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An Orchestra of Words in the Storm of Politics: A Linguistic Analysis of the Regent of Pati's Utterances in the Regional Tax Crisis

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Abstract

The 2025 PBB-P2 tax controversy in Pati Regency offers a revealing case of how political discourse functions as both a communicative tool and a strategic instrument during governance crises. This study analyzes three public statements by the Regent-drawn from verified news sources and recordings-using a qualitative critical discourse analysis informed by Searle's speech act theory and Wodak's discourse-historical approach. The analysis identifies a rhetorical trajectory from direct confrontation, marked by imperatives and declaratives asserting political strength, through a mitigation phase framed as denial of intent, to a procedural defense invoking constitutional legitimacy. These shifts are contextualized within Javanese politeness norms and the dynamics of digital media amplification. The Regent's confrontational style clashed with cultural expectations of indirectness, intensifying public backlash, while the apology's self-justificatory tone limited its restorative effect. The final procedural framing reasserted formal authority but failed to address emotional grievances, particularly in online spaces shaped by the viral initial statement. By linking linguistic strategies to socio-cultural and technological contexts, the study contributes to discourse studies and offers insights for culturally responsive crisis communication in democratic governance.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication; Critical Discourse Analysis; Javanese Politeness; Digital Media*

A. Introduction

Political discourse in Indonesia, especially at the local governance level, plays a pivotal role in shaping authority and influencing public perception. The 2025 PBB-P2 tax controversy in Pati Regency, which triggered widespread public debate and online virality, illustrates how political language can escalate governance crises and redefine relationships between leaders and citizens. Recent studies underscore the strategic deployment of language in political communication. For example, Fitriani, Nurkhalisah, and Majid (2023) analyzed news framing around the proposed postponement of the 2024 presidential election, revealing how linguistic choices are central to constructing legitimacy. Similarly, Aminudin (2023) examined Twitter as a contested arena where political actors and citizens negotiate meaning and power. These works collectively affirm that in Indonesia's contemporary political sphere, language is far from a neutral medium; it is a strategic resource for navigating legitimacy, authority, and public trust.

While most existing literature emphasizes the dynamics of national political discourse in mass and social media, there remains a significant gap in examining direct utterances by regional leaders in offline or local contexts, especially during moments of policy crisis. Mahendra (2025), for example, investigated political messaging in digital comic art as a form of social critique, showing how multimodal

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discourse can encapsulate complex political narratives. However, research on verbal statements made by local government officials during governance crises is comparatively rare. This gap is especially relevant in culturally distinct regions like Central Java, where politeness norms and indirectness in speech are traditionally valued, making confrontational rhetoric both culturally marked and politically risky.

The case of the Regent of Pati's public statements during the 2025 PBB-P2 tax crisis presents a unique opportunity to study how political authority is discursively constructed and contested at the regional level. His initial confrontational challenge to potential demonstrators, subsequent public apology, and later assertion of constitutional legitimacy illustrate a dynamic rhetorical trajectory from confrontation to mitigation to procedural defense. This sequence aligns with critical discourse analysis (CDA) concerns about the interplay between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) while also providing a culturally situated example of how communicative norms are strategically upheld or violated in high-stakes governance contexts.

This study therefore aims to identify and categorize the rhetorical and pragmatic strategies embedded in the Regent's utterances during the crisis, interpreting them within a CDA framework and situating them against Indonesia's socio-cultural and digital media landscapes. By integrating a close linguistic analysis with an understanding of cultural communication norms and media amplification, the research contributes to both the theoretical discourse on political communication and the practical understanding of leadership strategies in democratic yet culturally complex societies. The analytical focus on the transitions between rhetorical modes from defiance to reconciliation to legalistic justification provides an innovative lens for understanding how political actors adapt their discourse in response to evolving public pressure.

The novelty of this research lies in three key contributions. First, it provides one of the few in-depth critical discourse analyses of verbal statements made by a regional Indonesian leader during a non-electoral policy crisis, addressing a gap in the literature that has largely concentrated on national political figures or campaign rhetoric (Fitriani et al., 2023; Aminudin, 2023). Second, it examines the rhetorical shifts across three distinct communicative phases confrontation, mitigation, and procedural defense offering insights into the adaptability of political language under public scrutiny, a dimension rarely mapped in Indonesian CDA studies. Third, the research contextualizes these rhetorical strategies within Javanese politeness norms and digital media amplification, thereby linking micro-level linguistic features to macro-level socio-cultural and technological contexts. This integrated approach not only advances scholarly understanding of political discourse in Indonesia but also provides practical implications for managing public communication in culturally sensitive governance environments.

