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# "Polite but Firm": Critical Discourse Analysis of Kang Dedi Mulyadi's Politeness Strategy in Responding to Public Criticism

**Dwi Santoso**
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia

Email: dwi@pbi.uad.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

This article applies Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how West Java Governor Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) responds to public criticism through the strategic use of language. Analyzing ten statements from social media and online news outlets (2024–2025), the study finds that KDM employs mitigating, persuasive, and assertive politeness strategies to maintain authority while building public trust. These strategies reflect a model of ethical and communicative leadership that transforms criticism into constructive dialogue. Rather than silencing dissent, KDM uses language to manage tension, clarify responsibilities, and engage the public in meaningful ways. The study highlights how discourse can function as a tool for both power negotiation and reputation building in Indonesia's digital political sphere. It also demonstrates that politeness in political communication is not just etiquette, but a strategic means of navigating public discourse. This approach offers valuable insights into how leaders can maintain legitimacy and credibility in the social media age.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Politeness Strategy, Political Communication, Communicative Leadership, Digital Public Sphere

## INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital political communication, the challenges facing leaders concern not only policy implementation but also image management and ethics in the face of criticism (Haryatmoko, 2021; Fauziah, 2021). An increasingly open public sphere forces politicians not only to pretend to be populist but also to maintain honesty in their communication. In this context, the ability to respond to criticism with polite yet authoritative language is one of the keys to effective political communication in this era of disruption.

As a public figure who actively engages with the public both in person and digitally, Kang Dedi Mulyadi (KDM) demonstrates a communication style that emphasizes politeness and empathy while remaining assertive (Azizah and Surya, 2020; Santoso, 2023). He is known for his ability to frame criticism as part of a healthy public dialogue while simultaneously emphasizing ethical and institutional boundaries. The purpose of this study is to analyze the linguistic strategies employed by the KDM, particularly in response to criticism, using the AWK approach (Fairclough, 1995). This analysis is important in demonstrating how power, legitimacy, and public image are constructed through linguistic practices in the context of local Indonesian politics.

**Literature Review**

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a foundation for understanding how utterances are used to maintain credibility between speakers and listeners in interactions. In a political context, this strategy is crucial for maintaining credibility and public support (Fitriani & Zahra, 2021; Azizah & Surya, 2020). Politeness strategies are understood not only as an effort to avoid conflict but also as a tool for building balanced social relationships between leaders and the public. When applied appropriately, politeness can increase the effectiveness of political messages, soften criticism, and strengthen a leader's position in sensitive or controversial communication situations. Therefore, this strategy has pragmatic and strategic value in modern political communication practices.

Within the framework of political pragmatics, the use of politeness strategies also helps leaders foster an ethos of empathetic, rational, and responsible communicators. Politeness is part of a deliberative strategy for building social consensus without sacrificing authority. Furthermore, this strategy reflects the leader's linguistic proficiency in reading the social context and adapting their speaking style to the audience's dynamics. In a multicultural society such as Indonesia, where politeness norms are highly valued, the use of politeness strategies helps strengthen symbolic closeness between leaders and the public. This also demonstrates that politeness is not only an ethical aspect but also an effective rhetorical tactic, allowing for the assertion of power in a persuasive and inclusive manner. This view is consistent with Santoso's (2023) analysis, which considers politeness a key tool in designing leadership discourse, particularly in local political contexts that require emotional closeness and moral clarity between leaders and the public.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model analyzes texts (utterances), discursive practices (text production and consumption), and social practices (power structures represented in language). This approach is relevant for unraveling the dynamics of ideology and power in political communication (Rahmawati & Hartono, 2024; Hanif, 2023; Wardani, 2021). This analysis allows us to understand how language is not merely a tool for individual expression but also a means of creating, maintaining, or even challenging existing power structures. In a political context, each statement has an ideological dimension that represents particular interests, both implicitly and explicitly. Therefore, CDA is an essential critical tool for exploring the relationship between language, power, and legitimacy in public leadership discourse.

Using this approach, we can identify how symbolic representations of power are constructed and maintained through language that appears neutral but is in fact loaded with ideological significance. In the context of political leadership, such as KDM, CDA can reveal how leaders not only respond linguistically to criticism, but also shape socio-political realities through the construction of their chosen discourse. This analysis does not stop at the textual level, but also involves mapping the ideology hidden behind word choice, sentence structure, and tone of speech. Through this understanding, language is positioned as a symbolic force that plays a role in shaping the structure of power relations, building legitimacy, and directing public perception of the leader's role and image.

