2018) argued that bilingual practices in pesantren represent not merely linguistic phenomena but sites of negotiation between religious authority and students' worldly aspirations.

International scholarship further supports these insights. Haerazi and Irawan (2019) and Rasman (2018) assert that in an increasingly globalized world, linguistic practices function as arenas for negotiating identity and power. Drajiati et al. (2018) and Khotimah et al. (2019) found that language in educational institutions often reproduces dominant ideologies, both national and religious. Studies by Sutisna and Vonti (2020) and Zein et al. (2020a) on Islamic education in the Middle East reveal that Arabic not only transmits knowledge but also shapes religious habitus. In the Southeast Asian context, Carpio (2021) and Liza and Andriyanti (2020) demonstrated that multilingualism within Islamic institutions enriches students' identities while simultaneously generating tensions between global and local values. Furthermore, Nikolopoulou et al. (2021), through the concept of imagined communities, elucidated how language facilitates the imagining of national and transnational solidarities beyond geographic boundaries.

Across these studies, the interplay between language, religion, and identity consistently operates within tensions among the local, national, and global. However, most prior research has tended to depict pesantren as static institutions that merely reproduce religious values. In contrast, in modern pesantren such as Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar, linguistic practices reveal fluidity and creativity: language serves not only to affirm compliance with religious systems but also as a vehicle of self-expression, solidarity, and subtle resistance to authority structures. Instances such as switching from Arabic to Minangkabau in informal settings or using English humorously illustrate this linguistic innovation beyond formal functions.

Accordingly, this study proposes a renewed reading of linguistic practices in pesantren, not as reflections of institutional policy but as social processes through which religious, national, and local identities are negotiated simultaneously. A sociolinguistic ethnographic approach is therefore crucial, as it enables the researcher to capture the everyday dynamics of language use in natural contexts. Through observation, interaction, and discourse analysis, language practices can be interpreted not only as linguistic phenomena but also as socially meaningful actions.

This study thus explores linguistic practices at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar as forms of identity negotiation situated between religious and national ideologies. In classrooms, Arabic indexes piety and authority; in dormitories, English represents modernity; and in daily life, Minangkabau embodies intimacy and cultural identity. These languages operate not separately but within a hybrid and dynamic configuration of student identity.

By adopting this lens, the study conceptualizes the modern pesantren as a site of linguistic ideology, a space where language becomes an arena for negotiating religious, national, and local values. The novelty of this research lies in moving beyond describing how

languages are used to exploring why and with what meanings students choose specific linguistic forms in their social contexts. In doing so, this study contributes not only to sociolinguistic theories of identity but also to broader reflections on how Islamic education shapes citizens who are both religious and cosmopolitan. The central aim is to uncover how linguistic practices in modern pesantren mediate the negotiation of piety, nationhood, and local belonging, an intricate process that encapsulates the complexity of being Indonesian and Muslim in a globalized era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a sociolinguistic ethnographic design. The objective is not to measure the frequency of language use but to interpret the meanings, functions, and ideologies underlying linguistic practices within the pesantren context. A qualitative approach allows for the exploration of social dynamics and cultural contexts that shape language use, while a sociolinguistic ethnography frames language as social practice rooted in everyday interaction. As emphasized by Holmes (2020) and Pahwa et al. (2023), language must be studied within its social context, in the actions and situations that give rise to meaning. Accordingly, this research focuses not only on linguistic forms but also on how language functions as a medium for negotiating students' religious and social identities at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar.

The research site was purposively selected based on its unique characteristics as a modern Islamic educational institution that integrates religious and national curricula while enforcing Arabic and English language use policies. Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar's distinctive combination of traditional Islamic education (*tafaqquh fiddin*) and formal state education, within a strongly Minangkabau cultural environment, creates a multilingual setting where Arabic, English, Indonesian, and Minangkabau are alternately used. Such a socially and symbolically rich site provides an ideal context for examining how linguistic ideology and identity intertwine in everyday life. In line with ethnographic traditions, this purposeful site selection enables an in-depth understanding of meaning relations that may remain invisible in purely linguistic analyses.