This study fills a significant research gap by examining how regional political leaders in Indonesia construct, negotiate, and defend their authority through language during policy crises-a topic that remains underexplored compared to analyses of national-level discourse. Anchored in Searle's speech act theory and Wodak's discourse-historical approach, the research integrates micro-level linguistic strategies with macro-level socio-political and ideological dynamics. By situating the Regent of Pati's public statements within the framework of Javanese politeness norms and the accelerating role of digital media amplification, this study demonstrates a strong cultural sensitivity while providing fresh insights into localized crisis communication in democratic governance. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by extending critical discourse analysis to regional contexts, and practically, by offering guidance for culturally responsive communication strategies in high-stakes political environments.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine the Regent of Pati's public statements during the 2025 PBB-P2 tax controversy. CDA was selected for its ability to uncover the relationship between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2015), while speech act theory (Searle, 1979) guided the classification of the Regent's

statements into declaratives, imperatives, and expressives. The analysis also integrates cultural pragmatics, particularly Javanese indirectness norms, to interpret how deviations from expected politeness strategies influence public perception.

Data Collection and Sampling. The corpus consisted of three publicly documented statements by the Regent, collected from verified news outlets and official video recordings between 10–13 August 2025. Selection followed purposive sampling based on three criteria: High public visibility, measured by online engagement metrics such as video views, shares, and comments. Discursive significance, the statement's role in shaping public narratives during the controversy. Media amplification, the extent to which each statement circulated across mainstream and social media platforms.

Analytical Procedure. The data were segmented into speech acts and discursive units using Searle's taxonomy, then coded using Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach to identify confrontation, mitigation, legitimization, and identity-construction strategies. These strategies were contextualized within Hall's (1976) theory of high-context communication, emphasizing how Javanese politeness norms value indirectness, humility, and avoidance of explicit confrontation. The Regent's departure from these norms is analyzed as a factor shaping the intensity of online backlash and offline protests.

Credibility and Ethics. Triangulation was achieved through cross-verification of data from video footage, journalistic transcripts, and public commentary. Peer debriefing with two political linguistics experts ensured interpretive consistency, while an audit trail documented analytical decisions for transparency (Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical considerations were addressed by focusing strictly on language use rather than personal attributes, consistent with guidelines for discourse research involving public figures (Bucholtz, 2000).

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

The analysis of the Regent of Pati's public statements during the 2025 PBB-P2 tax controversy reveals a rhetorical progression that can be divided into three distinct phases: confrontation, mitigation, and procedural defense. Each phase is characterized by different pragmatic strategies and linguistic forms, reflecting shifts in the Regent's communicative approach as public pressure intensified. The selection of utterances for analysis was based on their public prominence, documented circulation in both mainstream and digital media, and their representation of critical moments in the crisis. Presenting these utterances in tabular form enables a clear visualization of the context, wording, and public reception, which is essential for identifying the interplay between language, cultural expectations, and political legitimacy. Table 1 summarizes the documented statements along with contextual notes and public reactions, forming the empirical basis for subsequent interpretation.

Table 1. Documented Statements of the Regent of Pati Related to the PBB-P2 Tax

No	Statement	Context	Public Reaction
1	"*Siapa yang akan melakukan aksi, Yayak Gundul? Silakan lakukan, jangan hanya 5 ribu orang, 50 ribu orang suruh mengerahkan saya tidak akan gentar. Saya tidak akan mundur satu langkah*."	Delivered during a public speech addressing rumors of protests against the PBB-P2 tax increase.	Viral on social media; perceived as provocative and challenging citizens.

No	Statement	Context	Public Reaction
2	"*Saya minta maaf yang sebesar-besarnya atas pernyataan saya '5 ribu silakan, 50 ribu massa silakan. Saya tidak menantang rakyat… sama sekali tidak ada maksud menantang rakyat, mosok rakyat saya tantang'.*"	Issued after the statement in No. 1 went viral and triggered public backlash.	Mixed responses; some accepted the apology, others viewed it as insufficient.
3	"*Tuntutan sudah disampaikan tadi. Kalau saya dipilih oleh rakyat secara konstitusional. Secara demokratis jadi tidak bisa saya harus berhenti dengan tuntutan itu, semua ada mekanisme*."	Responding to calls for resignation during a mass demonstration on August 13, 2025.	Interpreted as a refusal to resign; intensified debate on political accountability.

