

# Modern Javanese directives: Balancing clarity and politeness in a high-context society

Emi Nursanti\*, Suhandano, & Sulistyowati

**Abstract:** Javanese culture is widely characterized as a high-context society that prioritizes indirect communication to maintain social harmony. This study empirically tests this long-held assumption by examining the pragmatic structure of directive speech acts in contemporary data. Data were drawn from twenty short films produced by the Provincial Government of the Special Region of Yogyakarta and analyzed using a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach. Contrary to the classical paradigm, the analysis reveals a prevalent use of head act-oriented structures, indicating a preference for direct communication. This directness is frequently strategically combined with mitigating adjuncts, while the use of aggravating adjuncts is rare. Furthermore, a tendency toward simple pragmatic structures highlights a cultural emphasis on clarity and efficiency. These findings challenge the notion that indirectness is a necessary component of politeness. Instead, they suggest that in modern Javanese communication, directness and politeness operate as complementary, rather than contradictory, goals. Concise and direct utterances are not inherently impolite but are interpreted within the governing sociocultural and hierarchical context. This finding also indicates a sociolinguistic shift towards more direct and effective communication due to modernization.

**Keywords:** *Directive speech act; Javanese; modern communication; pragmatics; pragmatic structure*



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## INTRODUCTION

Politeness, a language feature that shows human social character by considering others' feelings and treating them with the respect they deserve (P. Brown, 2015; Kádár & Haugh, 2013), is universal (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, as interpersonal interactions are mostly influenced by cultural conventions reflecting societal values, politeness rules are also culturally distinctive (Ting-Toomey, 2015; Wierzbicka, 2003). Eastern and Western cultures have different ideas about being polite. While people in Western cultures value individualism, thus prioritizing negative politeness, and prefer direct and explicit communication, the high-context, collectivist Eastern cultures tend to employ indirect communication with a strong emphasis on maintaining harmony and positive face (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020; Hall, 1976; Ward et al., 2016).

This study will investigate directive speech acts (DSAs) in Javanese culture. DSA, or a speaker's attempt to make the listener do something, is a type of speech act that attracts significant interest from pragmatic researchers, especially concerning the politeness degree and the social variables influencing it (Chang & Iunn, 2021; Flöck, 2016; Leech, 2014). The potential to create conflict as it interferes with the interlocutor's freedom and the various

forms that a speaker can convey for the same DSA are some reasons for the intriguing nature of DSA as a research subject (Ruytenbeek, 2019).

DSA's realization in Javanese culture is significant to investigate. As the speech act is inherently face-threatening, how people navigate this risky speech act should be visible in the Javanese culture, with its strong norms of harmony and indirectness (Magnis-Suseno, 1997). Sukarno (2018) asserts that indirect or off-record forms are the most polite way to express requests in Javanese. However, as globalization and communication media change societies' interaction norms (Maiklad & Numtong, 2025; Platt, 1989; Tahar, 2019), a crucial question arises: Does the Javanese indirect pragmatic structure still dominate in the people's everyday discourse?

While the use of DSA in Javanese interactions is well-documented (see Jajal, 2006; Solikhan, 2009; Sukarno, 2018; Widada, 1999), there is a lack of studies investigating whether the indirect feature continues to exist in modern communication. Therefore, this study fills this gap by exploring the DSAs in contemporary Javanese discourse. It specifically aims to investigate the pragmatic structure of DSAs present in the dialogues of twenty short films produced by *Paniradya Kaistimewan*, The Provincial Government of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Although the language used in films is not real-life language, the fictional utterances are based on daily conversation and are meaningful according to the rules of nonfiction discourse (Searle, 1975). This representation of human communication typifies real-life discourse in a certain way, like the mechanics of (im)politeness, and therefore, can provide insights into its workings concerning various linguistic issues (Dynel, 2017; Kizelbach, 2017).

By focusing on the pragmatic structure, this study analyzed the elements making up the DSA. Directive speech usually consists of several parts. Pablos-Ortega (2020) observed that there are three elements in the realization of DSA: 1) the head act, which is the minimal unit that realizes the DSA, 2) the alerter, or the utterance that precedes the head act, and 3) supportive moves or the external unit of the DSA. These supportive moves are often also referred to as hedging, mitigators, or downtoners. The utterance "*Sorry to be a bit forward and all that, but you won't have time for a Christmas drink?*" consists of several parts: 1) the alerter: "*Sorry to be a bit forward and all that,*" 2) the head act: "*you won't have time for a Christmas drink,*" and 3) the mitigators: the negative verb (*you won't have*) and the adversative particle (*but*). This example demonstrates that the alerter and mitigator fundamentally perform the same function, which is to lessen the directive force of the head act. Therefore, the DSAs in this study were examined by focusing solely on two elements: the head act (H) and the supportive moves (S).