Participants were purposively selected to represent various levels of involvement in pesantren linguistic practices. The sample comprised 15 informants: five senior students active in dormitory and student organizational activities, five junior students adapting to language policies, three language teachers specializing in Arabic and English, and two pesantren administrators responsible for institutional language planning. The selection considered variations in age, regional background, and involvement in religious and social activities to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how language ideologies operate across social positions within the pesantren. This purposive sampling aligns with the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), who emphasize the importance of selecting informants based on information richness rather than statistical representativeness.

Data were collected over three months using three primary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation involved the

researcher residing temporarily within the pesantren, following students' daily routines, and recording language use in various settings such as classrooms, dormitories, mosques, and extracurricular activities. The researcher's presence was not merely passive but aimed at building rapport to ensure natural interaction (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Guillen, 2019). Semi-structured interviews explored students' and teachers' perceptions of Arabic, English, and local languages, as well as the social meanings attached to their use. Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes and was recorded with participants' consent. Documentary data were also collected from institutional language policies, speeches, activity manuals, and student writings in wall magazines, all analyzed to uncover ideological representations of language in written form.

Data analysis followed the interactive analysis model proposed by Bazen et al. (2021), consisting of three phases: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved categorizing and coding based on emerging themes such as "language and piety," "language and authority," "language and solidarity," and "identity negotiation." Data display was presented in descriptive narratives featuring direct quotations from interviews and observations to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices. Conclusions were drawn through reflective and iterative comparison between empirical findings and theoretical frameworks of language ideology and identity.

To ensure data validity and credibility, the study employed triangulation of sources, methods, and theories. Source triangulation compared the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators regarding the same phenomena. Method triangulation cross-checked findings from observation, interviews, and document analysis for interpretive consistency. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by interpreting field data through multiple conceptual lenses, including language ideology, indexicality of identity, and religious language socialization. This process ensured that data interpretation was grounded not merely in researcher subjectivity but in robust theoretical and empirical foundations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of Multilingualism in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools: Social Spaces and Linguistic Practices

The dynamics of multilingualism at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar illustrate how modern Islamic education serves as a complex sociolinguistic arena where language operates not merely as a means of communication but as a symbol of identity, social capital, and even religious morality. At a surface level, the school's language area policy enforces the use of Arabic and English as mandatory codes of communication among students in both academic and dormitory settings. However, ethnographic observation reveals that this policy functions less as a rigid linguistic system and more as a social negotiation space, shaped by compliance, creative adaptation, and subtle forms of resistance among students.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the school exhibits a functional yet dynamic division of linguistic labor. Arabic, for instance, is used as the principal language of religion, in

Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, and muhadharah (weekly speech practice). It symbolizes piety, spiritual discipline, and religious authority internalized by students as part of the ideal *santri* identity. In one observed tafsir class, an ustaz corrected a student for explaining a verse in Indonesian, reminding the class that using Arabic was not merely a linguistic matter but also a sign of reverence toward the sacred text. This moment exemplifies how Arabic occupies the highest position within the school's linguistic marketplace due to its elevated symbolic and religious value (Bourdieu, 2018, 2020).

English, meanwhile, functions as the language of modernity and intellectual progress. Within science and technology instruction, it signals the school's openness to global knowledge. Yet observations indicate that English is used primarily in formal contexts, classrooms and speech contests, while students frequently revert to Indonesian or local languages in everyday interactions. One informant (S.) admitted, "We try to speak English in class, but in the dorm it's difficult because most friends are more comfortable using Indonesian or Minang." This statement illustrates that compliance with the language area policy does not necessarily reflect ideological alignment but is instead shaped by interpersonal comfort and social solidarity.

