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## Arabic Language in Political Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the 2024 Malang Mayoral Candidate Debate

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of Arabic language in the 2024 Malang mayoral candidate debate through the perspectives of sociolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Language in political discourse functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a symbolic instrument for constructing identity, ideology, and political legitimacy. In the Indonesian context, Arabic is strongly associated with piety, moral authority, and Islamic identity. This study aims to analyze the forms, functions, and ideological dimensions of Arabic language use by candidates in constructing political images and building closeness with Muslim voters. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a sociolinguistic discourse analysis design combined with Norman Fairclough's CDA model. The data consist of candidates' utterances containing Arabic elements, such as words, phrases, greetings, prayers, and hadith quotations in the 2024 Malang local election public debate. Data sources were obtained from debate recordings broadcast on the YouTube channels of City Guide 911 FM, Harian Surya, and TV9. Data were collected through observation, transcription, note-taking, and classification, then analyzed through the dimensions of text, discursive practice, and social practice. The findings show that Arabic was used not merely as a religious expression, but as a political communication strategy embedded with symbolic and ideological meanings. Arabic was employed to construct an image of piety, strengthen moral legitimacy, and emphasize closeness to Muslim voters. The practice of code-switching into Arabic also represented the construction of political identity and power. Within the CDA framework, language functions as a tool of symbolic hegemony to shape political images and influence public perception. Thus, Arabic

played a dual role as a marker of Islamic identity and an instrument of political legitimacy. This study concludes that language politics in the public sphere is an arena of interaction between values, identity, and power. The use of Arabic in the Malang local election confirms that language is not merely a means of communication, but also a strategic resource for building trust and social legitimacy.

**Keywords:** Arabic Language, Political Discourse, Sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Malang Local Election.

## INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a medium for representing identity, expressing ideology, and constructing social legitimacy. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language choice reflects social position, cultural affiliation, and interactional strategies in building relationships with audiences (Fishman, 1972). In the context of Indonesian politics, Arabic occupies a strategic position due to its close association with the Islamic tradition embraced by the majority of the Indonesian population. Arabic vocabulary carries strong symbolic meanings, representing religiosity, piety, and moral authority, while also affirming religious and organizational affiliations (Azra, 2020).

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the concept of indexicality (Silverstein, 1976), namely the relationship between linguistic forms and the social meanings they index. When used in political discourse, Arabic not only conveys messages lexically, but also indexes religious identity, ideological orientation, and the social image that speakers seek to construct. Thus, Arabic operates simultaneously in two domains: as a medium of verbal communication and as a socio-political symbol rich in meaning and values.

From Fairclough's perspective (1995), language is viewed as a social practice imbued with ideological and political dimensions. Language never functions neutrally, because it contains processes of meaning production, distribution, and reproduction that are always related to structures of power.

In the context of political public debates in Indonesia, the use of Arabic can be understood as a discursive practice reflecting political candidates' efforts to construct ideological and moral images. In this sphere, Arabic is not merely used to strengthen arguments rhetorically, but also to index religious values and Islamic ethics that resonate strongly within the Muslim-majority society. For instance, the use of Arabic expressions such as *insya Allah*, *bismillah*, or hadith quotations does not merely convey lexical meanings, but also functions as a symbolic strategy affirming piety, moral credibility, and ideological closeness with Muslim voters.

In line with the framework of language ideology proposed by Woolard (1998), language is an entity inseparable from the systems of values, beliefs, and socio-cultural interests surrounding it. Therefore, when Arabic is used in political debates, it serves not only as a means of communication but also as an

ideological instrument to affirm Islamic identity and strengthen political legitimacy. The use of Arabic in this context reflects ideological choices adapted to the speaker's socio-political environment, while also demonstrating how political discourse operates within a field of power colored by religious symbols.

This study highlights the epistemological urgency of a sociolinguistic approach in analyzing the use of Arabic in political candidate debates. The analysis focuses on how candidates strategically employ code-mixing to convey intentions and influence the public (Fairclough, 1989). This is important to reveal in order to foster critical linguistic awareness among the public regarding political rhetorical strategies, uncover mechanisms of legitimacy and delegitimization of power mediated through language choice, and enrich applied linguistic studies in understanding the interaction between religious discourse and the contemporary political arena.