Unfortunately, the theory presented by Pablos-Ortega (2020) does not consider the intensifier as an element that modifies the head act, despite the fact that speakers do not always reduce their illocutionary force in directive utterances; instead, they also employ specific linguistic elements

to increase their directive power. Therefore, in this study, the intensifier element was included as a part forming the directive utterance. The intensifiers, or features of the upgrading strategy, can take the form of conveying possible consequences if not ignoring the command, emphasizing certain elements in the directive utterance delivered, or emphasizing its time dimension (Flöck & Geluykens, 2015).

This study investigated the occurrence pattern of these elements to determine whether Javanese speech acts are primarily oriented towards the head act [H] or supportive moves [S]. Should the pattern indicate a tendency for the structure [H] to appear either independently or preceding a mitigator or downtoner [S-], which serves to diminish the directive force, it can be concluded that the directive force is significant and the people tend to employ a direct strategy, moreover if the [H] is preceded or followed by an intensifier [S+] that serves to strengthen the illocutionary force. On the contrary, if the downgrading strategy is commonly employed, either independently or before [H], the directive force was lessened, leading the community to adopt a less directive strategy (Jarudecharat & Worathumrong, 2023).

As the assessment of politeness in DSA also depends on the strategies it employs, this study aligns the pragmatic structure of each utterance with its directive strategy. The strategies classification is adapted from Pablos-Ortega's (2019) comprehensive yet simple categories to suit the differences in rules, linguistic elements, and cultural context between Javanese and English. In this study, the DSA strategies are classified into four: 1) strong direct (SD): the DSA is delivered with imperatives in the *Ngoko* (low) variety without mentioning the subject (Sukarno, 2018); 2) weak direct (WD): this strategy uses performative sentences showing the speaker's needs, obligatory sentences, and imperatives with politeness markers; 3) conventional indirect (CI): it is not delivered in an imperative mood, but rather in a linguistic form commonly used to ask others to do something, such as making suggestions, invitations, or requests for willingness; and 4) nonconventional indirect (NCI): this strategy, taking the form of hints, relies on contextual elements.

By combining the analysis of DSA's strategies and pragmatic structures, this study provides insightful findings and powerful claims that not merely describe the observed phenomena but also explain the underlying communicative logic. In this way, this study aims to enhance the understanding of politeness within Eastern cultures, which had primarily focused on the languages of East Asian countries (see Diegoli, 2022; House & Kádár, 2022; Tantucci & Wang, 2018; Tran, 2022).

## **METHOD**

This study used the qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach with the inductive-sequential design, where the core element is qualitative, and

the supplementary element is quantitative (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The qualitative aspect was fundamental to this study, encompassing tasks such as interpretation, categorization, and the comprehension of language nuances within context. Meanwhile, descriptive statistics in frequency counts were employed to identify patterns and provide evidence for the qualitative interpretation. Compared to employing solely quantitative or qualitative method, this design is typically stronger as it integrates both approaches, thereby providing a comprehensive perspective and reducing the limitations inherent in each method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, it provides more precise conclusions and a more thorough comprehension of the research problem (Greene et al., 1989).

The data of this study were DSAs in Javanese delivered by the characters in twenty short films produced by *Paniradya Kaistimewan*, the Provincial Government of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The data were collected using the selective transcription method by recording the directive utterances into a data table each time they occur and adding further details to the utterances, such as the situational background, the characters' names and their relationships, and other multimodal information. This method generated 525 directive utterances from the 20 movies released from January 2021 until June 2023.

Those data were then analyzed through three steps: 1) data condensation, by selecting and transforming raw data gathered from data collection instruments into interpretable data, 2) data display, through organization of the condensed data into visual representations to make pattern identification and interpretation easier, and 3) drawing/verifying conclusions to identify significant findings, explanations, and theories (Miles et al., 2014). To reduce subjectivity in data analysis, inter-rater agreement was established by consulting a Javanese language expert to review the data labelling and tabulation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the pragmatic structure of directive speech acts (DSAs) requires segmentation to identify the sequence of elements within the utterance. The two components of the DSAs are the head act [H] and supportive moves [S]. [H] constitutes the fundamental component of the DSA capable of independently executing the directive (Yu, 2011), whereas [S] serves as a supplementary element to elaborate or justify the directive (Leech, 2014; Wang, 2009). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) call supportive moves as adjuncts, as this terminology allows for greater flexibility in the potential to boost or diminish the directive power.

