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Canonical Syntax: A strategy for constructing linguistic politeness among generation Z

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ABSTRAK

Kesopanan linguistik merupakan dimensi penting dalam menjaga keharmonisan sosial, khususnya bagi Generasi Z (Gen Z), yang dikenal memiliki gaya komunikasi yang berbeda dari generasi sebelumnya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk merumuskan konsep sintaksis kanonik dalam bahasa Indonesia sebagai strategi untuk menumbuhkan kesopanan dalam penggunaan bahasa Gen Z. Sintaksis kanonik dipahami sebagai bentuk kalimat yang dapat digunakan dengan aman di berbagai konteks formal dan informal tanpa menimbulkan tindakan yang mengancam muka. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan metode campuran, studi ini menggabungkan analisis konseptual berbasis literatur dengan survei terhadap 165 responden Gen Z berusia 18–23 tahun. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi sebelas bentuk sintaksis kanonik dalam bahasa Indonesia: (1) penambahan partikel -lah, (2) partikel fatis ya, (3) kata benda vokatif, (4) arahan leksikal seperti coba, tolong, mohon, mohon, (coba, bantu, silakan/silakan, baik hati), (5) kata keterangan mitigatif seperti tampaknya, sebaiknya (seharusnya, akan lebih baik jika), (6) modalitas, (7) penggunaan kata ganti saya sebagai subjek atau objek, (8) penghilangan klitik -mu, (9) klausa kondisional, (10) transformasi dari aktif ke pasif, dan (11) transformasi dari imperatif ke interogatif. Kesebelas bentuk ini digunakan sebagai instrumen survei untuk mengukur persepsi Gen Z. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar responden menilai sintaksis kanonik sebagai sopan. Namun, dalam komunikasi aktual, mereka lebih sering menggunakan bentuk non-kanonik daripada bentuk kanonik. Hal ini menunjukkan adanya kesenjangan antara kesadaran normatif dan kebiasaan komunikatif. Secara praktis, penelitian ini memberikan landasan pedagogis bagi pendidikan bahasa Indonesia untuk menumbuhkan generasi yang komunikatif dan sopan.

Kata kunci: *kesalahan semantik, makna leksikal, redundansi, analisis wacana*

ABSTRACT

Linguistic politeness is a crucial dimension in maintaining social harmony, particularly for Generation Z (Gen Z), who are known to have communication styles distinct from previous generations. This study aims to formulate the concept of canonical syntax in Indonesian as a strategy to foster politeness in Gen Z's language use. Canonical syntax is understood as sentence forms that can be safely employed across formal and informal contexts without posing face-threatening acts. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the study combines a literature-based conceptual analysis with a survey of 165 Gen Z respondents aged 18–23. The research identifies eleven canonical syntactic forms in Indonesian: (1) the addition of the particle -lah, (2) the phatic particle ya, (3) vocative nouns, (4) lexical directives such as coba, tolong, silakan, mohon, (try, help, please/go ahead, kindly) (5) mitigative adverbs such as sepertinya (it seems), sebaiknya (should, it would be better if), sekiranya (if/in case), (6) modality, (7) the use of the pronoun saya (I, I am, me) as subject or object, (8) omission of the clitic -mu (you), (9) conditional clauses, (10) transformation from active to passive, and (11) transformation from imperative to interrogative. These eleven forms were employed as survey instruments to measure Gen Z's perceptions. Findings reveal that most respondents evaluated canonical syntax as polite. However, in actual communication, they more frequently employed non-canonical rather than canonical forms. This indicates a gap between normative awareness and communicative habits. Practically, the study provides a pedagogical foundation for Indonesian language education to cultivate a generation that is both communicative and polite.

Keywords: semantic errors, lexical meaning, redundancy, discourse analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Linguistic politeness is an essential aspect of maintaining harmonious communication, both in spoken and digital interactions. In the Indonesian context, characterized by collectivistic and hierarchical cultural values, politeness is not merely a linguistic strategy but also a reflection of cultural principles such as respect, humility, and social harmony. Within the pragmatic framework, politeness is understood as a strategy employed by speakers to sustain social interactional harmony. Classical theories, such as those proposed by Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987), emphasize the politeness maxims and politeness as a face-saving effort. Furthermore, Verschueren (1999) highlights the metapragmatic dimension, where language choices reflect speakers' awareness of and orientation toward prevailing social norms.