Indonesian Political Communication

Recent literature has highlighted the increasing use of a "polite but effective" communication style by Indonesian public figures in the face of criticism and social pressure (Nugroho, 2023; Setiawan, 2022; Kusumaningrum & Wulandari, 2024). This communication style reflects leaders' adaptive efforts to meet increasingly critical societal demands in the digital age. Polite language that still conveys a firm message is considered more socially acceptable and reflects mature political rhetoric. In practice, this approach is often used to mitigate conflicts, maintain public stability, and empower leaders in a stressful and easily volatile communication environment. This phenomenon is a key element in the transformation of contemporary political communication strategies in Indonesia.

The "polite but effective" approach also demonstrates a paradigm shift in political communication from instructional to more dialogical and participatory. This is particularly important given the decline in public trust in formal political institutions. This communication style enables leaders to become not only authorities but also discursive actors, capable of engaging the emotional, moral, and rational dimensions of society. Therefore, politeness combined with assertiveness is not only a linguistic strategy but also a political instrument for building strong symbolic bonds with people.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with an AWK approach. The data consist of 10 KDM utterances collected from the official TikTok account @dedi.mulyadi (TikTok, 2024), YouTube, and online news portals throughout 2024–2025 (MetroTV, 2025; Alinea.id, 2025; Kompas TV, 2025). Data selection was purposeful, taking into account the context of the utterances, which directly respond to public criticism and reflect KDM's characteristic communication style. Data collection techniques involved utterance transcription, video documentation, and observation of public comments as a discursive response.

The analysis was conducted by identifying politeness strategies and their discursive impact on political image formation (Putri, 2024). Each utterance was analyzed along Fairclough's three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice, to explore hidden meanings, power structures, and the role of language in constructing a leader's image. The analysis process also included identifying linguistic devices signaling politeness (such as forms of address, modality, and mitigation strategies) as well as critically examining how the utterances were received and interpreted by audiences. Data validity was enhanced through triangulation of sources and theories, and interpretive coherence was verified through expert discussions and rereading by the researcher to ensure consistent interpretations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Ten Polite Utterances and Strategies from Kang Dedi Mulyadi

| No | KDM's Utterances | Politeness Strategies & Discursive Explanation | Sources |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | "Kalau mau kritik saya, lu kasih tahu saya solusi." (Indonesian) | The strategy of positive politeness: encouraging cooperation while maintaining the questioner's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In AWK, this is an example of a | TikTok, 2024 |

"If you want to criticize me, you have to give me a solution." (English Translation)

discursive practice that frames criticism as an opportunity rather than a threat (Fairclough, 1995; Fitriani & Zahra, 2021). This statement suggests that criticism without solutions is perceived as destructive, whereas criticism with solutions is an element of democratic collaboration. This strategy constitutes a form of participatory communication that not only maintains the leader's image as open to suggestions but also sets boundaries for aggressive criticism. Conversely, this approach also emphasizes the leader's hierarchical position by filtering criticism based on its constructiveness, which, from Fairclough's (1995) perspective, is a practice of power representation.

2. "Kalau bodoh tuh nurut, kalau pintar, ya ngerti tugas siapa." (Indonesian)
"If you're stupid, you'll obey, if you're smart, you'll understand whose job it is." (English Translation)

Mitigative satire strategy: creating a boundary between blind obedience and participatory intelligence. Satire as a tool to assert authoritative positions that remain communicative (Yuliana & Nisa, 2023; Nugroho, 2023). In the context of pragmatics, this satire functions as a form of expression of indirect assertiveness that still maintains social relations. Within the AWK framework, the use of this utterance shows a flexible power structure, one that is not solely repressive, but is able to educate the public in a humorous and dialogic way. The position of the leader is maintained, but communication is managed through rhetorical techniques that are inclusive and appealing to digital audiences (Fairclough, 1995; Hanif, 2023).

Alinea.id, 2025

3. "Jalannya jalan kabupaten, kunaon ngambek ka aing?" (Indonesian and Sundanese)
"The road is a district road, why are sulking to me?" (English Translation)

Logical transfer of responsibility (redirection strategy). In the AWK, this constitutes a social practice that dismantles the structure of public accountability (Hanif, 2023; Prasetyo, 2020). This statement pragmatically attempts to clarify roles and powers that are often misunderstood by the public. This strategy serves to highlight the boundaries of accountability between provincial and district authorities while avoiding generalizations and biased accusations. In the context of Fairclough (1995), this action exemplifies a discursive practice that addresses the tension between

CirebonersID, 2025

public perception and administrative structures and shapes the leader's identity as a transparent yet assertive communicator.