By adapting the frameworks proposed by Jarudecharat and Worathumrong (2023) and Klinkajorn (2014), this study classifies pragmatic structures into three categories: [H] oriented, [S+] oriented, and [S-] oriented, emphasizing the need to distinguish between elements that enhance and weaken

the directive's force. The [S+] element, or aggravating adjunct, serves to enhance the directive force, whereas the [S-], or mitigating adjunct, serves to lessen it. Each orientation comprises several subordinate structures. Table 1 presents the frequency of occurrence for each substructure.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of pragmatic structures in DSAs

Face threat	Pragmatic Structure	SD	WD	CI	NCI	Σ	
more ↑ ↓ less	S+ oriented	S+, H, S+	2				2
		S+, H	4	2	9		15
		S+, H, S-		3	2	2	7
	H oriented	H, S+	39		11	1	51
		H, S+, S-		3	4		7
		H	98		21	5	124
		H, S-, S+		2			2
	S- oriented	H, S-		83	38	3	124
		S-, H, S+		11	4		15
		S-, H		110	31	2	143
S-, H, S-			22	7	1	30	
S-			4		1	5	
	Σ	143	240	127	15	525	

Table 1 presents the pragmatic structures from [S+] to [S-], organized according to their directive force. A lower level indicates reduced directive force or diminished threat to the interlocutor's face.

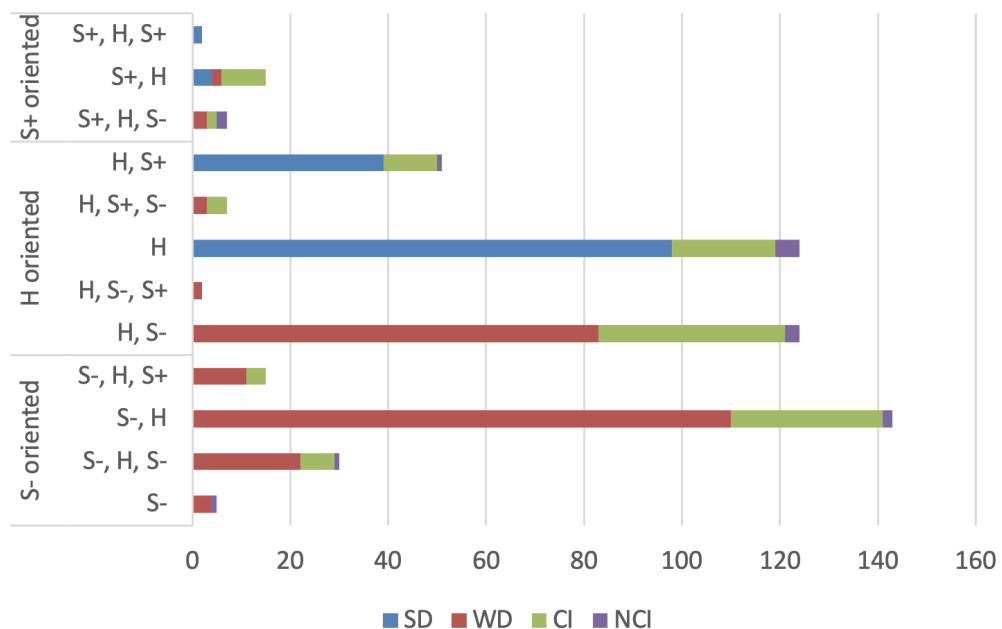


Figure 1 illustrates the patterns and tendencies related to the utilization of each substructure.