Bahasa Indonesia, on the other hand, serves as a medium of interregional communication and national rationality. It bridges linguistic and cultural diversity while neutralizing hierarchies between religious and global languages. In formal activities such as student organization meetings, Indonesian symbolizes uniformity and professionalism. Within the linguistic marketplace, it holds institutional symbolic capital, representing order, discipline, and adherence to national norms. However, in social practice, it is often blended with Minangkabau to foster intimacy and emotional closeness.

Minangkabau itself functions as the language of local solidarity and emotional familiarity. It is commonly used in dormitories, canteens, and informal gatherings among students from West Sumatra. Field observations show that this language appears during relaxed settings, such as when students share tea after evening prayers or joke during communal cleaning. Its use is not perceived as a rule violation but as an acceptable expression of social identity. One dormitory supervisor (ustaz Z.) remarked, "As long as it's not in class or during religious sessions, students can use their local language; it's part of how they maintain friendship."

Thus, linguistic practice among *santri* cannot be understood in binary terms of compliance versus defiance. Rather, students engage in translingual practices, the strategic, flexible use of multiple languages to construct meaning, maintain social harmony, and negotiate identity. When students mix Arabic and Indonesian in religious discussions, they are not committing linguistic errors but constructing religious understanding that resonates with their social realities. This demonstrates that multilingual practice in pesantren is not linguistic deviance but an intelligent social strategy.

Three primary patterns of adaptation to the language area policy emerge. First, symbolic compliance, where students use Arabic and English as expressions of loyalty to institutional values, albeit often confined to formal spaces. Second, functional negotiation,

where students blend languages contextually to balance religious and social meaning. Third, subtle resistance, where students deliberately use Indonesian or Minangkabau as “safe spaces” from institutional pressure. This resistance is not confrontational but expressed through humorous linguistic play or mocking codes that preserve group solidarity.

This analysis positions Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar as a living linguistic market in which symbolic linguistic capital is constantly renegotiated. Arabic holds religious capital, English embodies modern capital, Indonesian conveys national capital, and Minangkabau retains local-social capital. The interplay of these capitals creates a symbolic economy that shapes who is perceived as intelligent, pious, or respected. Bourdieu’s (2018) linguistic marketplace framework clarifies how power relations manifest through language choice, those who command a language with high symbolic value gain greater social legitimacy.

As Preece (2019) argues, linguistic power is not always hegemonic but can be negotiated through translanguaging practice. Within the pesantren, students employ linguistic flexibility to create spaces of agency, where one can be religious without losing social intimacy and be modern without abandoning local identity. Daily interactions demonstrate how *santri* construct their own “social grammar,” which may not always align with institutional norms but enriches the pesantren as a multilayered site of identity formation.

Arabic Language and the Representation of Piety: Authority, Discipline, and Religious Ideology

Arabic occupies an exceptionally privileged position at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar, not only as the medium of religious instruction but as a symbol of piety, spiritual discipline, and epistemic authority. In this context, Arabic is more than a communicative tool; it embodies moral and ideological values that regulate students’ behavior. From their first day, *santri* are reminded that mastering Arabic is part of becoming a ‘alim and salih individual. This highlights the symbolic dimension of Arabic, it indexes devotion and proximity to the divine.

In one observed tafsir class, the ustaz began the lesson with a loud Arabic greeting, echoed in unison by students. When a student mispronounced a verse, the ustaz not only corrected him but also remarked, “A mistake in recitation means a mistake in understanding God’s word.” Such moments demonstrate that linguistic accuracy is moralized, language becomes an instrument of spiritual discipline. As Guzmán et al. (2021) explain, Islamic piety is not solely internal faith but an embodied practice of the body and language through which religiosity is performed in public life.

Students perceive Arabic proficiency as a marker of both moral virtue and scholarly authority. One informant, R., who had spent three years at the pesantren, stated that students fluent in Arabic are “usually seen as more alim, closer to the teachers, and more knowledgeable about the kitab.” This reflects the indexicality of piety, where linguistic forms index moral values and social hierarchy (Genç et al., 2020). Correct pronunciation, lexical precision, and spontaneous citation of hadith all function as semiotic markers of taqwa and epistemic prestige. Thus, Arabic serves both as a vehicle of understanding sacred texts and as a performative display of religious hierarchy.

