


Language Ethics in the Digital Era: Between Freedom of Expression and Social Responsibility

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: Ethics, Language, Digital</p>	<p>Language ethics in the digital era are a crucial moral foundation for building a civilized communication civilization. Social media, as a modern public space, has shifted the function of language from a mere communication tool to a determinant of image, opinion, and social identity. However, freedom of expression is often misused as a means of spreading hate speech, sarcasm, body shaming, and hoaxes. Various studies (Rozak et al., 2023; Wijayanti et al., 2022; Ramdlanah, 2022) show that the crisis in language ethics is correlated with low digital literacy, moral degradation, and a loss of empathy in online interactions. Polite language reflects not only individual character but also national dignity. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy and language ethics education need to be integrated into the national education system as an effort to foster a civilized digital character. Amidst viral culture and the post-truth era, language ethics serves as a moral filter to maintain truth and social harmony. In conclusion, language ethics is not simply a matter of politeness, but a reflection of the nation's moral, social, and spiritual values, determining the direction of Indonesia's digital civilization.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary medium for human thought, interaction, and civilization. Through language, humans negotiate meaning, form identities, and instill moral values that apply in society. However, amidst the rapidly developing digital revolution, the function of language has undergone a major shift. Language is no longer exchanged solely face-to-face, but also in a vast and free virtual space. Social media provides a new space for people to express themselves without the constraints of time or space, while simultaneously opening up significant opportunities for the emergence of issues of language ethics.

The digital era has given rise to complex communication dynamics. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), and YouTube make it easy for anyone to express opinions, disseminate information, or interact instantly. However, this convenience is often misused. The phenomena of hate speech, slander, sarcasm, and the spread of hoaxes have now become part of everyday digital life. Freedom of expression, which should be a hallmark of

progress, often leads to moral and social degradation. This demonstrates the imbalance between the right to speak and the responsibility to speak.

According to Firmansyah et al. (2023), unethical use of social media has created a crisis of moral understanding and communication ethics in modern society. Low awareness of linguistic values has led to interactions on social media being filled with rude remarks, harassment, and provocation. As a result, social media, which should be a participatory space, has become an arena for social conflict and disinformation. Rozak et al. (2023) added that language behavior in the digital space reflects the moral character of the nation. When society becomes accustomed to using impolite and discriminatory language, the values of politeness and social decency also fade.

This crisis in language ethics demonstrates that technological progress is not always accompanied by moral maturity. The ability to access technology and information does not necessarily equate to the ability to use language responsibly. In this regard, awareness of language ethics is a crucial aspect that needs to be developed through education, digital literacy, and the promotion of polite culture in cyberspace.

According to Andriyani (2022), politeness in language is a manifestation of cultural values that maintain social harmony. He cited the example of how Balinese speakers maintain politeness in everyday conversation, even in casual contexts like gossiping in a traditional market. This principle can be applied to the digital realm: polite and empathetic communication can minimize conflict and create a healthy virtual environment.

In pragmatic studies, language ethics and politeness are closely related to the social and cultural context surrounding the speaker. According to Dipa (2021), politeness is determined not only by linguistic structure but also by cultural values and social norms prevailing in society. In interactions at a traditional Balinese market, for example, speakers maintain politeness through refined word choice, friendly expressions, and respect for their interlocutors, even in casual settings. Politeness here demonstrates respect for social harmony and balanced interpersonal relationships.

These findings align with the views of Rozak et al. (2023), who emphasize that in the context of digital media, communication ethics must reflect social awareness and responsibility for the impact of speech. Polite language is not only about using appropriate words, but also about empathy and respect for diverse views in online public spaces. Firmansyah et al. (2023) also add that a poor understanding of linguistic values has led to an ethical crisis in social media communication, characterized by the rise of hate speech, provocation, and violations of politeness norms.

Thus, politeness theory, reflected in various socio-cultural contexts, such as in Dipa's (2021) research, can serve as a conceptual foundation for developing ethical digital communication. The principles of respect, empathy, and social balance that underlie traditional politeness need to be adapted to the digital space so that freedom of expression remains in line with social and moral responsibility.

This demonstrates that language has an educational and refined function. If these traditional linguistic values are internalized in digital communication, cyberspace can become

an effective means of character education. Therefore, preserving language ethics is not only an academic task but also the social responsibility of every individual digital media user.