However, studies on politeness are no longer sufficient if understood solely from the perspective of pragmatic strategies. Recent research has shown that syntactic structure itself can serve as a channel of social meaning. Portner et al. (2019) demonstrated that politeness is understood not only as a post-syntactic pragmatic strategy but also as a feature integrated into syntactic structure. Meanwhile, Trotzke (2024) emphasizes that canonical syntax represents the unmarked version of speech acts that functions to maximize politeness. Sentence structure choices are not merely formal devices but also social strategies to mitigate the imposition of speech acts and ensure the acceptability of interaction. Singh et al. (2024).

Several studies have demonstrated the central role of syntactic structure in constructing politeness. However, these studies still incorporate pragmatic contexts in their analyses. Subbarao et al. (2021), in the multilingual context of India, also confirmed that interrogative, declarative, and conditional modes are employed to regulate social distance and power relations. Chendeb (2019), in a cross-linguistic study, highlighted the role of word order, passive forms, and interrogative structures as markers of syntactic politeness. In the local context, Kasman (2021) examined Bugis, showing the use of the mitigative particle tabe. Ji (2021), through neurolinguistic research, demonstrated that the processing of politeness occurs simultaneously with syntactic and semantic processing in the brain, suggesting that sentence structure choices directly influence politeness evaluation.

In the context of Generation Z, the issue of language politeness has become increasingly complex. As digital natives, Gen Z uses a communication style that is concise, expressive, fast, full of mixed codes, and emojis (Crystal, 2008; Danesi, 2017). Recent research indicates that although most Gen Z individuals are aware of communication ethics (Setiawan, 2025; Saputro et al., 2025), they also show a tendency to lower the level of politeness, especially in digital communication characterized by ellipses, blunt imperatives, or sarcasm (Nayantara et al., 2025). The intensity of social media use and digitalization significantly affects the language politeness of Gen Z (Pandang et al., 2024; Hapsari et al., 2024; Salsabil & Ningsih, 2023). Furthermore, research results indicate that hate speech is increasingly prevalent (Kurniawan, 2024), ranging from negative comments (Zaman, 2024) to their inability to communicate effectively (Taliwuna, 2024; Anwar et al., 2021). More concerning, some studies suggest that their communication skills are a barrier for Gen Z to secure employment (Hapsari et al., 2024; Fotaleno, 2024).

Previous studies have extensively discussed politeness at the level of pragmatic strategies but have not systematically linked canonical syntax forms with politeness in Gen Z communication practices. This gap highlights the need for a new conceptual framework to understand how canonical syntax functions in creating polite language interactions.

Therefore, this study aims to formulate the concept of canonical syntax in Indonesian as a strategy for fostering linguistic politeness among Generation Z. Theoretically, this research extends the discourse on politeness from a pragmatic perspective to a social-syntactic one. Practically, it is expected to contribute to the development of literacy and the cultivation of polite communication among Gen Z, which is crucial for shaping linguistic identity in the vision of *Indonesia Emas 2045*. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on canonical syntax in Indonesian—namely, sentence forms that can be safely employed.

Politeness Foundation

Studies on linguistic politeness began with classical theories that focused on social relations and face management. Leech (1983, 2014) introduced the politeness maxims—such as the tact

maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim—which function as normative guidelines for evaluating polite and impolite utterances. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the face-saving theory of politeness, distinguishing between positive and negative politeness strategies. Positive politeness emphasizes solidarity and social closeness, while negative politeness is oriented toward respecting the interlocutor's right to freedom. This perspective situates politeness as a strategy to minimize face-threatening acts through appropriate linguistic choices.

In subsequent developments, theories of politeness have not only emphasized pragmatic strategies but also incorporated cognitive, social, and even emotional perspectives. Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper and Hardaker (2017) introduced the study of impoliteness as a counterpoint to classical theories that emphasized politeness. This approach recognizes that impolite utterances also serve specific social functions, such as reinforcing hierarchy and power. Furthermore, Culpeper (2011) proposed a cognitive-emotional framework to understand how politeness and impoliteness are perceived, highlighting the role of emotions and social evaluations in interaction. This perspective enriches politeness studies by shifting the focus from mere linguistic strategies toward an understanding of speakers' social experience.