In everyday interactions, Arabic phrases such as *jazakallah khairan*, *afwan*, or *barakallah* frequently appear beyond formal settings, in dormitory conversations and social interactions. Yet usage differs by seniority, senior students employ them confidently, while newcomers often hesitate or misapply them. This variation demonstrates how Arabic proficiency operates as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2020), positioning fluent speakers as more “knowledgeable” and “well-mannered” within the *pesantren*’s internal hierarchy.

Arabic also functions as an ideological code, a system of symbols that structures thought, behavior, and moral conduct within the community (Sultana, 2019). The discipline of using Arabic aligns with moral discipline: those who speak the “language of religion” are expected to act according to its values. Teachers often remind students that “Arabic is the language of paradise,” implying that speaking it brings one closer to divine values. This reinforces a linguistic ideology where speaking Arabic equates to embodying piety. Such ideology operates not through written rules but through embodied practices, greetings, gestures, tone of voice, and comportment.

During an afternoon sermon, one *ustaz* proclaimed, “Allah revealed the Qur’an in Arabic because it is the most *sharif* (noble) language. Whoever learns it is walking the path of honor.” This statement represents not merely theological doctrine but the reproduction of a linguistic ideology that places Arabic at the apex of moral hierarchy. Consequently, students internalize that speaking Arabic is not an academic task but a form of worship.

Nonetheless, this linguistic discipline occasionally produces tension. Some students reported feeling “pressured” by the obligation to speak Arabic outside class. One informant, L., confessed, “Sometimes we want to relax, but when the teachers are around, we have to speak Arabic, we’re afraid of making mistakes.” This indicates the disciplinary dimension of language, where Arabic not only trains the body but constrains spontaneous sociality. Hence, Arabic functions dually, as an instrument of spiritual formation and a mechanism of social control.

Berry et al. (2019) argue that piety in religious practice cannot be separated from moral performativity enacted through bodily and linguistic habitus. In the *pesantren*, piety is not merely about understanding the meaning of prayer but about articulating it with proper intonation, correct language, and conscious reverence. Linguistic discipline thus becomes a moral exercise, shaping a compliant and devout self. In this sense, Arabic facilitates the internalization of religious values through repetitive linguistic routines rather than coercive enforcement.

From a discourse perspective, Arabic also mediates the reproduction of epistemic authority. When *ustaz* cite *hadith* in Arabic before explaining them in Indonesian, a semiotic shift occurs, the sacred (Arabic) legitimizes the profane (Indonesian). This strengthens the indexical link between language and religious power. Students who can quote scripture in its original form hold higher epistemic status than those reliant on translation. Thus, Arabic operates as a form of moral currency reinforcing social stratification within the *pesantren*.

Observations during *muhadharah* sessions reveal the performative dimension of this ideology. When students deliver speeches in Arabic, evaluation criteria extend beyond

content to include fluency, delivery style, and composure. Fluent Arabic speech is associated with calmness, authority, and piety. This reflects Baker and Riches's (2018) argument that language not only represents identity but actively produces it through social practice.

Indonesian Language and the Ideology of Nationhood: Rationality, Academic Function, and the Negotiation of Modernity

The Indonesian language at the Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar performs a unique and complex role. On one hand, it serves as an academic and administrative medium that bridges the Islamic boarding school's educational system with the national curriculum. On the other, it acts as a symbol of nationhood and modern rationality. Within a religiously charged educational environment, Indonesian functions as a "neutral" language, neither as sacred as Arabic in its spiritual dimension nor as intimate as Minangkabau in its social use. It serves as a mediating medium balancing Islamic values with national ideals, and tradition with modernity. Hence, Indonesian in the pesantren is not merely a communicative tool but an ideological arena in which students negotiate their positions as both devout Muslims and modern citizens.