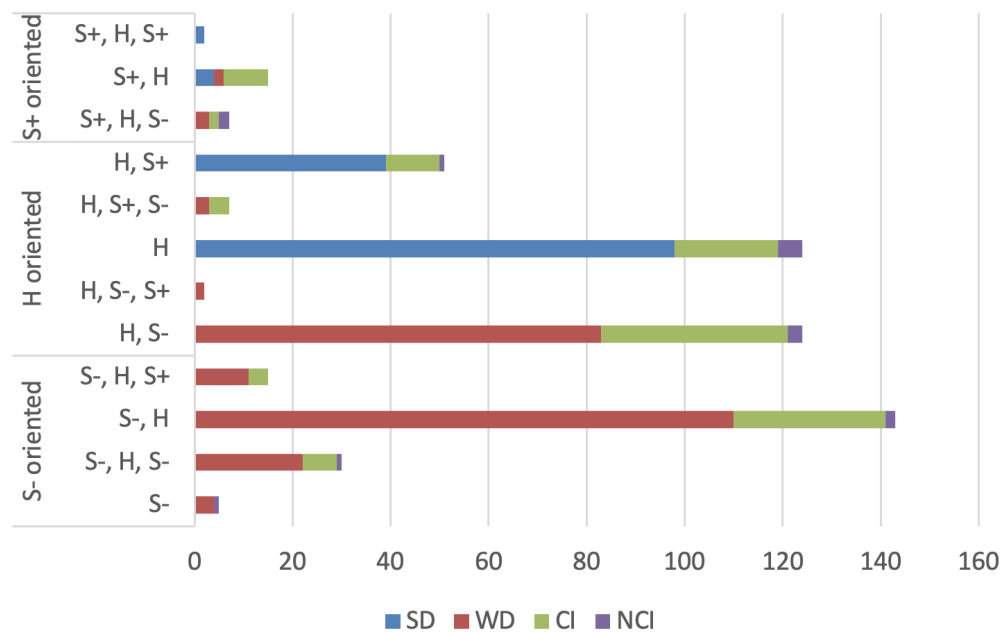


Figure 1. Visualization of the frequency distribution of pragmatic structures

Figure 1 shows that the [H] oriented structure, with a frequency of 308 utterances (58.7%), dominates the use of DSA in this study. Then, the [S-] oriented structure ranks second with a frequency of 193 utterances (36.7%). The [S+] oriented structure is the least utilized, with a frequency far lower than other structures, accounting for merely 4.6% (24 utterances). These results explain the preference of Javanese speakers to initiate directive utterances with the primary component (head act). This implies the importance of clear communication for them. However, in certain situations, when a direct imperative seems inappropriate, speakers can begin the utterance with a politeness marker or mitigating adjunct [S-]. The use of [S+], or the aggravating adjunct, at the beginning of an utterance is very uncommon. This structure is only used in very urgent contexts because [S+] serves to increase the directive force and has the potential to cause conflict.

From Figure 1, it is also evident that simple patterns, such as [H], [S-, H], and [H, -S], are generally employed more often than more complex patterns, like [H, S-, S+] or [S-, H, S+]. This signifies a preference for clear and effective speech and aligns with Grice's (1975) politeness maxims, especially the maxim of manner, which suggests that individuals inherently opt for concise communication to facilitate understanding. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that to balance clarity and politeness, speakers often use simple structures, as more complex structures may introduce ambiguity or excessive directness that could impede effective communication. This preference for simple structures is similar to Klinkajorn's (2014) findings on directive speech in Thailand, where complex patterns composed of multiple elements are generally avoided due to the increased difficulty in interpretation for the interlocutor.

Figure 1 also shows that the four predominant substructures are [S-, H] at 27.2%, [H, S-] at 23.6%, [H] at 23.6%, and [H, S+] at 9.7%. The components of these four predominant substructures reveal a greater inclination towards linguistic strategies that soften the impact of the directive [S-] rather than those that intensify it [S+]. This outcome parallels Flöck's (2016) findings in British and American English directive utterances. She asserted that this preference confirms the claim that directive speech is understood as a face-threatening act, necessitating the use of mitigating devices. In contexts that do not pose a threat to the interlocutor's face, such as in close or hierarchical (downward) interactions, speakers are not required to employ mitigating strategies. The following discussion provides a more detailed explanation and examples of each pragmatic structure.

### [S+] oriented directive speech

[S+], or aggravating adjunct, or upgrader, is a modification strategy used to increase the strength, intensity, or urgency of a directive utterance (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). This strategy can be used to challenge or threaten the face of the interlocutor and to exert more pressure to comply with the directive utterance (Flöck, 2016). In this study, [S+] oriented directive utterances were the least frequently used, with only 24 utterances (4.6%). This implies a Javanese preference to avoid directive utterances that are harsh and potentially hurtful to the interlocutor. Figure 2 shows its distribution in each substructure and directive strategy.