The focus of this research is directed at the 2024 Malang mayoral candidate debate, where Arabic is positioned as a form of linguistic practice containing symbolic and political meanings. The data were obtained from recordings of public debates broadcast on the YouTube channels of City Guide 911 FM, Harian Surya, and TV9. The analysis applies Fairclough's three dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—text, discursive practice, and social practice—to reveal the ideological and representational functions of Arabic in constructing image, moral legitimacy, and power relations in Indonesia's political public sphere.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ***2.1 Basic Concepts of Sociolinguistics***

Historically, the theoretical foundation of sociolinguistics is rooted in the structuralist paradigm introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. Saussure positioned language as an autonomous system of signs (*langue*) whose meaning emerges through differential relations among its elements rather than through the social context of use (Saussure, 1916/1959). This perspective provided the scientific basis for modern linguistics in viewing language as an organized structure that can be studied objectively. However, as language studies developed, scholars increasingly recognized that language functions not only as an orderly system but also as a means of social interaction reflecting identity, power, and the cultural dynamics of society. In this context, sociolinguistics emerged, placing language as an integral part of social reality influenced by factors such as social class, gender, age, and cultural background (Hymes, 1974; Fishman, 1972; Labov, 1972). This line of thought was later expanded by Ronald Wardhaugh, who emphasized that language is a dynamic social practice involved in shaping social relations and constructing speaker identity (Wardhaugh, 2010). Thus, the basic concept of sociolinguistics represents an expansion of structuralism toward a more contextual, functional, and reflective approach to the social reality of language.

The development of sociolinguistics marks a shift from structural views emphasizing language stability toward approaches highlighting social dynamics in language use. This field focuses on how language constructs social meaning, negotiates identity, and reflects power relations within society. From this perspective, language is understood as a social practice with ideological and cultural dimensions (Fairclough, 1995), while also serving as an important instrument for understanding social change and human reality.

### ***2.1.1 Language as Social Practice***

From the perspective of modern sociolinguistics, language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a social practice rich in meaning and value. Language use is always tied to social context, power relations, and underlying ideology. Fairclough (1995) argues that every speech act is a social act that both reflects and shapes social structure. Through language, individuals not only convey messages but also negotiate identity, social position, and ideological perspectives. For example, when a public official uses Arabic expressions such as *insya Allah* or *ukhuwah islamiyah*, they are not merely communicating, but constructing a religious image and symbolic closeness with the Muslim community. This view aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital (1991), which suggests that certain language forms possess different social and symbolic values depending on who uses them and in what context. Therefore, language is understood as an instrument for the social construction of reality, in which linguistic practices become means of reproducing and transforming social and cultural structures.

### ***2.1.2 Language Variation and Social Context***

Language variation is a fundamental aspect of sociolinguistic studies because it reflects the reciprocal relationship between language and social structure. Language is neither static nor uniform; rather, it constantly varies according to social background, culture, and communicative situation. Janet Holmes (2013) explains that differences in language form and use represent social stratification, group identity, and the social roles of speakers. Thus, language choice becomes an indicator of social position and existing power relations in society.

In the sphere of public officials' communication, language variation may be understood as a social strategy reflecting awareness of audience and discourse context. Phenomena such as code-switching demonstrate how speakers adjust language forms to situational demands in order to achieve communicative and symbolic goals. This approach confirms that language variation is not merely a linguistic difference but also a manifestation of values, norms, and ideologies operating within society. Hence, language serves as a means of social representation that both reflects and shapes the social and cultural order in which it is used.

### ***2.1.3 Language and Identity***

Language has a fundamental function as a marker of social identity, reflecting an individual's membership in a group and the values they uphold. Fishman (1972) states that language functions as a symbol of social membership, where language choice reflects the speaker's cultural, religious, and class affiliations. Through language, individuals not only express themselves but also negotiate their position and role within the broader social order.

Identity mediated through language may be personal or collective. In certain social contexts, the use of a particular language by public actors may function as a representation of group identity and a means of strengthening social solidarity. Thus, language possesses a symbolic dimension that plays a role in constructing self-image and reinforcing social cohesion.

However, the relationship between language and identity is also ambivalent. Language can serve as an instrument of inclusion, but also as a tool of social exclusion that distinguishes between "insiders" and "outsiders." Therefore, in sociolinguistic perspectives, language is understood not only as a reflection of identity but also as a field of negotiation and identity construction that continuously evolves alongside social and cultural change.