Observations in an integrated science classroom revealed that the entire teaching process predominantly used Indonesian. The teacher taught a biology lesson on ecosystems, occasionally relating it to Qur'anic verses, but all conceptual explanations and scientific terminology were delivered in Indonesian. The students actively took notes and asked questions about difficult terms, to which the teacher responded patiently without switching to Arabic or English. In such a setting, Indonesian operates as the lingua franca of modern knowledge, it embodies rationality, logical order, and access to scientific discourse as part of the national educational project. Thus, Indonesian represents a symbol of modernity that coexists harmoniously with spirituality without undermining religious values.

Students perceive the use of Indonesian as a space of freedom and rationality. One informant, F., explained that speaking Indonesian "feels more comfortable when discussing general subjects because we can express opinions freely without the fear of making mistakes, unlike when using Arabic." This statement suggests that Indonesian is associated with openness and logical argumentation, in contrast to Arabic, which is linked to religious authority and sacredness. Through Indonesian, students feel they have a voice, a legitimate space for opinion and critical reasoning. The language thus becomes a medium for negotiating between authority and agency, compliance and self-expression as Indonesian learners.

According to Deygers and Malone (2019), within the framework of decolonial multilingualism, language choice is never neutral but always tied to history, ideology, and power. In this modern pesantren context, the use of Indonesian can be interpreted as a form of linguistic decoloniality, an effort to reclaim epistemic space previously monopolized by Arabic as the symbol of religious orthodoxy or English as the emblem of global modernity. By positioning Indonesian as the primary medium for scientific and managerial knowledge, the pesantren asserts that nationalism and religiosity can coexist within a single educational framework without negating one another.

In student organizational activities, Indonesian serves as the official language in meetings, reports, and bulletin publications. In an observed student council (OSIS) session, discussions proceeded formally yet dynamically. Students spoke Indonesian in clear, structured sentences, occasionally blending Arabic terms such as *ukhuwah* or *musyawarah*, now integrated into their everyday lexicon. One student asserted that “every program should align with both national and Islamic values,” illustrating how Indonesian serves as a platform where national and religious ideologies intersect. Hence, Indonesian use is not merely pragmatic but deeply ideological, it articulates a synthesis between civic and spiritual values.

Administratively, all official documents, letters, reports, and student guides, are written in Indonesian, underscoring its institutional function as the language of bureaucracy and governance. From a linguistic marketplace perspective, Indonesian carries symbolic value as the state language, conferring formal legitimacy and administrative authority. In interactions with external institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Department of Education, the *pesantren* presents a modern and nationally aligned image through the use of Indonesian. Thus, the *pesantren* not only forms religious individuals but also cultivates citizens capable of engaging in the modern social system.

In an interview, Ustaz M., a civic education teacher, emphasized that “students must understand that loving the homeland is part of faith, and Indonesian is the tool to maintain unity.” This view reflects how Indonesian functions beyond communication, it acts as an ideological instrument fostering national consciousness. Indonesian, therefore, serves as a moral language of nationhood, binding individuals to the broader political community without severing religious commitments. In daily life, the language symbolizes a bridge between Islamic education and the ideals of modern Indonesian nationhood.

Dormitory observations reveal another layer of linguistic dynamics. Despite the language area policy mandating Arabic and English, students frequently revert to Indonesian during academic discussions or study sessions. When working on assignments in science or mathematics, they spontaneously switch to Indonesian for clarity and precision. Several students even remarked that “using Indonesian makes things clearer and avoids misunderstanding.” This indicates that language choice extends beyond policy compliance, it reflects cognitive strategies for achieving communicative efficiency. Within a translingual practice framework, such behavior represents linguistic intelligence: the students flexibly employ multiple languages to fulfill different communicative goals while maintaining religious, academic, and rational values.

