

Social Meaning in Language Choice: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Cultural Awareness in Language Register Variation

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Inputted : 2 September 2025
Accepted : 27 September 2025

Revised : 15 September 2025
Published : 30 September 2025

ABSTRACT

Linguistic register variations in digital spaces not only reflect stylistic choices but also serve as a vehicle for constructing social meaning shaped by the speaker's cultural awareness. This dynamic becomes increasingly prominent within digital interactions involving institutions, the media, and the public. The present study aims to explain how cultural awareness informs the ways individuals and institutions select particular registers, and how these register choices generate distinct social meanings within the context of digital communication. Using a qualitative approach through document analysis of five secondary media sources representing governmental bodies, mainstream media, critical media, and law-enforcement institutions, this study examines linguistic patterns, communicative orientations, and cultural values articulated in the texts. The findings reveal three dominant patterns in the construction of social meaning. Formal and technocratic registers are employed to institutionalize norms and orient communicative practices toward legal compliance. Critical and evaluative registers emerge as forms of negotiated meaning and public resistance to institutional dominance, reinforced by viral dissemination as a mechanism of social pressure. Meanwhile, the adoption of hybrid registers by public institutions reflects cultural awareness of dialogue, empathy, and participation within the digital ecosystem. Overall, the study confirms that language choice functions as a social strategy guided by cultural awareness and plays a central role in shaping power relations, legitimacy, and communicative practices in digital spaces.

Keywords: social meaning; register; cultural awareness; digital communication

INTRODUCTION

Cultural awareness plays a fundamental role in determining language register variation because it enables speakers to accurately interpret social and cultural contexts. Numerous studies have shown that cultural awareness enhances the ability to understand linguistic nuances, including the distinction between formal and informal registers and culture-specific idiomatic expressions (Aminah et al., 2025) . Register choice is shaped not only by linguistic aspects but also by situational parameters and the underlying text structure, so that social context and communication function directly influence language decisions (Egbert & Gracheva, 2022) . Furthermore, involvement in second language use can broaden tolerance for foreign cultural norms and strengthen the relationship between language, culture, and social attitudes (Hu et al., 2025) .

In sociolinguistic studies, language choice is understood as a social act that reflects identity, social position, and relationships between individuals. Registers are used to signal formality, closeness, and strategies for managing interpersonal relationships. Speakers actively adjust registers based on context, audience, and communication goals, both in face-to-face interactions and in increasingly complex digital ecologies (Safitri & Tamrin, 2025) . Research in multilingual communities also shows that cultural



background, ethnicity, and communication domain consistently influence language choice, as demonstrated in studies of the Chinese community in Medan and multilingual Azerbaijan (Rzayeva et al., 2020) . Among urban youth, code-shifting and the formation of hybrid registers are adaptive strategies closely linked to the dynamics of globalization and identity negotiation (Safitri & Tamrin, 2025) .

Cultural awareness and standard language ideology also have broader social implications. Preference for a particular language variety can reinforce linguistic hierarchy and social inequality if not accompanied by a critical understanding of register diversity (Pichler, 2025) . Situational factors such as location, conversation topic, and social status also determine the register used in everyday communication (Berisso Genemo, 2022) . In practice, cultural awareness forms the basis for linguistic adaptation: in formal institutions, it gives rise to registers that respect hierarchy, in local communities, it produces more relaxed and solidaristic language varieties, and in digital spaces, it encourages the formation of mixed registers that adapt to audience heterogeneity (Kidwell & Triyoko, 2021; Masitoh et al., 2023). In the context of language education, the integration of cultural awareness has also been shown to enhance cross-cultural communicative competence (Brainee, 2024).

Although the link between cultural awareness and register variation has been widely discussed, several limitations remain unresolved. First, research explicitly examining how cultural awareness is reflected in register choices based on secondary data from online media remains limited. This is despite the fact that online media presents real-life communication practices that represent contemporary registers on a broad scale. Second, previous studies tend to focus on a single domain (e.g., formal organizations or face-to-face interactions) and have not integrated the cross-contextual analysis necessary for a comprehensive understanding of register dynamics (Mensah, 2024; Smith, 2024). Third, although secondary data-based cultural awareness training has demonstrated positive impacts, research directly linking this data to representations of social meaning and register practices is still limited (Miguel, 2024; Jouan & Hallot, 2022).