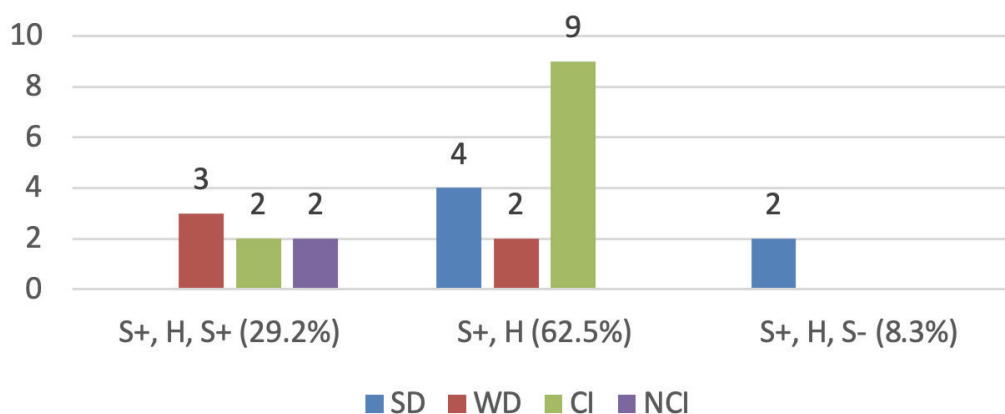


Figure 2. Distribution of the substructures and directive strategies in S+-oriented utterances

Figure 2 demonstrates that, in this orientation, the substructure [S+, H], as the simplest formula, is the most commonly used. Within this substructure, there are fifteen utterances, of which six were expressed using the direct strategy (SD and WD) and nine employed the conventional indirect (CI) strategy. An example of data within the strong direct strategy is shown in Extract 1.

Extract 1. *Sri, kowe ki bocah wingi sore. Nek pengin uripmu tentrem, kowe rasah neko-neko.* (12/4)  
[Sri, you're just a kid. If you want a peaceful life, don't mess around..]

Extract 1 is a threat delivered by Kenthos, a village youth, to Sri because Sri is considered to have influenced the villagers to follow the sultan's program, which will only cause them misery. The core part or head act of this directive utterance is '*kowe rasah neko-neko*' [don't mess around]. The speaker uses the negative assessment '*kowe ki bocah wingi sore*' [you're just a kid] to demonstrate that the interlocutor is too young and inexperienced, which serves as an aggravating adjunct.

In Javanese culture, which emphasizes the importance of hierarchy, young people are culturally seen as having less authority than their elders. Therefore, this opening remark is considered highly disrespectful as it undermines the competence, credibility, and authority of the interlocutor. Besides this negative evaluation, the directive is further intensified by the accompanying threat '*nek pengin uripmu tentrem*' [if you want your life to be peaceful], highlighting that Sri's actions pose a danger to her life. In this instance, the speaker amplifies the directive's intensity by expressing a negative assessment and a sense of threat, aiming to instill feelings of inferiority and fear in the interlocutor to ensure compliance with the order.

While extract 1 demonstrates that the [S+, H] substructure is applicable to direct strategy and can further reinforce the direct command, extract 2 indicates that this technique can also be employed for indirect strategy, which is commonly known as a polite way to convey DSA (Blum-Kulka, 1987; P. Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Extract 2. *Ora isa. Tetep sing salah ki kowe. Ha ngerti pitikku dolan kok ra digusah?* (138/1)  
[No way. It's still your fault. You knew my chickens were here, but you didn't chase them away?]

Extract 2 belongs to the conventional indirect category, as it is not expressed in an imperative form, making its illocutionary meaning less immediately clear. The main purpose of the statement is to request the listener to drive away his chickens when they are near his home. The utterance is preceded by an aggravating adjunct in the form of disagreement: '*Ora isa. Tetep sing salah ki kowe.*' [No way. It's still your fault.] This disagreement has violated the politeness principle (Grice, 1975) as it threatens the interlocutor's positive face. Within the comedic framework of the film, this statement aims to provoke amusement from the audience; nevertheless, in actual communication, such a disagreement frequently serves to strengthen the directive force. Framing the interlocutor's actions as wrong justifies the

right thing to do, thereby enhancing the directive's power. The relatively high frequency of conventional indirect strategies in this most face-threatening structure indicates that indirectness is not necessarily more polite.

Figure 2 also depicts the occurrence of utterances beginning with [S+] and ending with [S-], as in Extract 3 below.

Extract 3 *Cah enom kok suwe le mikir, Ndu..Ndu. Selak digrebeg Landa kowe.* (401/5)

[You're young but take so long to think. You'll be caught by the Dutch before you know it.]