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|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | "Saya tidak akan pernah mendengarkan ancaman... Tapi saya akan dengar kritik yang membangun." (Indonesian) "I will never listen to threats... But I will listen to constructive criticism." (English Translation) | The strategy of negative politeness: maintaining authority without ignoring aspirations. Avoiding face-threatening acts by engaging in asymmetric dialogue (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Haryatmoko, 2021). This finding argues that KDM sets boundaries against pressure and threats while simultaneously opening dialogue by being open to constructive criticism. This strategy is selective but preserves face for the listener, especially in the context of hierarchical relationships between leaders and people. Within AWK, this stance is part of a discursive practice that demonstrates resistance to domination without blocking access to public participation, thus creating inclusive and deliberative power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Benkler, 2022). | MetroTV, 2025 |
| 5 | "Miskin jangan bergaya kaya." (Indonesian) "Poor don't act rich." (English) | Public moral assertion through direct discourse. Their discourse demonstrates symbolic authority in regulating social behavior (Nugroho, 2023; Setiawan, 2022). This statement pragmatically demonstrates an affirmative stance toward social values considered deviant, without personalizing specific individuals. This strategy emphasizes the limits of social norms and demonstrates the leader's role as guardian of collective morality. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this statement can be read as a form of symbolic domination legitimized through direct and ethically nuanced language, as well as a pedagogical instrument that directs public behavior (Fairclough, 1995; Haryatmoko, 2021). | Alinea.id, 2025 |
| 6 | "Ini kerja nyata. Transparansi itu kekuatan." (Indonesian) | Reframing: Recasting the critique of image-building as a real work ethic (Fairclough, 1995; Haryatmoko, 2021). This statement contains a strategy of redefining the accusation of image-building as something negative, emphasizing that openness and | TikTok, 2025 |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | "This is real work. Transparency is power." (English Translation) | transparency are tangible forms of leadership integrity and accountability. Within the AWK framework, this is a discursive practice that reconstructs the meaning of critique while demonstrating the use of symbolic power to create new legitimacy for public action (Hanif, 2023; Kusumaningrum & Wulandari, 2024). This strategy also reflects an understanding of the dynamics of public perception in digital political communication. | |
| 7 | "Orang nomor satu di Jabar harus bisa memberi rasa aman." (Indonesian) "The number one person in West Java must be able to provide a sense of security." (English translation) | Representation of the leader's protective role: a strategy for constructing the legitimacy of authority (Latif, 2020; Fauziah, 2021). This statement emphasizes the leader's responsibility as a guardian of order and protector of society. In the context of politeness theory, this strategy shapes positive perceptions of the leader, who is symbolically present in the lives of citizens. Discursively, this is part of the practice of producing legitimacy through language that builds a sense of security and trust. In AWK, this representation demonstrates the consolidation of power through the image of a paternalistic figure who responds to social unrest, reinforcing hierarchical relationships while simultaneously being perceived as close to the public (Fairclough, 1995; Wardani, 2021). | MetroTV, 2025 |
| 8 | "...kalau itu bermanfaat bagi kepentingan masyarakat Jabar, saya terbuka." (Indonesian) "...if it is beneficial for the interests of the people of West Java, I am open." (English Translation) | Selective politeness is based on values of social utility. It welcomes constructive criticism (Rahmawati & Hartono, 2024; Alamsyah, 2022). This statement demonstrates a leader's preference for criticism that is not merely reactive but also productive. This strategy falls under the category of selective political discourse, in which public participation is positioned as valuable if it meets the requirements of positive contributions to the common good. From the AWK perspective, this practice represents a process of filtering public input as a means of maintaining discursive control without blocking channels of participation. This demonstrates a power relationship that does not directly marginalize criticism but rather renegotiates the terms of citizen | TikTok, 2025 |