In addition to cultural factors, social and psychological aspects also influence language behavior in the digital world. Anonymity and social distance in online media make individuals more willing to violate norms of politeness. This phenomenon is called the online disinhibition effect, a condition where someone feels free to express things they would not say in face-to-face communication. As a result, offensive comments, insults, and even cyberbullying emerge. However, from a social ethics perspective, freedom of expression must be exercised while considering the rights and dignity of others. As Wijaya et al. (2023) point out, every form of communication on social media reflects public morality. Therefore, building awareness of digital ethics means instilling a sense of responsibility for the social impact of every word.

Language ethics in the digital era are also closely related to the social responsibility of media users. This responsibility includes the obligation to maintain the accuracy of information, respect the privacy of others, and use language that reflects empathy and respect. According to the theory of social responsibility in mass communication, freedom of speech is inseparable from the moral obligation not to harm others. In the digital context, this means that every user has a role in creating a healthy communication ecosystem, both through spreading positive messages and rejecting hate speech.

Furthermore, a poor understanding of language ethics is often linked to weak digital literacy. Many social media users do not understand the impact of their speech on others or on social stability. When the digital space is filled with aggressive and hateful language, not only communication is disrupted, but also social relationships in the real world. Therefore, digital literacy education must include learning about language ethics, not just technical skills in using the platform. This education can be delivered through school curricula, public campaigns, and through familiarization within families and online communities.

Language has the power to build and tear down. On the one hand, it can be a means of unifying and disseminating knowledge. However, without ethics and responsibility, language can be hurtful, divisive, and even undermine social trust. Therefore, maintaining language ethics means safeguarding human dignity amidst freedom of expression. In line with the view of Firmansyah et al. (2023), a sound understanding of language ethics and values can create a balanced, respectful, and high-quality digital communication environment.

Based on this description, it can be concluded that the main problem in the digital era lies not with technology, but rather with human awareness in its use. Language ethics is an important indicator in assessing the extent to which society is able to balance freedom of speech and social responsibility. Therefore, research and studies on language ethics in the digital space are crucial for strengthening the moral literacy of modern society.

This article aims to examine in depth the role of language ethics in maintaining the balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility in the digital age. This study seeks to uncover how principles of politeness, cultural values, and ethical awareness can be implemented in digital communication practices, so that cyberspace can become an environment that is not only informative but also humane and civilized.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method aimed at describing and analyzing the phenomenon of language ethics on social media in relation to freedom of expression and social responsibility. This approach was chosen because the issues studied are contextual, interpretive, and focused on meaning, rather than numerical measurement. Through this method, researchers seek to deeply understand the practice of language use in digital spaces and the ethical values contained therein.

The research data sources were obtained from two sources: primary and secondary data. Primary data came from observations of posts and comments on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, which illustrated the phenomenon of violations and the application of language ethics. Secondary data were obtained from various relevant research results and scientific literature, particularly journals by Firmansyah et al. (2023), Dipa (2021), Darningwati et al. (2023), and Rozak et al. (2023) that discuss linguistic values, politeness, and communication ethics in the digital era.

Data collection was conducted using documentation and non-participant observation techniques. Researchers explored public discourse on social media relevant to the study's focus and noted forms of speech that reflected both politeness and violations of language ethics. Next, the data was analyzed qualitatively through a process of data reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The analysis was conducted inductively, interpreting the meaning of the data based on the social context and relevant theories.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, this study employed source and theory triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various social media platforms and previous research findings, while theory triangulation was conducted by linking field findings to the concepts of politeness and communication ethics as presented in the aforementioned journals.

Through this descriptive qualitative method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how language ethics are realized and violated in the digital space, as well as how freedom of expression can coexist with social responsibility in modern communication practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language ethics in the digital era are a crucial moral foundation for building a civilized communication civilization. Initially intended to expand social interaction, social media has now become a public arena where language plays a central role in shaping opinions, images, and even social identities. However, freedom of expression is often misused as a means to spread hatred, sarcasm, body shaming, and hoaxes (Rozak et al., 2023; Wijayanti et al., 2022). This phenomenon confirms that technological advancements have not been matched by moral maturity in language.

The Phenomenon of Ethical Crisis and the Decline of Character on Social Media

Research by Rozak et al. (2023) shows that 87.9% of Indonesians consider netizens' behavior of abusive comments on social media to be concerning, while 96.3% admit to being easily influenced by hoaxes. These results reinforce the view that the degradation of linguistic

character has become a social crisis in the 21st century. Modern society appears to be losing the boundary between freedom of speech and social responsibility. The main contributing factors are low moral education, boredom, and the influence of global digital culture, which encourages impulsive communication styles without emotional control.