In addition, metapragmatic provides a new theoretical dimension in the study of politeness. Verschueren (1999) and Shahid (2025) emphasize that every linguistic choice is grounded in social norms, reflective awareness, and adaptive strategies to communicative contexts. The metapragmatic approach enables individuals to evaluate and categorize utterances as correct or incorrect, cooperative or uncooperative, straightforward or misleading (Naait, 2024), and ethical or vulgar (Hames et al., 2025). Metapragmatic focuses on reflective awareness in assessing the appropriateness of language in interaction. This concept also allows speakers to consciously regulate their language use (Dynel, 2023). Moreover, metapragmatic is closely related to normativity, which concerns the evaluation of language-use rules in society (Bridges, 2017). Thus, the foundation of politeness extends beyond strategies for face management to include reflective mechanisms that regulate how politeness norms are negotiated in actual communicative practice.

Canonical Syntax in Politeness Theory

In its development, linguistic studies no longer view syntax merely as a neutral formal structure, but also as a channel of social meaning. This perspective emphasizes that choices of sentence structure play a role in negotiating social relations between speakers and hearers. Portner et al. (2019), through their research on speech-style particles in Korean and polite pronouns in Romance languages, demonstrated that social information such as status, formality, and power relations can be explicitly represented in the left periphery of the clause. In other words, social aspects are not merely pragmatic inferences but can be directly encoded within syntactic structure.

This idea is reinforced by Trotzke (2024), who introduced the concept of social syntax by emphasizing the importance of canonical forms (canonical syntax). According to him, canonical forms represent the unmarked versions of speech acts—whether requests, questions, or statements—that by default maximize politeness. The principle of maximizing politeness functions to minimize the imposition of speech acts, thereby making interaction more socially acceptable. Thus, canonical syntax not only underlies formal structures but also serves as a social strategy embedded within the syntactic form itself.

In line with this, Singh et al. (2024) show empirical evidence that syntactic politeness can be manifested through specific structural devices, such as embedded clauses, hedging, and indirect interrogatives. These three functions serve as forms of mitigation: subordinating clauses reduce the force of commands or statements, hedging decreases the speaker's commitment to propositions, and indirect interrogatives soften speech acts by lowering the level of imposition. These findings support the view that politeness is not only produced by lexical choices or pragmatic strategies but can also be mapped through canonical syntactic forms. Chendeb (2019), through a cross-linguistic study, highlights how word order, passive forms, and interrogative structures can function as markers of syntactic politeness. Anwar (2024) incorporates the communicative function of language in syntactic studies. Thus, the canonical syntactic framework in politeness asserts that linguistic politeness is realized at the structural level

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-method approach that combines conceptual analysis and survey. Conceptual analysis is conducted by examining syntax and politeness theories, ranging from Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (2014), Culpeper (2011) to recent developments such as Portner et al. (2019) and Trotzke (2024) to formulate the concept of canonical syntax in the Indonesian language.

To complement the theoretical analysis, a survey was conducted on 165 Generation Z individuals aged 18-23. This group was purposively selected to represent Generation Z, the digital native generation with distinct communication characteristics relevant to the research focus. The research data consisted of two types: qualitative data sourced from sentences in academic books and journal articles on syntax and politeness, and quantitative data from a questionnaire designed to test 11 identified canonical syntax forms, providing two sentence options (canonical vs. non-canonical) for each form.

The research instrument consisted of an online questionnaire with two sections: (1) the evaluation of 11 canonical syntactic forms using a five-point Likert scale to measure perceptions of politeness, and (2) the choice between canonical and non-canonical sentence forms to examine Gen Z's preferences in communication. Data were collected via an online survey (Google Forms) during August 2025. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, calculating the frequency and percentage of respondents' perceptions and preferences. These results were then compared with the theoretical framework that had been formulated in order to identify the gap between politeness awareness and actual language practice.

Validity was ensured through the triangulation of literature and empirical data, while the reliability of the instrument was strengthened through expert review in the fields of linguistics and pragmatics. In general, the research procedure is illustrated as follows.

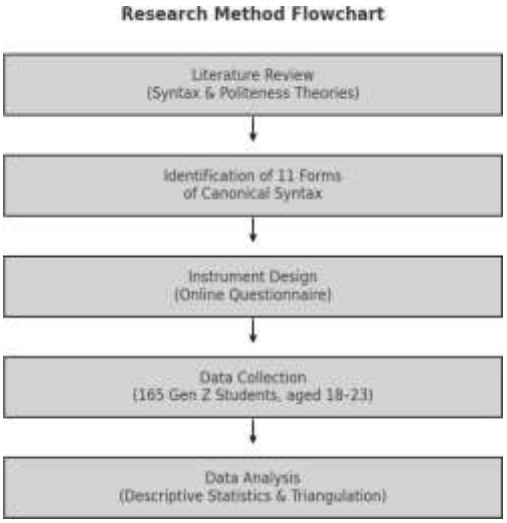


Figure 1: Research method flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Canonical Syntax Forms