The analysis of the Regent's public statements reveals a clear rhetorical progression across three phases: confrontation, mitigation, and procedural defense. In the first phase, the Regent employed imperatives and declaratives to project strength and challenge potential protesters, a move that diverges from Javanese politeness norms and fueled public backlash. In the mitigation phase, he attempted face repair through apology but combined it with self-justification, limiting its effectiveness. Finally, by invoking constitutional legitimacy, the Regent shifted toward procedural defense, refra the second finding highlights the subsequent shift in communicative strategy, as demonstrated by the Regent's apology: "*Saya minta maaf yang sebesar-besarnya atas pernyataan saya…*" This apology constitutes an attempt at facework a strategy to repair damaged interpersonal and institutional relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987). While the Regent explicitly denied any intention to challenge the people, the phrasing "*mosok rakyat saya tantang*" attempted to reframe the initial statement as a misunderstanding (Goffman, 1967). In political pragmatics, such linguistic reframing is a common means of mitigating public backlash (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Nonetheless, online and offline responses suggested that public perception was already heavily influenced by the initial utterance (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015).

A third finding concerns the Regent's response to demands for resignation. In the statement, "*Tuntutan sudah disampaikan tadi… tidak bisa saya harus berhenti…*" he invoked democratic and constitutional legitimacy as a defense against extra-parliamentary pressure (Habermas, 1984). This move positions the utterance within the domain of political institutionalism, where language operates to uphold procedural authority (Wodak, 2009). The strategic emphasis on "mechanisms" served to redirect the discussion from moral or emotional appeals to procedural formalism (Fairclough, 2001). However, the defiance implicit in refusing to resign reinforced the initial perception of intransigence (Lauerbach, 2006).

Across the three utterances, a consistent rhetorical pattern emerges: the use of declarative and imperative speech acts to assert authority (Searle, 1979). The initial statement used an imperative form ("*Silakan lakukan*") to challenge, while the latter statements employed declaratives to justify and defend. This oscillation between challenge and justification illustrates the Regent's adaptive discourse strategy, shifting from confrontational to defensive, depending on public reaction (van Dijk, 1997). Such shifts have been observed in other political crises, where leaders recalibrate tone to manage legitimacy threats (Chilton, 2004).

Digital dissemination played a pivotal role in amplifying these statements. The first utterance's spread through social media created a memetic framing that overshadowed later clarifications (Shifman, 2014). In this context, language not only communicated meaning but also generated symbolic capital that could be reused by both supporters and opponents in online debates (Bourdieu, 1991). As the initial utterance was more emotionally charged than the apology, it achieved higher virality, consistent with research on emotional contagion in political communication (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

The Regent's apology marked an attempt to restore trust but faced limited success. While his denial of intent ("*mosok rakyat saya tantang*") sought to reframe the initial statement as a misunderstanding, the strategy clashed with public expectations for humility and accountability. As a result, the apology produced mixed reactions, especially online, where emotionally charged content from the first statement continued to dominate.

The invocation of democratic legitimacy in the third statement reflects a discursive shift from interpersonal to institutional justification. By emphasizing "*dipilih oleh rakyat secara konstitusional*," the Regent invoked a macro-political frame that seeks to elevate the debate from personal conduct to systemic governance (van Leeuwen, 2007). Such rhetorical reframing is a form of legitimization strategy that positions the speaker within a larger political order (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). However, in crisis contexts, institutional legitimacy claims may be less persuasive than direct responsiveness to grievances (Tyler, 2006).