Indonesian also becomes a means for negotiating modern identity. One informant, H., stated that speaking Indonesian made him feel “more confident and open-minded.” He added, “When using Arabic, I have to be cautious, afraid of misinterpreting meanings; but in Indonesian, I can express my thoughts freely.” This demonstrates how Indonesian is associated with intellectual freedom and critical participation, two hallmarks of modern rationality within Islamic education. Thus, the Indonesian language enables students to integrate spirituality with modernity without dichotomy.

Interestingly, even though Indonesian functions as a symbol of nationhood, its usage in the pesantren remains infused with religious nuances. Many students use Arabic greetings such as *akhi*, *ukhti*, or *ustaz* even in formal Indonesian discourse. This hybridization reflects translingual positioning, through which students construct multiple identities, as modern Muslims, national citizens, and members of the pesantren community. In practice, Indonesian thus becomes a dynamic site of identity negotiation.

Theoretically, this phenomenon illustrates what Bräuchler (2022) conceptualizes as a decolonial linguistic space. Indonesian challenges the hierarchical linguistic order that privileges Arabic as the symbol of piety and English as the emblem of global progress, demonstrating that a national language can possess both ideological and epistemic power. Through Indonesian, modern pesantren such as Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar articulate an inclusive model of Islamic education, one that embraces modernity without forsaking spirituality and sustains nationalism without diluting religiosity.

Minangkabau Language and Social Intimacy: Solidarity, Emotion, and Locality

The Minangkabau language occupies a distinctive space within the environment of Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar. Amid a linguistic discipline system emphasizing Arabic and English, the local language emerges not as a violation but as an expression of humanity and social solidarity. For many students from West Sumatra, Minangkabau serves as a cultural breath that warms the rigidity of institutional routines. It surfaces between study hours and rest periods as a marker of intimacy, unmediated by hierarchy or authority. In these moments, the language functions not only as communication but as an emotional and relational symbol that cannot be replaced by any other.

Evening observations in the dormitory courtyard revealed laughter-filled conversations in Minangkabau. Groups of students sat casually, teasing one another in their native dialect: “*Lamak bana ko, ka ma anta yo?*” Their laughter dissolved social distinctions between seniors and juniors, replacing them with egalitarian warmth. As informant A., a senior student, expressed, “When we speak Minang, it feels like home.” This highlights that the use of local language in pesantren life is not mere habit but an affective strategy to preserve cultural and emotional continuity. Minangkabau bridges the formal world of the pesantren with the familial comfort of home.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this reflects what Bailey et al. (2020) call sociolinguistic scales, where each language occupies an ideological position within a hierarchy of meaning. Arabic represents the global-religious scale, associated with sacred knowledge and authority. Indonesian signifies the national-modern scale, rationality and citizenship. Meanwhile, Minangkabau embodies the local-intimate scale, where cultural identity, emotion, and solidarity are articulated. When students choose Minangkabau, they are repositioning their identities within the hierarchical multilingual order of the pesantren.

Canteen interactions further illustrate this dynamic. While eating, students fluidly code-switch between Minangkabau and Indonesian, as in: “*Iyo lah, tapi nasi ko dak banyak bana, yo,*” to which a friend replies, “*Sabar, rezeki urang ado yang atur.*” Here, Indonesian ensures mutual intelligibility, while Minangkabau infuses emotional warmth. Such fluidity

reflects linguistic flexibility, students transition from formal-religious personae with teachers to cultural-intimate selves among peers.

Teachers generally tolerate such use. Ustaz R. acknowledged, “When they use Minang, it usually means they’re relaxed; it’s different from being in class.” This tolerance indicates cultural accommodation: local language functions as a social valve, a release mechanism balancing emotional and disciplinary demands.

In conflict resolution, Minangkabau also mediates emotion. When two students quarreled over chores, one diffused tension by saying softly, “Iyo lah, ndak usah ribui, awak cuci lah, jan marah yo.” The gentle tone exemplifies the Minangkabau ethos of humility and humor, turning the language into a language of empathy.