This research successfully identified eleven canonical syntax forms in the Indonesian language. These findings are grouped into six major categories: addition of particles, omission of clitics, selection of pronouns, addition of lexical elements, addition of subordinative clauses, and sentence structure transformation. The findings indicate that politeness is not only manifested through pragmatic expressions but also systematically structured at the syntactic level. This means that these forms have a high level of acceptability because structurally they minimize the potential threat to face and maintain the harmony of interaction. Therefore, the eleven identified

canonical syntax forms in this study can be seen as universal syntactic patterns that support politeness practices across communication domains. Below is the mapping of canonical syntax findings in the Indonesian language. Here is a table mapping canonical syntax in the Indonesian language.

Table 1: Canonical Syntactic Elements and Their Functions

Canonical Syntactic Element	**Initial Sentence**	**Canonical Sentence**	**Function**
Addition of particles	Addition of particle *-lah* Close the door now!	Please close the door now.	The particle *-lah* softens the command
	Addition of phatic particle *ya* We leave tomorrow.	We leave tomorrow, *ya*.	The particle *ya* maintain familiarity
Addition of lexical elements	Addition of vocative nouns The assignment is due tomorrow.	The assignment is due tomorrow, Bro/Sis/Mr./Mrs.	Expresses respect
	Addition of lexical items *coba, tolong, silakan, mohon* Bring me the book on the table!	Please bring me the book on the table.	Provides room for choice
	Addition of adverbials such as *sepertinya, sebaiknya, sekiranya* Revise the report immediately!	You should revise the report immediately.	Reduces imposition
	Addition of modality Print the document before the meeting!	You can print the document before the meeting.	Increases flexibility & politeness
Choice of pronouns	Choice of first-person pronoun saya as subject I (*aku*) am presenting the article today.	I (*saya*) am presenting the article today.	Regulates power distance and respect
Clitic omission	Omission of clitic *-mu* Has your assignment *(-mu)* been submitted?	Has the assignment been submitted?	Reduces face threat
Addition of subordinate clauses	Addition of conditional clauses Send the file now!	If you don't mind, please send the file now.	Respects the addressee's autonomy
Sentence structure transformation	Transformation from active to passive Do this task before going home!	This task should be done before going home.	Enhances a collaborative impression
	Transformation from imperative to interrogative Bring your laptop to the front!	Could you bring your laptop to the front?	Reduces instructiveness, sounds more polite

The document analysis indicates that linguistic politeness among Generation Z can be realized through canonical syntactic strategies manifested in eleven main forms: (1) the addition of the particle *-lah*, (2) the addition of the phatic particle *ya*, (3) the addition of vocative nouns, (4) the addition of lexical elements such as *coba*, *tolong*, *silakan*, *mohon*, (5) the addition of adverbs such as *sepertinya*, *sebaiknya*, *sekiranya*, (6) the addition of modality, (7) the choice of the first-person pronoun *saya* as subject/object, (8) the omission of the clitic *-mu*, (9) the addition of conditional clauses, (10) the transformation of active sentences into passive, and (11) the transformation of imperative sentences into interrogatives.

In Indonesian syntax, particles are categorized as function words that do not undergo morphological changes and cannot stand alone. Despite their small form, particles play an important role in providing interpersonal nuances within sentences. For instance, the particle *-lah* in the sentence *'Tutuplah pintu itu sekarang'* ('Please close the door now') reduces the harshness of the command compared to the plain form *'Tutup pintu itu sekarang'* ('Close the door now'). Syntactically, the particle *-lah* attaches to the predicate, particularly verbs in imperative

sentences. Its presence makes commands or prohibitions more neutral and polite than direct forms without the particle. Similarly, the phatic particle *ya* as in *'Kita berangkat besok, ya'* ('We leave tomorrow, okay?') is typically placed at the end of a sentence. While it does not alter the core structure of the sentence, it creates a strong interpersonal effect and functions to maintain familiarity.