Based on this context, this study aims to understand how cultural awareness is reflected in the choice of registers that appear in online media and explain the social meanings generated by variations in these registers in various communication contexts. This study also seeks to explain the relationship between social context, the level of cultural awareness, and the form of register used by speakers in digital and institutional interactions. By using a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis and digital ethnography, this study is expected to provide conceptual and empirical contributions to strengthening understanding of the dynamics of language, culture, and social meaning in contemporary communication.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with document analysis to examine the social meaning and register variations in digital discourse. This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of the relationship between language choices, institutional contexts, and cultural values that shape communication practices in online spaces. Data were obtained through purposive sampling from five secondary media sources relevant to the issues of digital ethics, content moderation, digital literacy, and critical expression. These sources include a Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) article on digital ethics and the ITE Law, a Tirto investigative report on the removal of critical content, a Metro TV opinion article on the "*no viral no justice*" phenomenon , a Kompas report on strengthening digital human resources, and an

Instagram post from the Magelang Police Department regarding the ethics of expressing criticism.

The five data sets were selected because they represent different actors in digital discourse: the government, critical media, mainstream media, and security forces. The analysis was conducted through three steps: data reduction, thematic coding, and interpretation. Key quotations reflecting the use of specific registers were identified and then coded based on register type, communicative orientation, and emerging cultural values. Findings were compared across sources to ensure thematic consistency and maintain the validity of the analysis. The final results are presented in tabular form to map the variety of registers and social meanings of each source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of social meaning in language choices requires a structured observation of discourse sources that reflect actual communication practices in the digital space. This study utilizes five secondary data sets from government institutions, national media, and security forces, each of which presents a variety of different registers and communication strategies according to their institutional mandates. The analysis is conducted through a review of diction, sentence construction, communicative orientation, and the social context surrounding message production, allowing for a systematic mapping of register usage tendencies and manifestations of cultural awareness. The results of the initial review are then summarized in a thematic analysis table to present a structured overview of the core quotations, register categories, thematic focus, and social meanings identified in each source, as follows

Table 1. Analysis of Register and Social Meaning in Digital Communication

Code	Title Source	Key Quotes	Register	Theme/ Subtheme	Social Meaning
DS-01	Maintaining Ethics in the Digital Space to Avoid SARA Conflicts (Kominfo, 2022)	The ITE Law regulates interactions in cyberspace to be clean, healthy, ethical and utilized in a way productive	Institutional, formal	Digital ethics; SARA regulations	Language becomes instrument state normative; framing digital speech as threats that must be regulated for stability social
DS-02	<i>Issue Transparency and Uploads Critical Deleted in X</i> (Tirto.id, 2025)	Content that is considered violate law only determined unilaterally by the government	Journalism critical, formal-civil	Digital censorship; legal definition monopoly	Digital language functions as a tool of social control, but the state monopolizes the legitimacy of legal meaning and narrows the space for civil discourse, so that public expression risks being misinterpreted as a violation of the law
DS-03	<i>Ethical Criticism for Healthy Dialogue</i>	Criticism delivered ethically, that is, politely,	Educational-institutional (hybrid)	Moderation expression; ethics public	Language is directed as a tool for maintaining social cohesion, with

	(Polresta Magelang , 2025)	empathetically, and respectfully toward others, will open up a space for healthier dialogue			criticism conditioned to remain within orderly and empathetic corridors; emphasizing the role of institutions in shaping peaceful and solution-oriented communication practices
DS-04	Jokowi's Efforts to Develop Globally Competitive Digital Human Resources (Kompas.com, 2024)	Digital literacy among Gen Z is crucial due to their significant population. It's not only a necessity, but also a long-term investment for the nation's future	Educational-formal (government)	Digital literacy: strengthening HR; digital culture	Language is used as a tool for national development and social empowerment, where the discourse on digital literacy is interpreted as a form of strategic investment that is inherent in the identity of the younger generation
DS-05	<i>If it's not viral, it won't stand up.</i> (Metro TV, 2024)	The phrase ' <i>no viral, no justice</i> ' has emerged . If it doesn't go viral, the law won't be upheld	Journalism opinion; formal	Social criticism; viral culture; digital justice	The language of opinion highlights the changing meaning of justice in digital spaces, where virality influences public perceptions and drives changes in institutional responses