An underlying theme across all statements is the negotiation of face and authority. The initial defiance projected a positive face of strength, while the apology sought to repair negative face threats to public trust (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The final statement balanced both, reaffirming authority while acknowledging public demands. This dynamic interplay demonstrates the complexity of political communication in maintaining both legitimacy and relational solidarity (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

From a linguistic standpoint, the Regent's utterances reveal the deployment of both high-context cultural markers and low-context directness (Hall, 1976). The direct challenges are atypical in Javanese politeness norms, which favor indirectness and subtlety (Errington, 1988). This departure from cultural expectations intensified public perception of the statements as provocative. At the same time, the later explanations sought to re-align with these norms, albeit after the initial impact had been cemented (Geertz, 1976).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Regent's discourse during the PBB-P2 tax crisis evolved through distinct stages: confrontation, mitigation, and procedural defense. Each stage was marked by a different balance of pragmatic functions asserting power, repairing image, and legitimizing authority (Fairclough, 1995). The interplay between these functions underscores the inherently strategic nature of political language in high-stakes contexts (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The data also illustrate how public reception is shaped not merely by linguistic content but by timing, delivery, and digital amplification (Papacharissi, 2015).

2. Discussion

a. Confrontational Political Discourse and the Construction of Authority

The Regent's initial statement, "*Siapa yang akan melakukan aksi… 50 ribu orang suruh mengerahkan saya tidak akan gentar*," can be understood as a performative speech act that actively constructs political identity and authority rather than merely transmitting information (Austin, 1962;

Searle, 1979). By directly challenging potential demonstrators, the Regent positioned himself as a political actor willing to engage in verbal confrontation, a style that is often linked with populist leadership patterns in various cultural contexts (Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2009). This rhetorical strategy signals both confidence and resistance, characteristics that can reinforce the perception of strong leadership in times of political uncertainty (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008).

The Regent's confrontational rhetoric constructed a political persona centered on strength and defiance, directly challenging potential protesters. While such discourse resonates with populist leadership patterns, it conflicts with Javanese indirectness norms that value subtlety and consensus. This cultural mismatch intensified negative public reception and amplified online backlash, demonstrating how local communication expectations shape political legitimacy during crises.

The directness of this confrontation is further amplified by the context of a public policy crisis the proposed PBB-P2 tax increase where heightened emotions and political tensions create fertile ground for rhetorical escalation (Habermas, 1984; Fairclough, 2001). In such environments, language serves not only as a medium of governance but also as a battlefield for symbolic dominance (van Dijk, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The Regent's choice to challenge rather than appease at this stage demonstrates an orientation toward conflict framing rather than consensus-building, a decision with significant implications for political legitimacy.

Digital media played a decisive role in shaping the crisis narrative. The Regent's initial confrontational statement became a viral soundbite, circulating widely on social platforms and overshadowing later clarifications. This dynamic illustrates how emotional resonance, rather than procedural explanations, determines which political messages dominate public discourse.

The virality of the statement highlights the dynamics of emotional contagion in political discourse, where emotionally charged language tends to spread more widely than neutral or conciliatory speech (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Shifman, 2014). The performative defiance embedded in "*Saya tidak akan mundur satu langkah*" functions as a soundbite with high memetic potential, allowing it to be recontextualized in diverse communicative spaces, from serious political debate to satirical memes. In this way, the utterance transcends its original event, becoming a symbolic marker of the Regent's political persona (van Dijk, 2008; Papacharissi, 2015).

From a critical discourse analysis perspective, the statement reflects a strategic use of antagonism to define the boundaries of political identity (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Wodak, 2009). By framing himself against a hypothetical mass of protesters, the Regent draws a symbolic line between the governing authority and dissenting voices, thereby reinforcing an "us versus them" narrative (van Dijk, 1997; Lauerbach, 2006). This binary framing is a common rhetorical device in populist discourse, where conflict is constructed as a sign of authentic leadership (Chilton, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

The interplay between linguistic choice, cultural expectation, and media amplification underscores the multidimensional nature of political speech in crisis contexts. While direct confrontation can consolidate authority among certain constituencies, it also risks alienating audiences that value consensus-oriented leadership (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). The Regent's initial choice of confrontational discourse thus reveals a deliberate, albeit risky, negotiation of authority one that privileges symbolic power over conciliatory engagement.