In addition to particles, syntactic politeness is also realized through the addition of certain lexical elements within sentence structure. These words function as mitigation markers that soften speech acts, reduce illocutionary force, and create a sense of choice for the interlocutor. This study identifies several key lexical elements, namely vocative nouns,

specific lexical directives, adverbs, and modality. Vocative nouns such as *Kak*, *Dik*, *Pak*, *Bu* ('older sibling', 'younger sibling', 'Mr.', 'Mrs.') indicate respect for the social status of the addressee, as in the sentence *'Tugas itu dikumpulkan besok, Kak/Dik'* ('The assignment is due tomorrow, Bro/Sis'). In Indonesian syntax, vocative nouns function as elements used to directly address the interlocutor, usually placed at the beginning of a sentence or inserted within an utterance. Mitigative directive words (*tolong*, *silakan*, *mohon*, *coba*, *sudilah*, *kiranya*) provide room for choice and reduce the sense of giving a direct order, for example *'Tolong ambilkan buku di meja'* ('Please bring me the book on the table'). Syntactically, these words are positioned at the beginning of a sentence or before the main verb, serving as mitigation elements that soften the force of a command. Mitigative adverbs (*sepertinya*, *sebaiknya*, *sekiranya*) are used in sentences such as *'Sebaiknya segera revisi laporan itu'* ('You should revise the report immediately'). These adverbs function to reduce the imposition of an utterance. Without them, declarative sentences containing decisions, evaluations, or warnings may sound harsh, absolute, and leave no room for negotiation for the addressee. Finally, modality—for instance *'Anda bisa cetak dokumen itu sebelum rapat'* ('You can print the document before the meeting')—is usually placed before the verb. In canonical syntax, modality shifts an utterance from being perceived as imposing to being more flexible, in line with norms of social interaction.

The choice of personal pronouns is also crucial in canonical syntax. The shift from *aku* ('I', informal) to *saya* ('I', formal), or the use of *beliau* ('he/she', honorific) and *Anda* ('you', formal), demonstrates awareness of social distance and respect. For instance, *'Saya mempresentasikan artikel hari ini'* ('I am presenting the article today') is more formal than *'Aku mempresentasikan artikel hari ini'* ('I am presenting the article today'). On the other hand, the omission of the possessive clitic *-mu* in sentences such as *'Tugas sudah dikumpulkan?'* ('Has the assignment been submitted?') reduces face-threat compared to the form *'Tugasmu sudah dikumpulkan?'* ('Has your assignment been submitted?'). From the perspective of canonical syntax, the choice of pronouns serves as a mitigative device that lowers the risk of face-threatening acts. Sentences using *saya* are considered canonical because they are more universal, flexible, and acceptable across both formal and informal contexts. Conversely, the use of *aku* tends to be non-canonical, as it is limited to intimate or egalitarian contexts.

The omission of the clitic *-mu* is also one of the strategies employed to enhance politeness. In syntax, clitics are grammatical forms attached to other words, such as the suffixes *-ku*, *-mu*, and *-nya*, which mark possession. The distinction lies in the nuance conveyed: *-ku* refers to the speaker, *-mu* to the addressee, and *-nya* to the third person. In communicative practice, their use is closely tied to politeness strategies. For example, *'Tugasmu sudah dikumpulkan?'* ('Has your assignment been submitted?') sounds more pressing, whereas *'Tugas sudah dikumpulkan?'* ('Has the assignment been submitted?') is more neutral because omitting *-mu* reduces the force of the utterance. An alternative is replacing *-mu* with *-nya*, as in *'Tugasnya sudah dikumpulkan?'* ('Has the assignment been submitted?'), which gives a more polite and formal impression. Thus, within the framework of canonical syntax, the omission of *-mu* is understood as a neutralization strategy that lowers face-threatening force, while its replacement with *-nya* is interpreted as a formalization strategy that elevates the degree of politeness in the sentence.

The addition of subordinate clauses is also a strategy for constructing politeness. In Indonesian syntax, conditional subordinate clauses are introduced by conjunctions such as *jika*, *apabila*, *kalau*, and *andaikan*. Syntactically, these clauses appear at the beginning of the sentence

as hypothetical subclauses. Their function is not only to serve as connectors between clauses but also as mitigation devices in directive speech acts. Conditional clauses reduce the illocutionary force of commands or requests by making them conditional, so that the speaker does not deliver the directive directly but instead frames it as a hypothetical situation, providing the addressee with room to either accept or reject it. Thus, conditional clauses operate as syntactic politeness strategies because they provide a sense of choice and reduce the level of face-threatening acts. For example, *'Jika berkenan, kirim file itu sekarang'* ('If you don't mind, please send the file now') signals respect for the interlocutor's autonomy, in stark contrast to the direct imperative *'Kirim file itu sekarang'* ('Send the file now').