Pak Dukuh made this statement to Pandu during their chess game. He employed an indirect strategy to inspire Pandu to think swiftly, as discussing intelligence could undermine the other's self-esteem. The negative evaluation '*cah enom kok suwe le mikir*' [You're young but take so long to think.] was chosen to begin the statement. It also becomes the directive core whose illocutionary meaning is 'don't think too long'. Then, to make it less serious and reduce the tension, he added a joke '*selak digrebeg Landa kowe*' [you'll be caught by the Dutch]. As the face-threatening nature of [S+] can be considered too risky not to be mitigated, this combination of [S+] and [S-] is a compromise that simultaneously can strengthen the compliance and reduce the imposition (Flöck, 2016).

In a limited number of instances, specifically two utterances, by featuring the structure [S+, H, S+], the speakers utilize an aggravating adjunct both at the beginning and the end of the utterance, as demonstrated in data 4.

Extract 4 *Kowe ki seprana seprene urip nek Jogjakarta kok ra ngerti berita ki piye ta Dik Dik? Update ngono kuwi lho, ben ora cethek-cethek banget pemikiranmu dan pengetahuanmu.* (301/9)

[You've been in Yogyakarta for so long, how come you don't know the news? Update yourself, so your thoughts and knowledge aren't so shallow.]

The participants in this dialogue are Sum and Asih, two young women living next door. Sum, who was quite surprised and disappointed because Asih did not know about the big celebration at the Yogyakarta Palace where she would be one of the dancers, advised her to keep up with the news so as not to miss important information. The directive core of the utterance is '*Update ngono kuwi lho*' [Update yourself]. However, before and after delivering the core, Sum gives a negative evaluation that makes the advice sound harsh. Despite its blunt and rude nature, criticizing the addressee's shallow knowledge and lack of awareness of current events through negative statements surrounding the core message increases the likelihood of eliciting compliance with the advice given.

In this category, it can be concluded that the principles of respect and harmony underlying interactions in Javanese culture (Magnis-Suseno, 1997) make this [S+] oriented substructure uncommon in daily conversation. This limited use is also predominantly uttered by speakers who are angry or disappointed with their interlocutors. Before speaking, speakers assess their FTA, and there are certain contexts where politeness is not taken into account, one of which is anger, resulting in less mitigated language (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). In such contexts, speakers explicitly express negative emotional attitudes through these aggravators (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Besides implying the speaker's strong emotions, utterances oriented at aggravating adjuncts may also affect the interlocutor's perception, prompting immediate compliance with the command, as the modification devices amplify the directive's authority and can convey a sense of urgency and authorization (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). However, the use of this impolite, conflict-filled, and aggressive language also has the potential to make the interlocutor feel embarrassed, insulted, hurt, or angry (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017), especially if the utterance is accompanied by aggravating non-verbal behavior, such as unpleasant facial expressions, lowered eyebrows, and a loud voice (L. Brown & Prieto, 2017).

### [H]-oriented directive speech

H or head act is the minimal unit (Flöck, 2016; Pablos-Ortega, 2019) or the core of a directive speech act (Jarudecharat & Worathumrong, 2023). This part can realize the action independently without reliance on other elements (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). In this study, 308 (58.7%) of all utterances in the film dialogue were [H] oriented, placing the head act at the beginning. This category comprises five substructures, from the simplest, [H], to the most complex, such as [H, S+, S-] and [H, S-, S+]. Figure 3 illustrates the frequency distribution of [H] oriented utterances within each substructure and their corresponding DSA strategies.

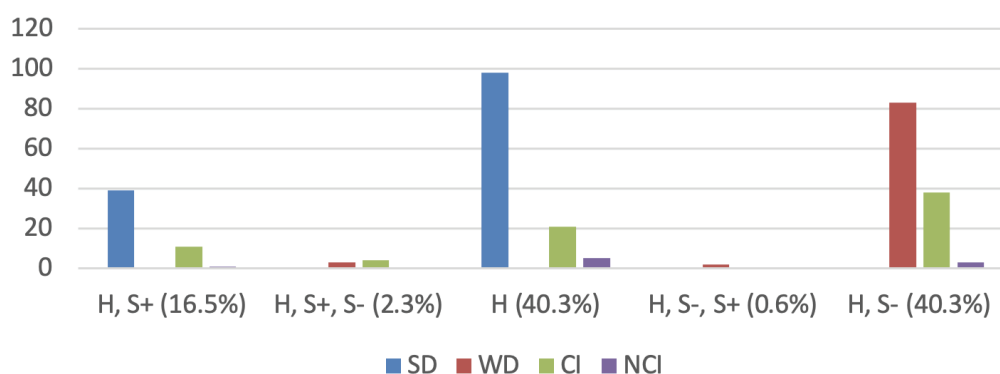


Figure 3. Distribution of the substructures and directive strategies in [H] oriented utterances