## ***2.2 Language and Power (Critical Discourse Analysis)***

### ***2.2.1 Language as an Instrument of Power Legitimation***

Within the paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), language is viewed not merely as a communication tool, but as a medium possessing social and ideological power. Fairclough (1995) argues that language is a social practice with a dual function: reproducing existing power structures while also serving as a means to challenge them. Through discourse, individuals or social groups may construct social realities that benefit their position within power structures.

Furthermore, Teun A. van Dijk (1997) explains that power in discourse is manifested through control over thought, discourse, and access to public information. Mastery of language enables dominant groups to determine what is considered true, important, and trustworthy. In political contexts, this is evident when political actors use language to legitimize policies, build moral images, or reinforce social identities aligned with public values.

In the 2024 Malang mayoral candidate debate, the use of Arabic by candidates became a form of symbolic legitimation strategy. The selected expressions not only indicated personal piety but also functioned to construct religious imagery, public morality, and closeness with religious communities. Thus, language became an instrument for gaining trust and political legitimacy through religious and cultural resonance.

### ***2.2.2 Ideology in Language Use***

According to Fairclough (1995), ideology operates through discourse in subtle and often unconscious ways. Language becomes the primary medium through which ideology works, because every lexical choice, style, and sentence structure reflects the speaker's worldview. Meanwhile, Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (2009) emphasize that discourse is always ideological because it is shaped by surrounding social, cultural, and political contexts.

This view is reinforced by Bourdieu's concept of language and symbolic power (1991), which argues that language has symbolic value that may be used to gain or maintain power. Mastery of language styles considered "high-value" within society grants symbolic advantages to speakers because it reflects moral, intellectual, or religious authority.

In regional election debates, the use of Arabic may be interpreted as a form of ideological representation associating candidates with Islamic values, public ethics, and social morality. Arabic functions as a marker of religious and cultural identity affirming candidates' ideological positions before the Muslim-majority public. Thus, language becomes an arena for articulating political ideology that links power with value-based legitimacy.

### ***2.2.3 Arabic as a Discursive Strategy in Local Politics***

In Indonesian political discourse, especially in Muslim-majority regions such as Malang, the use of Arabic is not merely linguistic but also strategic and symbolic. Based on Van Dijk's (2006) view of discourse control, the use of religious symbols in language serves to strengthen social position and build emotional ties with audiences.

In the context of the 2024 Malang mayoral debate, Arabic was used as a discursive strategy to construct religious identity by displaying piety and closeness to Islamic values, while simultaneously legitimizing leadership through representations of morality and integrity embodied in linguistic symbols. In addition, Arabic articulated social solidarity by creating cultural and emotional closeness with Muslim communities as the voter base, while negotiating political ideology associated with justice, trustworthiness, and public service within an Islamic framework.

Therefore, Arabic in local political discourse functions doubly: as a medium of religious communication and as symbolic capital that strengthens candidates' image and political legitimacy before the public.

## ***2.3 Malang Mayoral Election and Muslim Voters***

In the context of local politics, the 2024 mayoral election in Malang became an important arena representing the dynamics of nationalism discourse and Islamic politics at the regional level. Based on data from the General Elections Commission (KPU) of Malang, the number of registered voters in the

2024 election reached approximately 660,774 people (Antara Jatim, 2024), with the majority of residents adhering to Islam (BPS Kota Malang, 2023).

Malang is known as a city of education, home to leading universities such as Universitas Brawijaya, Universitas Negeri Malang, and Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, as well as several major Islamic boarding schools. These demographic and cultural conditions make Islamic identity politically significant, where Arabic is often used to build symbolic closeness with Muslim constituents.

The three candidates each carried different political affiliations and party coalitions. In Malang's religious and intellectual socio-cultural context, candidates attempted to construct religious imagery and public morality through Islamic symbols and the use of Arabic vocabulary in public debates. Arabic therefore functioned as symbolic and ideological capital strengthening leadership legitimacy before Muslim voters.

Thus, the 2024 Malang mayoral election was not merely an electoral contest, but also a site of contestation over religious discourse, political identity, and representations of public morality articulated through language.