Sentence structure transformation also plays a significant role. The passive sentence *'Tugas ini dikerjakan sebelum pulang'* ('This task should be done before going home') sounds more collaborative and neutral compared to the active *'Kerjakan tugas ini sebelum pulang'* ('Do this task before going home'). Similarly, transforming an imperative into an interrogative, as in *'Bisa bawa laptop ke depan?'* ('Could you bring your laptop to the front?'), reduces the harsh instructive tone, making it more socially acceptable. Structurally, this transformation occurs through a shift in sentence mood from imperative to interrogative, while retaining its directive function. Canonical syntax demonstrates that such transformations—from active to passive and from imperative to interrogative—serve as default forms of politeness because they lower the level of imposition. The addressee is given space to either accept or reject the command, so that the directive is no longer understood as an authoritative instruction but rather as a request that offers choice. Thus, the social function of these transformations is to create a more neutral politeness distance, maintain interactional harmony, and emphasize that politeness is realized not only through lexical choices but also through syntactic structure.

Exploring Generation Z's Perceptions of Canonical Syntax

The survey results distributed to 165 Generation Z respondents (aged 18–23) indicate a consistent tendency to prefer canonical syntactic forms (as represented by number 2 in each sentence in Table 2) over direct or non-canonical forms (represented by number 1 in each sentence in Table 2). Overall, the majority of respondents assessed sentence type 2—with the addition of particles, mitigating words, conditional clauses, or structural transformations—as more polite, despite the fact that the conveyed meaning remained the same. These findings suggest that respondents are able to distinguish between polite and impolite forms independently of extralinguistic context.

Table 2: Exploring Generation Z's Perceptions of Canonical Syntax

No.	Sentence	Very Polite %	Polite %	Neutral %	Impolite %	Very Impolite %
1.1	Close the door now.	0%	9.7%	43%	44.8%	2.4%
1.2	Please close the door now. (*Tutuplah*)	8.5%	52.1%	29.7%	9.1%	0.6%
2.1	We leave tomorrow.	0.6%	17.6%	77.6%	4.2%	0%
2.2	We leave tomorrow, *ya*.	37.6%	57.6%	4.2%	0.6%	0%
3.1	The assignment is due tomorrow.	0%	24.2%	67.9%	7.9%	0%
3.2	The assignment is due tomorrow, Bro/Sis.	35.2%	57.6%	7.3%	0%	0%
4.1	Bring me the book on the table.	0%	3.6%	33.9%	57%	5.5%
4.2	Please bring me the book on the table. (*Tolong*)	58.2%	41.2%	0.6%	0%	0%
5.1	Revise the report immediately.	0%	9.7%	59.4%	30.3%	0.6%
5.2	You should revise the report immediately. (*Sebaiknya*)	31.5%	61.2%	7.3%	0%	0%
6.1	Print the document before the meeting.	0%	9.7%	70.3%	18.2%	1.8%
6.2	You can print the document before the meeting.	18.2%	61.8%	19.4%	0.6%	0%
7.1	I (*aku*) am presenting the article today.	1.8%	37.6%	51.5%	8.5%	0.6%
7.2	I (*saya*) am presenting the article today.	24.8%	61.8%	13.3%	0%	0%
8.1	Has your assignment (*-mu*) been submitted?	9.1%	62.4%	28.5%	0%	0%

8.2	Has the assignment been submitted?	0%	18.8%	72.7%	8.5%	0%
9.1	Send the file now.	0%	8.5%	50.3%	38.2%	3%
9.2	If you don't mind, please send the file now.	60%	36.4%	3%	0.6%	0%
10.1	Do this task before going home.	0.6%	18.8%	65.5%	15.2%	0%
10.2	This task should be done before going home.	4.8%	45.5%	49.1%	0.6%	0%
11.1	Bring your laptop to the front.	0%	9.1%	55.8%	33.9%	1.2%
11.2	Could you bring your laptop to the front?	32.7%	59.4%	6.7%	1.2%	0%

The survey data reveal a significant difference between sentence type 1 (direct, plain, non-canonical) and sentence type 2 (modified with canonical strategies). In general, type 2 is perceived as more polite by the majority of Generation Z respondents compared to type 1, even though the substantive meaning of the command, request, or prohibition remains the same. Generation Z demonstrates a strong preference for canonical syntactic forms that explicitly signal politeness.

In the category of adding the particle *-lah*, 52.1% of respondents rated sentences with *-lah* as polite and 8.5% as very polite, while 29.7% still considered them neutral. This indicates that the particle *-lah* adds a softer nuance, but its perceived politeness is not as strong as other forms. In contrast, the phatic particle *ya* received a much higher appreciation, with 95.2% of respondents rating it as polite or very polite, and almost none evaluating it negatively.