Table 1 above highlights how social meanings in language choices are shaped through the interaction of cultural awareness, power dynamics, and register variations used by various communication actors in the digital space. In line with the research focus, the analysis of five secondary data sets indicates that register choice cannot be understood as a mere linguistic preference, but as a socio-cultural response influenced by values, ideology, and institutional context.

The first finding shows that the government, through the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo), utilizes formal and regulatory registers to assert its authority in regulating digital communication. The language chosen is highly technical, legally grounded, and prioritizes order. Linguistic strategies within institutional registers play a crucial role in establishing legitimacy and establishing expected standards of behavior in social and organizational contexts. These institutional registers reflect norms and values deemed appropriate and legitimate by a particular community or institution, thereby helping to solidify the identity and authority of that institution. Institutional legitimacy depends not only on individual perceptions of appropriate behavior (propriety) but also on collective consensus and widely recognized validity within the social context (Haack et al., 2020) . Formal language plays a crucial role in reproducing cultural values that emphasize stability and compliance as the basis of social interaction, not simply informing rules. In this context, formal registers serve as

a tool to reinforce cultural narratives that emphasize citizens' obligations to create a conducive and orderly digital space, reflecting both the government's position of authority and the social values internalized by society (Alhugbani, 2025; Zakarneh & Mahmoud, 2025). This is in line with studies on Emirati society showing that language, such as Arabic, plays a role in strengthening social identity, family values, and social stability through the communication of deep cultural values. (Zakarneh & Mahmoud, 2025).

The second finding comes from a Tirto report that outlined the issue of content moderation in Indonesia. The media employed a critical register, emphasizing the lack of transparency and potential abuse of power. Terms such as "one-sided," "potentially arbitrary," and "minimal appeals mechanism" create the impression that the government is not fully accountable. The choice of language that emphasizes the ambiguity of moderation and the use of a critical register reflect a media ideology that favors openness and freedom of expression, while simultaneously representing resistance to formal language standards upheld by the state. In the context of cultural awareness, the public interprets unclear moderation as a threat to freedom of expression, thus using critical language to highlight power imbalances and mobilize public opinion. Media with an ideology of openness tend to use more expressive language and challenge formal norms, allowing for easier communication of social and political criticism (Pratama, 2025; Sparks & Hmielowski, 2022).

The third finding is evident in Metro TV's opinion piece on the phenomenon of "no viral, no justice." This article uses an argumentative-reflective style to illustrate how virality has become a crucial part of the social advocacy process. Phrases such as "dirujuk warganet" or "polisi virtual" demonstrate the shift in social media's function from a space for self-representation to an arena for public scrutiny. Monti et al. (2022) note that opinion language is often used to articulate public frustration with the slowness of formal responses in handling certain cases, thus triggering greater social pressure on relevant institutions. Public cultural awareness interprets virality as a form of moral legitimacy, where the greater the public reaction and attention, the greater the pressure for institutions to act. Changes in language register, particularly the use of more critical and expressive language, are utilized to maximize the social impact of messages and effectively mobilize public opinion. Studies also show that language containing social dimensions such as knowledge, common ground, and trust is more effective in changing public opinion, especially in the context of structured debate and conflict on social media.