## METHOD

### *Research Design and Participants*

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a sociolinguistic discourse analysis integrated with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. The study focused on the public debate of the 2024 Malang mayoral election, involving three candidate pairs as political discourse actors.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select utterances containing Arabic elements from all official debate sessions. The data were collected from publicly available debate recordings broadcast on the YouTube channels of City Guide 911 FM, Harian Surya, and TV9 during 2024–2025. The analysis focused on linguistic forms, social functions, discursive strategies, and ideological meanings of Arabic language use.

### *Instruments*

The primary instrument was the researcher as a human instrument, supported by documentation sheets, transcription guidelines, and coding tables. The corpus consisted of candidates' utterances containing Arabic words, phrases, greetings, prayers, and hadith quotations.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed through Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The procedures included data reduction, classification, textual analysis, interpretation of rhetorical functions, and contextual analysis of political and socio-cultural meanings.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied source triangulation by comparing recordings from different media outlets and theoretical triangulation using sociolinguistic and discourse perspectives.

## FINDINGS

The following table presents the vocabulary used by candidates in the 2024 Malang mayoral election debate. The debate was conducted in three sessions. Each session addressed two of the six major themes that had been determined: improving public welfare, regional development, improving public services, solving regional problems, aligning regional development with provincial and national policies, and strengthening the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). The analysis focuses on categories of Arabic vocabulary that reflect social, religious, and politico-ideological functions, highlighting candidates' communication strategies in constructing image, moral legitimacy, and ideological position in public discourse.

Arabic Vocabulary	Meaning / Translation	Function / Context in Debate
السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته	May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be upon you	Opening greeting; marks the candidate's Islamic identity
بِسْمِ اللَّهِ	In the name of Allah	Opening speech; symbol of religiosity and ethics
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ	Praise be to Allah	Expression of praise; religious rhetorical strategy
إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ	God willing	Mitigation device; avoiding absolute political promises
نَحْنُ نَحْكُمُ بِالظَّوَاهِرِ وَاللَّهُ يَتَوَلَّى السَّرَائِرَ	We judge by what is apparent, while Allah knows what is hidden in the hearts	Moral legitimacy; discursive authority; emphasizing justice and objectivity
الْمُحَافَظَةُ عَلَى الْقَدِيمِ الصَّالِحِ وَالْأَخْذُ بِالْجَدِيدِ الْأَصْلِحِ	Preserving the good old traditions and adopting better new ones	Identity strategy; affirming traditional affiliation and progressiveness
يَسِّرْ وَلَا تُعَسِّرْ	Make things easy and do not make them difficult	Counter-argument; emphasizing that social aid is not merely political
الضعفاء	The weak / vulnerable people	Indicator of social solidarity; concern for the poor
الْعُلَمَاءُ	Religious scholars	Respecting religious authority; marker of social structure
اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ	Allah is the Greatest	Performative closing; symbol of moral courage and political strength

## DISCUSSION

The use of Arabic vocabulary in the 2024 Malang mayoral election public debates demonstrates how language functions as a medium for representing ideology, identity, and political legitimacy. In the context of Malang society, which is religious, deeply rooted in pesantren traditions, and characterized by a strong academic culture, Arabic serves not only as a tool of spiritual expression but also as a form of social and religious capital with political value. Candidates employed Arabic as a multilayered communication strategy: on one hand, to display personal piety, and on the other, to construct an image of leadership that is ethical, knowledgeable, and close to the Muslim community. This finding aligns with Fairclough (1995), who argues that language contains ideological and political dimensions embedded in every social practice. Language does not merely reflect reality; it also shapes and reproduces ideological structures and power relations in society.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the code-switching practices found in the debate were highly symbolic. Greetings such as *Assalāmu‘alaikum warahmatullāhi wabarakātuh* (“May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be upon you”) or *Bismillāh* (“In the name of Allah”) functioned not simply as speech openings, but as markers of identity performance, presenting candidates as representatives of Islamic values. This reflects Silverstein’s (2003) concept of indexicality, which explains the relationship between linguistic forms and the social meanings they index. In this case, Arabic became an indexical sign linking the speakers to Malang’s Muslim community, whose identity is strongly connected to pesantren traditions and religious scholarship.

Classical expressions such as *Alhamdulillah* (“All praise is due to Allah”) and *In shā’ Allāh* (“If Allah wills”) also served rhetorical functions in religious-political discourse. The phrase *In shā’ Allāh*, in particular, operated as a mitigation device, helping candidates avoid the impression of making absolute political promises. Woolard (1998) emphasizes that language choices are never accidental, but systematically connected to identity, status, and social power. By framing plans and promises in moral and spiritual terms, candidates sought to strengthen public trust while protecting themselves from accusations of politicizing religion.