For vocative nouns, more than 90% of respondents considered this form polite, with 35.2% rating it as very polite and 57.6% as polite. This indicates that direct address remains a primary strategy for maintaining social relations among Gen Z. Even stronger results were found for mitigative directive words such as *tolong*, *silakan*, and *mohon*, which were the most preferred forms, with 58.2% of respondents rating them as very polite and 41.2% as polite. Almost no respondents evaluated this form negatively, suggesting that mitigative directives can be regarded as the canonical pattern of politeness among Gen Z. Mitigative adverbs such as *sebaiknya* and *sekiranya* were also well received, with 31.5% of respondents rating them as polite and 61.2% as very polite. Modal expressions (*bisa*, *boleh*, *mungkin*) were more frequently categorized as polite (61.8%) rather than very polite (18.2%), indicating that modality is perceived as polite but not as strong as direct mitigators. A similar pattern was observed in the use of personal pronouns, where *saya* or *Anda* were valued more highly than *aku* or *kamu*, with 24.8% rating them as very polite and 61.6% as polite.

A contrasting finding appears in the omission of the clitic *-mu*, where 72.7% of respondents rated this form as neutral, while only 18.8% considered it polite, and 8.5% regarded it as impolite. This indicates that the strategy of clitic omission is not automatically perceived as politeness. In contrast, conditional clauses such as *kalau boleh* ('if allowed') and *jika berkenan* ('if you don't mind') received very high scores, with 36.4% of respondents rating them as polite and 60% as very polite. Respondents regarded this form as one of the most effective canonical strategies of politeness.

The results for structural transformation strategies were varied. Transformations from active to passive were mostly perceived as neutral (49.1%). Nevertheless, 45.5% of respondents still rated them as polite and 4.8% as very polite. This suggests that while passive forms reduce the force of an utterance, they are not always perceived by Gen Z as more polite. In contrast, transforming imperatives into interrogatives proved more effective, with 32.7% of respondents rating them as very polite and 59.4% as polite. This confirms that interrogative forms are more naturally understood by Gen Z as expressions of politeness compared to passivization.

From these data, the levels of politeness of canonical syntactic forms as perceived by Generation Z are as follows.

Table 3: Level of Politeness in Canonical Syntactic Forms as Perceived by Generation Z

No.	Canonical Syntactic Form	Very Polite (%)	Polite (%)	Neutral (%)	Impolite (%)	Very Impolite (%)
1	Particle *–lah*	8.5	52.1	29.7	9.1	0.6
2	Phatic particle *–ya*	37.6	57.6	4.2	0.6	0.0
3	Vocative noun	35.2	57.6	7.3	0.0	0.0
4	Mitigative directive words (*tolong, silakan*, etc.)	58.2	41.2	0.6	0.0	0.0
5	Mitigative adverbs (*sebaiknya, sekiranya*)	31.5	61.2	7.3	0.0	0.0
6	Modality (*bisa, boleh, mungkin*)	18.2	61.8	19.4	0.6	0.0
7	Personal pronouns (*saya, Anda*)	24.8	61.8	13.3	0.0	0.0
8	Omission of clitic *-mu*	0.0	18.8	72.7	8.5	0.0
9	Conditional clauses (*kalau boleh, jika berkenan*)	60.0	36.4	3.0	0.6	0.0
10	Transformation active → passive	4.8	45.5	49.1	0.6	0.0
11	Transformation imperative → interrogative	32.7	59.4	6.7	1.2	0.0

The findings indicate that Gen Z's perceptions of the eleven canonical syntactic forms consistently place mitigative forms as more polite choices compared to plain or direct forms. The data show that conditional clauses rank the highest in the polite category, with 60% of respondents rating them as very polite and 36.4% as polite. Similarly, mitigative directive words such as *tolong*, *silakan*, and *mohon* received high appreciation, with 58.2% of respondents rating them as very polite. Other strong forms in this category are vocative nouns (35.2% very polite; 57.6% polite) and the phatic particle *ya* (37.6% very polite; 57.6% polite), both of which reinforce impressions of familiarity as well as respect in communication.