Figure 3 indicates that [H] oriented utterances are predominantly employed in direct strategies, comprising 137 utterances (44.5%) within the strong direct strategy and 88 utterances (28.6%) within the weak direct strategy. The limited quantity of indirect strategies in this structure supports Jarudecharat and Worathumrong's (2023) assertion that when [H] oriented utterances are employed more frequently, their directive force tends to be stronger.

Within this [H] oriented category, two substructures exhibiting the highest and equal frequency of use are [H] and [H, S-]. The [H], or a singular head act, formula represents a midpoint between [S+] and [S-], rendering the utterances neutral, neither rude nor polite. Through this formula, by placing the core part at the beginning and omitting any politeness markers, the speaker prioritizes clarity. Besides, people use it frequently due to its efficiency, as it is the most basic and simple formula (Klinkajorn, 2014). Sometimes, one word is enough to realize the DSA, as exemplified in Extract 5.

Extract 5            *Baleni!* (33/16)  
                          [Repeat it!]

Ajeng made this remark to her boyfriend, Aji, after she became upset that her shot was not good enough to post on Instagram. In a harsh tone, she insisted that the photo be retaken. The illocutionary force of this DSA is clear and efficient since the verb '*baleni*' (repeat) alone can express the speaker's intention by indicating the activity to be undertaken.

In a different context, even words or phrases that are not verbs can also express DSA, as demonstrated in Extract 6.

Extract 6.            *Kacang ijo!* (238/13)  
                          [Mung beans!]

Kismo made this utterance to the people waiting in front of his kitchen while he was making *bakpia*. Although he only said '*Kacang ijo!*' [Mung beans.], they knew that he meant to ask the person carrying the mung beans to hand them over, as this was a common practice. This is a non-sentential utterance, an utterance that is only a fragment and does not have a clear predicate (Dragone & Lison, 2016). Nevertheless, the utterance managed to convey a complete meaning, in this case, as a request (Fernández et al., 2007; Schlangen, 2003). The ability of the interlocutor to interpret such minimal language input depends heavily on the context and shared understanding between the participants.

The prevalence of utterances featuring this singular head act element in Javanese culture, which is recognized for its politeness and indirectness, is noteworthy. However, as it is mostly used in the strong direct (SD) strategy, which is predominantly employed by individuals with minimal social dis-

tance and in hierarchical interactions, this finding is not really surprising. In such participant relationships, conveying strong direct DSA is acceptable because familiarity among participants typically results in diminished emphasis on politeness during exchanges (Ronan, 2022). Its frequent usage signifies a preference for direct and efficient communication because this substructure, comprising solely a single head act, is the most basic and uncomplicated formula as well as the most effective pattern for conveying the speaker's meaning (Klinkajorn, 2014). It also exemplifies contemporary communication that is immediate and effective (Tahar, 2019) and aligns with other studies stating that modern communication prioritizes speed, brevity, and efficiency (Mialkowska et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2021; Zakaria & Muton, 2022).

The other substructure dominating in the [H] oriented structure is [H, S-]. Through this formula, the speaker initially conveys the main directive, then provides politeness markers or mitigators. Generally, these mitigators can reduce the directive strength by increasing optionality (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Leech, 2014). Extract 7 exemplifies this.

Extract 7            *Kowe tak foto neng kene gelem ra?* (55/16)  
                         [If I take your photo here, is it okay?]

When Aji spotted a suitable location for taking a picture, he delivered this invitation to Ajeng. Despite his excitement, he did not force Ajeng to take a picture there. The question '*gelem ra?*' [is it okay?] at the end of his utterance was meant to ask for willingness and provide the option of refusal, making the directive not coercive. Through this device, the speaker framed his utterance as something 'negotiable' whose result is a shared decision (Caffi, 2007).

If the previous data indicates that employing a single mitigation device has enhanced the politeness of directive speech, this study also identified several utterances containing multiple mitigators, as exemplified in Extract 8.

Extract 8   *Ra maem dhisik pa, Le? Selak bengi lho. Mengko selak arep tak resiki mejane.* (373/7)  
                         [Why don't you eat first, Son? It's getting late. I'll clean the table immediately.]