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| 9 | "Perbedaan APBD dan bansos… tidak ada lagi sesat pikir." (Indonesian) "The difference between the regional budget and social assistance… there is no longer any fallacy." (English Translation) | Affirmative education: strengthening the clarity of fiscal frameworks while improving public understanding (Prasetyo, 2020; Santoso, 2023). This statement demonstrates a pedagogical strategy in political communication, in which leaders act as facilitators of public literacy in financial policy. From a pragmatic perspective, this action reinforces the leader's ethos as a trusted source of information. Meanwhile, within the AWK framework, it reflects a knowledge-based power relationship, in which clarification of the terms APBD and social assistance serves as a tool to combat discursive confusion that could undermine government legitimacy. This strategy also contains elements of technocratic representation that strengthen the leader's position as a policy communicator (Fairclough, 1995; Wardani, 2021). | Kompas TV, 2025 |
| 10 | "Saya open untuk kolaborasi." (Indonesian) "I am open to collaboration." (English translation) | Positive politeness is based on openness and citizen participation. In CDA, it is a form of communicative and egalitarian leadership (Azizah & Surya, 2020; Kusumaningrum & Wulandari, 2024). This assertion demonstrates a participatory strategy in political communication that reinforces the leader's image as a facilitator of dialogue and cooperation. Within politeness theory, this openness reflects respect for public aspirations without ignoring institutional boundaries. Discursively, this strategy constructs an image of egalitarian leadership that rejects a top-down approach and favors a deliberative one. From the perspective of AWK, this action strengthens the structure of democratic discourse by inserting collaborative practices into generally hierarchical power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Wardani, 2021). | Wikipedia, 2025 |

(The text "engagement in the public sphere (Fairclough, 1995; Wardani, 2021)." appears at the top of the column, continuing from a previous row.)

Discussions

The KDM strategy demonstrates the ability to express assertiveness in a polite manner through:

Threat Reduction: Criticism transforms into cooperation (Rofiq, 2023). This demonstrates the judicious use of positive politeness to reduce social tension, especially when criticism is expressed openly in digital spaces. This strategy demonstrates KDM's ability to transform potential conflicts into productive dialogues.

Social Responsiveness: Effective engagement and fostering the image of the leader as a servant (Latif, 2020). This approach demonstrates a dialogic relationship that strengthens horizontal trust without neglecting vertical power structures. KDM describes leaders as facilitators and mediators of people's aspirations.

Legitimacy Enhancement: Through role validation and public education (Prasetyo, 2020; Yuliana and Nisa, 2023). KDM not only maintains symbolic power but also reproduces the discourse of leadership as an educational entity. It reinforces the perception of leadership as something present not only in symbols and places, but also in news narratives.

The results of this analysis demonstrate that KDM's communication strategy incorporates civility as a discursive technique and political tool. In various situations that provoke public criticism, he does not immediately adopt a defensive or repressive style, but constructs a narrative that embraces participation, clarifies positions, and educates public opinion. In this way, KDM manages the symbolic crisis in a constructive and communicative manner.

In Fairclough's view, this strategy extends beyond the textual level to encompass discursive practices, encompassing the creation of public messages and social practices that reflect value systems, norms, and the distribution of power. KDM not only creates civil discourse but also manages it to maintain symbolic and strategic control. His self-presentation as an open yet assertive leader, communicative yet consistent, demonstrates his success in transforming his leadership image through discourse that is widely accepted by the public.

Analyzing the effectiveness of this approach, one can conclude that the strategy of pragmatic politeness in the political context is not only a linguistic instrument, but also a legitimization tool that plays an important role in shaping perceptions, maintaining communication stability and strengthening cohesion between leaders and society.

## CONCLUSION

Kang Dedi Mulyadi developed a political communication model that balances politeness and assertiveness. This strategy builds audience trust and demonstrates an adaptive and contextualized ethic of political communication. KDM uses the power of language as a tool to strengthen symbolic positions without alienating interlocutors or critical audiences. Its approach reflects a consistent commitment to effectively managing criticism, shaping political narratives through educational, solution-oriented, and meaningful language.

From the perspective of pragmatic and critical discourse analysis, this strategy provides an effective model for building cooperative and deliberative power relations. By using strategic yet ethical language, KDM is able to present political communication that avoids open conflict while simultaneously presenting a firm and principled stance. This approach demonstrates that civility is not a form of weakness, but rather a rhetorical force that can influence public opinion and enhance political legitimacy.

This research contributes to research on political pragmatics and the representation of power in Indonesian digital discourse. By analyzing KDM's linguistic practices, we can understand how ethical, inclusive, and strategic political communication can serve as a model for coping with complex social dynamics. These findings can also serve as a reference for other public figures in developing civil, effective,

and efficient political communication, particularly in the context of digital democracy, which requires accountability, transparency, and sensitivity to people's aspirations

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