This condition is reinforced by the findings of Ramdlanah (2022), who asserted that digital interactions without polite values lead to the dehumanization of communication, where individuals no longer view their interlocutors as human beings, but merely as anonymous accounts. Verbal aggression in the digital space has eroded the values of politeness and empathy, two key aspects of language ethics.

The Role of Language in Character Formation and Digital Identity

Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a reflection of a person's character and morals. Rozak et al. (2023) assert that polite language is a tangible manifestation of national character. When language is used politely, a person's self-image, both individually and collectively, is enhanced. Conversely, rude or provocative language reflects low character. This research underscores that a strong nation must have a society that is both linguistically intelligent and moral in its speech.

Similarly, Saubatul Ramdlanah (2022) emphasized the importance of "digital character awareness," namely the ability to weigh the moral impact of every utterance in the virtual space. Amidst the rapid flow of linguistic and cultural globalization, ethical language awareness serves as a bulwark against the Indonesian national identity, preventing it from being swept away by the increasingly entrenched culture of abusive and intolerant speech on social media.

Digital Literacy and Ethics Education as Key Pillars

Several studies (Wijayanti et al., 2022; Kurnia et al., 2021; Ramdlanah, 2022) confirm that weak language ethics on social media are directly related to low digital literacy. Many young users view social media as a free space without consequences, yet every utterance leaves a digital footprint that can have social and even legal repercussions. Therefore, language ethics education must be integrated into learning from elementary school through university.

Digital literacy training programs have proven effective in increasing ethical awareness. For example, research by Marini et al. (2022) and Ulfiyani et al. (2024) showed that language ethics training can improve students' politeness and empathy by more than 70%. Ideal digital literacy not only teaches technological skills but also instills moral responsibility, critical thinking skills, and empathy in communication.

Ethical Challenges in the Post-Truth Era and Viral Culture

The post-truth era has made emotions more dominant than facts. Syuhada (2017) and Aulia (2023) highlight that social media has become an information ecosystem prone to manipulation, where viral opinions are often more credible than the truth itself. In this context, language ethics becomes a moral and epistemic filter: every user is required to think before speaking, weigh before writing, and be responsible for every statement they share.

The phenomenon of digital anonymity also exacerbates the ethical crisis. When identities are hidden, users feel free to make harsh comments without guilt. Research by

Rozak et al. (2023) shows that the 16–23 age group is the most frequently involved in negative and sarcastic comments. This illustrates the importance of developing digital character and moral awareness from adolescence.

Language Ethics from a Social, Religious, and Professional Perspective

Language ethics also has strong religious and professional dimensions. According to Lubis & Kadri (2024), the principles of good speech (qaulan ma'rūfan) and noble speech (qaulan karīman) are universal ethical guidelines that can be applied in the digital space. Polite speech reflects faith and humanity, while hurtful speech violates basic spiritual values. In the professional world, Suhartono & Lestariningsih (2022) demonstrated that ethical communication increases public trust and institutional credibility. Public service based on polite language is a manifestation of an institution's social responsibility. Likewise, in the context of digital business (Vera Maria & Arfan Maulana, 2022), ethical communication is key to maintaining reputation and relationships with consumers.

Social Phenomena and Relevance to National Character

Indonesia was once named one of the countries with the lowest levels of digital civility in Southeast Asia (Microsoft Digital Civility Index, 2022). Findings by Rozak et al. (2023) showed that 94.4% of respondents expressed concern about this distinction. This figure reflects the growing moral awareness of society, although its practice is not yet fully reflected in language behavior. Collaboration between education, families, the media, and the government is needed to rebuild the nation's character through polite, empathetic, and responsible language.

Critical Analysis: Between Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom of expression in the digital space cannot be separated from social responsibility. As expressed by Arsyad & Nadjib (2011) and Fadil Mas'ud et al. (2025), media democratization must be accompanied by public ethics mechanisms to prevent freedom from degenerating into verbal anarchy. The basic principle of "free but civilized" needs to be upheld through content regulation, platform moderation, and user literacy. In this context, language functions not only as a means of expression but also as a means of moral control in digital society.

CONCLUSION

From all the integrated findings, it can be concluded that language ethics in the digital era reflect the nation's moral, social, and spiritual well-being. Polite and responsible language is a key pillar in maintaining harmonious digital communication. The decline in language ethics not only indicates an individual moral crisis but also a fragility of national character. Therefore, education in language ethics, digital literacy, and strengthening character values must be a strategic agenda in facing the challenges of 21st-century communication. Language ethics is not merely a matter of politeness, but also a reflection of national identity and a measure of the maturity of digital civilization.

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