Interestingly, code-switching between Arabic and Minangkabau occurs even in religious discussions. After a Qur’anic interpretation session, one student whispered, “Berarti kok urang indak salah, ustaz tu maksudnyo begitu kan?” This demonstrates scaling movement (O’Doherty et al., 2018), students move discourse from a global-religious register to a local-personal one, blending piety with social intimacy.

Moreover, Minangkabau use embodies subtle symbolic resistance to linguistic discipline. While Arabic and English signify prestige, the local language reclaims personal autonomy and cultural continuity. This form of subtle negotiation (Lapada et al., 2020) reflects students’ agency in maintaining local identity within an institutional structure demanding uniformity. As one student, S., noted, “Here we must speak Arabic and English, but in the dorm we use Minang to remind ourselves who we are.” Thus, Minangkabau serves as a memory marker, a linguistic repository of heritage and belonging.

Ultimately, Minangkabau functions as a horizontal solidarity code, contrasting with the vertical hierarchy symbolized by Arabic. When students switch to their local language, they reaffirm egalitarian relations grounded in emotional intimacy. In this way, Minangkabau becomes a language of warmth that counterbalances the rigidity of formal linguistic systems within the highly disciplined educational setting of the pesantren.

Linguistic Negotiation and the Formation of *Santri* Identity: From Piety to Cosmopolitanism

The identity of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar is not static or monolithic; rather, it emerges through an ongoing social process negotiated through language. Within the multilingual ecology of the pesantren, *santri* navigate among multiple value systems and ideological orders: religiosity embedded in Arabic, national rationality represented through Indonesian, and emotional as well as cultural intimacy articulated in Minangkabau. These languages function not merely as tools of communication but as symbolic terrains where *santri* negotiate who they are, to whom they speak, and how they wish to be perceived. This process of linguistic negotiation produces a hybrid identity that connects piety with cosmopolitanism, a phenomenon that may be conceptualized as linguistic piety negotiation.

Field observations revealed fluid and context-sensitive code-switching practices. In tafsir (Qur’anic interpretation) classes, students used Arabic with utmost seriousness,

signaling proximity to the authoritative sources of Islamic knowledge. However, upon leaving the classroom and interacting with peers in the dormitory corridors, they effortlessly shifted to Indonesian to discuss general schoolwork, and then to Minangkabau when joking during meals. These language shifts not only demonstrate linguistic flexibility but also mark transformations in social persona. When speaking Arabic, *santri* perform the persona of pious learners; in Indonesian, they embody the rational modern student; and in Minangkabau, they enact a local self marked by humor, intimacy, and warmth.

One student, R., stated, “When we use Arabic in class, it feels more respectful and scholarly, but outside, speaking Minangkabau feels like being myself.” This statement reflects a metalinguistic awareness that each language carries distinct ideological and affective values. Language choice thus becomes a way to regulate social and symbolic distance between the “sacred” and the “profane.” Arabic affords a sense of closeness to religious authority, Indonesian provides access to national modernity, and Minangkabau restores local intimacy. As Fong (2019) conceptualizes, this situation constitutes a translanguaging space, a social arena in which individuals merge linguistic, cultural, and ideological resources to construct complex and dynamic identities.

Evening observations in student discussion forums vividly illustrate this negotiation process. During a small debate on “Islam and Nationalism,” students alternated between Arabic for quoting scripture, Indonesian for rational argumentation, and Minangkabau to close the session with camaraderie. Such seamless transitions reveal that *santri* perceive no rigid boundary between religious, national, and local domains. Instead, they mobilize linguistic repertoires strategically to strengthen their positionality within discourse. As Li Wei (2022) explains, translanguaging is not merely the use of multiple languages but a social act that generates new spaces for identity formation and negotiation.