Conversely, several other forms were more frequently placed in the polite rather than the very polite category. For instance, modal expressions (*bisa* 'can', *boleh* 'may', *mungkin* 'perhaps') were rated polite by 61.8% of respondents, while interrogative transformations (59.4% polite) indicate that question forms are still perceived as softer than plain imperatives, though rarely regarded as very polite. A similar tendency appears in active–passive transformations, where nearly half of respondents (45.5%) placed them in the polite category, while 49.1% considered them neutral, suggesting that this form is generally perceived as neutral in terms of politeness.

Interestingly, the omission of the clitic *-mu* was largely perceived as neutral (72.7%), with only 18.8% rating it as polite. This finding suggests that for Generation Z, neutralization through the removal of possessive markers does not automatically enhance politeness, but rather merely reduces the force of the utterance. In contrast, the particle *-lah* received a more balanced distribution (52.1% polite; 29.7% neutral), indicating that this particle is still understood as a marker of formality rather than a strong indicator of politeness.

The Actual Use of Canonical Syntax by Generation Z

What is particularly interesting from these findings is the reality of Generation Z's linguistic politeness in actual usage. The survey results indicate that although the majority of Generation Z respondents (aged 18–23) rated canonical syntactic forms as more polite, in practice they more frequently use the alternative type 2 (non-canonical) forms. Of the

165 respondents, 125 (75.8%) admitted to preferring direct or plain forms, while only 40 respondents (24.2%) consistently used canonical forms. This is illustrated in the following chart.

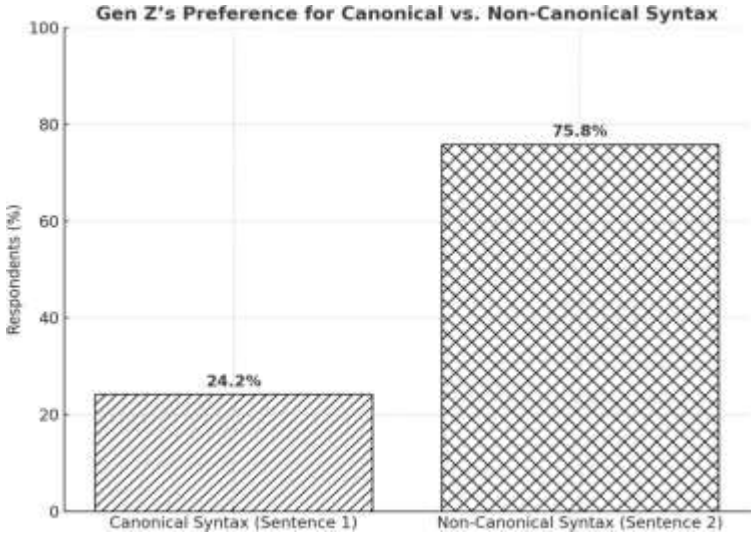


Figure 2: Gen Z's Preference for canonical vs. Non-canonical syntax

This phenomenon reveals a gap between perception and linguistic practice. On the one hand, Generation Z demonstrates metapragmatic awareness that sentences with particles, conditional clauses, or mitigators are more polite. On the other hand, in actual interaction, they tend to prefer the second type of sentences. This aligns with several previous studies that highlight the relatively less polite communication style of Generation Z (Dwi, 2025; Rintaningrum, 2024).

An important implication of these findings is the need for canonical syntax to serve as a 'default safe strategy' in both formal and intergenerational communication. Accordingly, Generation Z needs to be trained to distinguish when canonical forms should be used and when non-canonical forms may be acceptable. One recommendation arising from this study is to enhance awareness of polite language use through the introduction of canonical syntax in language education within the classroom.

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CONCLUSION

This study confirms that canonical syntax functions as an important strategy in constructing linguistic politeness among Generation Z. Based on theoretical review and survey data from Gen Z respondents in Jakarta, eleven canonical syntactic forms were identified as being perceived as more polite compared to direct forms, despite conveying similar meanings. The findings demonstrate a consistent perception that canonical forms are more polite, yet in everyday practice, Gen Z tends to prefer concise and direct expressions. This reveals a gap between normative awareness and communicative habits, particularly in the context of fast-paced and digital communication.

Theoretically, these findings extend politeness research by highlighting the syntactic dimension as a means of mitigating speech acts. Practically, the results can serve as a basis for linguistic education for Gen Z, raising awareness of the importance of canonical syntax in maintaining social harmony. Thus, this study not only contributes to the development of syntax-based politeness theory but also offers practical directions for Indonesian language education in the digital era. Canonical syntax can be positioned as a pedagogical reference to cultivate a young generation that is not only communicatively competent but also polite in sustaining social harmony.

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