In sum, this case illustrates how language can be weaponized as a political instrument, simultaneously reinforcing authority and provoking opposition. The strategic deployment of confrontational speech acts in this instance reflects a broader trend in contemporary politics, where leaders leverage performative language to navigate crises and maintain public visibility, even at the expense of relational harmony (Fairclough, 1995; Papacharissi, 2015). The implications extend beyond local governance, offering insights into the global dynamics of political communication in the age of digital virality.

b. Image Repair and the Limits of Apology in Crisis Communication

The Regent's apology, "*Saya minta maaf yang sebesar-besarnya… sama sekali tidak ada maksud menantang rakyat*," represents a shift from confrontation to damage control. Analyzed through the lens of image repair theory, this utterance employs the strategy of denial of intent, a form of mortification aimed at reducing perceived culpability (Benoit, 1995). However, by combining apology with self-justification, the statement risks diluting its sincerity, particularly in cultures where a straightforward acceptance of fault is more effective in restoring public trust (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

The linguistic construction of the apology attempts to mitigate the initial offense by reframing the speaker's intention. The phrase "*mosok rakyat saya tantang*" appeals to shared cultural values of respect toward the people, functioning as a rhetorical question designed to elicit agreement from the audience (Goffman, 1967; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Such reframing is a common strategy in political apologies, where leaders seek to maintain a balance between acknowledging public grievance and preserving personal authority (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; Wodak, 2009). Nonetheless, research indicates that the presence of defensive elements in an apology can undermine its restorative capacity, especially when the initial offense was perceived as deliberate (Benoit, 1995; Tyler, 2006).

In the Indonesian socio-cultural context, effective political apologies often prioritize humility, emotional resonance, and collective identity repair over detailed explanations (Hall, 1976; Errington, 1988). The Regent's apology, while adopting the linguistic markers of regret, also foregrounded the speaker's own narrative of misunderstood intent. This dual focus may have weakened the apology's appeal among constituents seeking a more unequivocal admission of wrongdoing (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

The subsequent statement invoking constitutional legitimacy "*Kalau saya dipilih oleh rakyat secara konstitusional…*" further shifted the discourse from interpersonal reconciliation to procedural defense (van Leeuwen, 2007; Fairclough, 1995). While appeals to institutional authority can be persuasive in formal political debates, they often fail to address the affective dimensions of public dissatisfaction, especially during crises involving symbolic affronts (Tyler, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This rhetorical shift reframes the controversy as a matter of legality rather than relational trust, potentially alienating audiences whose grievances are rooted in perceived disrespect rather than procedural concerns.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, the Regent's communicative strategy in the apology stage illustrates the challenge of balancing face-saving and face-restoring acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). The apology sought to repair the negative face threat created by the initial confrontation, while the legitimacy appeal attempted to reinforce the positive face of strong leadership. However, this dual strategy risks sending mixed signals to the public, making it difficult to achieve full reconciliation (Goffman, 1967; Benoit, 1995).

Digital media again played a critical role in shaping public reception of the apology. In contrast to the viral spread of the initial confrontational statement, the apology's circulation was more contained, lacking the emotional punch that drives online engagement (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Shifman, 2014). As a result, the apology's intended reparative effect was limited, overshadowed by the enduring presence of the initial soundbite in digital discourse (Papacharissi, 2015; Bourdieu, 1991).

This dynamic underscores a key limitation in political crisis communication: once a provocative utterance has been mediatized and recontextualized, subsequent attempts at repair must compete with the entrenched symbolic power of the original statement (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak, 2009). The Regent's experience demonstrates that procedural defenses and intention-based explanations are less likely to resonate when the offense has already been framed in moral-emotional terms (Tyler, 2006; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015).

Overall, the findings show that the Regent's communication strategy shifted from assertive confrontation to partial mitigation and finally to institutional defense. However, deviations from

cultural norms and the viral nature of digital media limited the effectiveness of both the apology and procedural framing, leaving the initial provocative rhetoric as the defining narrative of the controversy.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Regent of Pati's discourse during the 2025 PBB-P2 tax controversy followed a clear rhetorical trajectory: assertive confrontation, partial mitigation, and procedural defense. The initial confrontational statements projected authority but conflicted with Javanese politeness norms, triggering widespread public backlash. Efforts to repair the image through apology were only partially effective, as digital virality amplified the provocative framing and overshadowed subsequent clarifications. The later appeal to constitutional legitimacy reasserted formal authority but failed to rebuild relational trust with the public.

These findings underscore the importance of adopting culturally aligned crisis communication that respects local norms of indirectness and humility while also balancing procedural explanations with empathetic responses to public concerns. In the digital era, leaders must anticipate media amplification and craft initial statements carefully to avoid misinterpretation and escalation. By integrating critical discourse analysis, speech act theory, and cultural pragmatics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of localized political communication and offers practical insights for managing governance crises in networked societies.

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