In everyday interaction, language also mediates relations of power and authority. In the presence of teachers (*ustaz*), Arabic serves as a language of respect and discipline. During a *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) lesson, one student responded to a question using Arabic quotations, even though an Indonesian answer would have sufficed. The *ustaz* praised the student, saying, “Anta fahimtum jayyidan,” reaffirming the symbolic prestige of Arabic. Yet immediately after class, the same student switched to Indonesian to joke about the complexity of Arabic terms, then slipped into Minangkabau when chatting with his roommate. This linguistic choreography underscores how *santri* use language not only to communicate but also to maintain honor, display competence, and negotiate social position between institutional authority and peer community.

This phenomenon exemplifies what Verge et al. (2018) describe as decolonial multilingualism, where individuals in postcolonial contexts such as Indonesia do not merely reproduce inherited language ideologies, such as the dominance of Arabic as the emblem of religious truth, but reinterpret and recontextualize them. *Santri* are not passive followers of institutional linguistic norms; they actively combine languages to reflect their dual identities as religiously devout and modern Indonesian citizens. Thus, linguistic negotiation becomes ideological negotiation, bridging Islamic piety, Indonesian nationalism, and the enduring

localism of Minangkabau identity.

An interview with N., a senior student, reinforced this awareness: “Using Arabic is important to understand religion, but if it’s only Arabic, it feels disconnected from the outside world.” This reflection highlights the critical stance *santri* take toward the linguistic hierarchies of pesantren education. While Arabic proficiency symbolizes religious authority, it can also limit engagement with the broader social world. Consequently, Indonesian is adopted in student organizations and public discussions as a means of negotiating openness to modernity, while Minangkabau serves as an emotional anchor that preserves social rootedness.

Observations of organizational meetings among *santri* show that Indonesian functions as the primary language for writing minutes, planning programs, and managing events. It operates as a “language of rationality,” marking *santri* as capable of systematic and administrative reasoning. Yet, in moments of tension, they revert to Minangkabau for humor or solidarity, for instance, when one member jokingly remarked, “Iyo lah, indak usah serius bana, santai dulu lah.” Such shifts between formal and local registers demonstrate *santri*’s sociolinguistic intelligence in managing diverse social identities, religious, national, and cultural, simultaneously.

Identity negotiation also manifests in public performances. During khutbah (Friday sermon) practice or speech contests, Arabic often appears in the opening quotations of Qur’anic verses, followed by the main discourse in Indonesian. Some conclude with Minangkabau phrases when addressing regional peers. This layered linguistic structure demonstrates not only compliance with religious norms but also the integration of national and cultural dimensions, revealing that *santri* identity is not fragmented but multi-layered and complementary.

Analytically, the process of linguistic piety negotiation illustrates how *santri* balance competing ideological demands within pesantren life. On one hand, they are expected to embody disciplined piety through Arabic, the language of sacred knowledge. On the other, they must engage with national rationality via Indonesian and sustain local emotional belonging through Minangkabau. This negotiation is perpetual and recursive, performed in every linguistic interaction. As Anderson (2019) and O’Brien et al. (2020) note, such translanguaging spaces enable individuals to “become” something new without severing ties to their origins.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that linguistic practices at Pondok Pesantren Modern Terpadu Al-Kautsar Al-Akbar function not merely as instruments of communication but as social arenas where *santri* actively negotiate their religious, national, and cultural identities. Arabic, Indonesian, and Minangkabau operate as symbolic resources representing the religious, rational, and emotional dimensions of *santri* life, while fluid language shifts reveal their reflexive capacity to navigate multiple ideological orders. Through the lens of linguistic piety negotiation, this study argues that piety in modern pesantren is not confined to ritual

devotion but is enacted through linguistic choices that balance religious authority with civic nationalism. The findings challenge the notion of *santri* as passive subjects of institutional language ideologies, instead portraying them as creative and critical agents constructing hybrid selves at the intersection of spirituality and modernity. By doing so, this research contributes to broader sociolinguistic discussions on the relationship between language, religion, and identity in contemporary Muslim societies, showing that modern Islamic educational spaces in Indonesia serve as dynamic arenas for the production and negotiation of translingual, reflexive, and ideologically nuanced identities.

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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