A notable exchange occurred during a heated debate between Candidate Pair 1 and Candidate Pair 3 regarding traffic congestion. Candidate Pair 1 criticized previous transportation policies implemented during Candidate Pair 3’s earlier tenure, arguing that, in outward appearance (*ẓāhir*), they had failed to solve the city’s traffic problems. In this context, Candidate Pair 1 quoted a Prophetic saying: *Naḥnu naḥkumu bi al-ẓawāhir wa Allāhu yatawallā al-sarā’ir* (“We judge by what is apparent, while Allah knows what is hidden in the hearts”). This quotation was used as an argumentative basis for evaluating public policy according to visible results rather than personal intentions or motives. Sociolinguistically, the hadith functioned as a counter-discourse strategy that framed criticism within a moral-religious register.

By invoking religious authority, the candidate established discursive authority and reinforced an image of fairness and integrity before a religious audience. This supports Van Dijk's (2006) argument that religious symbols in discourse can strengthen social positioning.

Intertextual expressions such as *Al-muḥāfazatu 'alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ wa al-akhdhu bi al-jadīd al-aṣlah* ("Preserving the good from the past while adopting what is better from the new") further signaled ideological affiliation with pesantren traditions. Arabic here served as a symbolic bridge between modern politics and classical Islamic scholarship, projecting an image of leadership that is progressive yet rooted in tradition. This reflects a form of strategic hybridization in religious-political discourse.

Similarly, when Candidate Pair 1 was questioned about distributing financial aid and food packages to residents, the candidate responded by citing the Prophetic principle: *Yassirū wa lā tu'assirū* ("Make things easy and do not make them difficult"). This statement functioned as a counter-argument, reframing the assistance not as political maneuvering but as genuine social concern intended to ease people's burdens. In this context, Arabic became a resource for presenting political action as ethical and socially responsible.

Other expressions such as *al-ḍu'afā'* ("the weak") and *al-'ulamā'* ("the scholars") illustrated Arabic as a marker of social solidarity and respect for religious authority. These terms positioned the speaker as both supportive of ordinary people and respectful toward religious elites. Meanwhile, the closing declaration *Allāhu Akbar* ("Allah is the Greatest"), repeated three times by Candidate Pair 3 at the end of the debate, functioned performatively as a symbol of moral courage and political strength. The repetition intensified rhetorical force and emotional resonance while activating a religious frame among Muslim voters. Thus, the expression simultaneously affirmed religious identity and strengthened symbolic proximity with the faith community.

Overall, the use of Arabic in the 2024 Malang mayoral debate functioned as a mechanism of symbolic legitimacy. Bourdieu (1991) argues that language does not merely convey messages; it also accumulates power through its association with moral and religious values. The repeated and deliberate use of Arabic vocabulary indicates that language became an instrument of social control and ideological reproduction in the local political arena. These linguistic practices reveal the close relationship between language, religion, and power, showing how Arabic operates both as a marker of Islamic identity and as a political resource that reinforces moral hierarchy in public discourse. Therefore, the candidates' linguistic strategies reflected not only personal piety but also ideological efforts to gain social and electoral legitimacy through the symbolic power of language.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the use of Arabic in the 2024 Malang mayoral election debates functioned not merely as a form of religious expression, but as a political communication strategy embedded with symbolic and ideological meanings. Within the context of Malang society, which is religious and deeply rooted in pesantren traditions, Arabic was strategically employed to construct an image of piety, strengthen moral legitimacy, and emphasize closeness to Muslim voters.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the practice of code-switching into Arabic represented an effort to construct political identity and power. Arabic expressions, ranging from everyday religious vocabulary to quotations from hadith, were used performatively to display moral authority and religious commitment in the public sphere.

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, this phenomenon reveals how language operates as a tool of symbolic hegemony to shape political images and influence public perception. Thus, Arabic played a dual role: as a marker of Islamic identity and as an instrument of political legitimacy.

The findings suggest that language politics in the public sphere should be understood as an arena where values, identity, and power interact dynamically. The use of Arabic in the Malang local election confirms that language is not merely a means of communication, but also a strategic resource for building trust, moral authority, and legitimacy in the eyes of society.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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