The fourth finding, derived from an Instagram post by the Magelang Police, displays a hybrid register, combining institutional authority with a persuasive and communicative approach. Messages such as "criticism delivered ethically" or "respecting differences of opinion" demonstrate the police's efforts to adapt to more egalitarian digital communication norms. This strategy demonstrates that institutions also have a cultural awareness of how to interact with digital audiences. Černikovaitė & Karazijienė (2023) explain that organizations are now adopting a hybrid register in communication as an adaptation to contemporary practices that demand emotional closeness and public acceptability, especially in the context of hybrid work that combines face-to-face and digital communication. This hybrid communication model allows institutions such as the police not only to deliver formal appeals but also to build an open and responsive self-image to community aspirations through a more personal and inclusive approach.

The fifth finding comes from Kompas, a media outlet that discusses strengthening digital literacy as part of developing future human resources. Technocratic and educational registers are used to emphasize that digital skills are a cultural competency that the younger generation must possess. Terms such as "digital talent," "digital literacy

index," and "cybersecurity capability" indicate that language is used to construct notions of progress and competitiveness. This selection of registers aligns with findings (Samsudin et al., 2023) that language in digital education reflects social values of modernity, efficiency, and transformation. Cultural awareness is a crucial element in bridging technical skills with the needs of social adaptation.

A review of five sources reveals three main patterns in the formation of social meaning in the digital space. First, the emergence of a process of institutionalization of norms through the use of formal and technocratic registers. The government and mainstream media package discourse on communication ethics and digital literacy in standard, orderly, and regulatory-oriented language. Humaira et al. (2025) state that the choice of language that emphasizes legal compliance reflects ethical awareness in digital communication, while the rapid dissemination of information helps the public understand norms and their legal obligations.

Second, the negotiation of meaning in digital communication is evident through the use of critical registers containing evaluation, rhetoric, or cynicism as a form of resistance to the dominance of institutional discourse. This choice of language functions as a social pressure demanding transparency, justice, and equality, while the phenomenon of virality strengthens its impetus, thereby triggering a response from institutions. Third, the adaptation of registers by public officials and institutions through a more dialogic, empathetic, and communicative hybrid style demonstrates an understanding of the value of digital communication that emphasizes equality and citizen engagement. This strategy makes institutions more responsive to societal dynamics. The choice of register reflects a social strategy grounded in the speaker's cultural awareness of community norms, contexts, and expectations (Adams et al., 2022; Kolo, 2025) . Overall, the research findings confirm that social meaning in digital communication does not originate solely from the text, but is formed through the relationship between language, context of use, and cultural interpretation. These findings also emphasize the importance of transparency in content moderation, strengthening ethics-based digital literacy, and public communication strategies that are more inclusive, dialogic, and adaptive to the dynamics of digital culture.

CONCLUSION

The construction of social meaning in digital communication demonstrates that language choice is part of a social strategy shaped by the speaker's cultural awareness. The variety of registers emerging in institutional discourse, the media, and society demonstrates that language not only conveys information but also represents the positions, values, and communicative goals of each actor. The formal registers used by the government and mainstream media reinforce authority through the use of standard, technocratic, and regulatory-oriented language. This pattern demonstrates an institutional orientation to regulate public communication behavior and maintain the stability of digital discourse through a norms-based approach.

On the other hand, the critical registers developing in public discourse reflect the dynamics of negotiating meaning, positioning the public as subjects who test the consistency and responsibility of institutions. Evaluative and rhetorical language becomes a means of resistance to the dominance of official discourse, while virality strengthens the position of criticism as an effective mechanism of social pressure in encouraging institutional responses. Meanwhile, the adaptation of registers through a hybrid approach by public institutions demonstrates an effort to adapt to an increasingly egalitarian and participatory digital culture. This pattern demonstrates the growing

importance of communication strategies that prioritize empathy, dialogue, and sensitivity to audience expectations.

Overall, these dynamics confirm that cultural awareness is a key foundation for register selection and the formation of social meaning in digital spaces. Language serves as a tool for legitimacy, resistance, and participation, while also affirming the power relations that exist within it. The implications of these findings point to the need for more transparent and adaptive public communication strategies, as well as strengthening digital literacy that emphasizes ethical dimensions and cultural understanding. Further research is recommended to expand the scope of data and utilize a multimodal approach to more deeply examine how registers play a role in shaping contemporary digital communication practices.

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