This utterance was delivered by a mother to her son. Like the previous data, which used a conventional indirect strategy in the form of a question, in Extract 8, the speaker also conveyed a question in the form of a negative interrogative mitigation device (Flöck, 2016). Heritage (2002) states that this negative question implicitly suggests the desired response from the speaker, so the question '*Ra maem dhisik pa, Le?*' [Why don't you eat first, Son?] reflects the mother's desire for her son to eat immediately.

Besides using the interrogative form as the first mitigation device, the mother also explained the rationale behind the required action, noting that it was already too late and that she would promptly clear the dining table. This reason is referred to as a grounder and is among the most commonly employed mitigators (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Caffi, 2007; Flöck, 2016). In addition to minimizing imposition by offering justification or rationale for the request, by using the grounder, the speaker also employs the principle of negative politeness by viewing the interlocutor as a rational partner who cannot be compelled to act without full comprehension (Blum-Kulka, 1992). Therefore, with these two politeness markers, the utterance does not convey a coercive command but rather a request for cooperation. That the [H, S-] substructure is also dominating indicates the Javanese people's preference for clear but polite speech, signifying a balance between the pragmatic need for effective directives and the unwavering commitment to the two fundamental principles of Javanese society, harmony and respect.

Although in a limited number, in this [H] oriented structure, some utterances incorporate intensifiers after the head act to reinforce the imposition. Example 9 illustrates this concept.

Extract 9 *Bu Endang, ora cok gawe ontran-ontran. Mengko nek Ratinah ngerti, diperkarakke, kapok Jenengan. (85/3)*  
[Bu Endang, don't make a fuss. If Ratinah finds out, you'll be sued, and you'll regret it.]

Through this statement, Bu Tutik intended to warn Bu Endang not to spread rumors carelessly. After conveying the main point of the statement, '*ora cok gawe ontran-ontran*' [don't make a fuss], Bu Tutik cautioned that failure to comply could result in legal action. This negative consequence is classified as an aggravating modification because the speaker exerts pressure to comply with her request, and it limits the interlocutor's freedom (Flöck, 2016). This aggravating modification reinforces the directive force but makes the utterance sound harsh, hurtful and potentially causes conflict. Therefore, people rarely used the aggravating adjunct to minimize its negative effects.

While the previous data samples are structured in basic formulas, more complex formulas, such as [H, S-, S+] and [H, S+, S-], were also identified with low frequency. Due to this complication, these formulas are hardly employed in communication when the context permits the use of simpler formulas, as they are more efficient. A datum illustrating this complex structure is presented in Extract 10.

Extract 10 *Ning suk titenana. Ora teges aku ndongakke ala. Kita lihat saja nanti nasibmu seperti apa.* (17/4)

[But pay attention tomorrow. It doesn't mean I pray for bad things. We'll just see what fate holds for you.]

Kenthos made this statement when he was offended, as Parto disregarded his advice. '*Ning suk titenana*' [But pay attention tomorrow] is the core of his directive utterance. In Javanese, this is a form of threat or warning that something bad will happen in the future. However, the speaker then conveys a softening by saying '*Ora teges aku ndongakke ala.*' [It doesn't mean I pray for bad things.] This mitigator is known as a cajoler, a linguistic sign intended to create closeness between participants (Flöck, 2016). Kenthos said this to convince that he did not wish for any negative outcomes. Then, he ended his statement by emphasizing the consequences '*Kita lihat saja nanti nasibmu seperti apa*' [We'll see what fate holds you.] to reiterate that there will be consequences for ignoring his advice.

The structure of this utterance is quite complex. After conveying the core [H], Kenthos provided a marker softening the directive's strength [S-], but then added emphasis to strengthen it again [S+]. The complexity is shaped by the social factors present among the participants. Their closeness makes the speaker not want to ruin their good relationship, so he adds a mitigator in the form of a cajoler. However, at that time, he was also upset and hurt because his advice was not accepted. Kenthos wants Parto to know that he will regret not taking his advice. This way of speaking is likely also influenced by Javanese culture, which upholds harmony, self-control, and politeness, so that the anger he feels is as much as possible covered up with polite language.

In conclusion, this [H] oriented structure indicates that the speaker's decision to initiate the utterance with a directive core (head act) signifies a preference for direct and concise communication. In contexts of minimal social distance or in downward interactions, the use of a single head act formula is quite appropriate. However, in more complex situations and contexts, the speaker will incorporate modification devices as required. Participants with close social distance typically select simple formulas for less-threatening requests, whereas complex formulas are generally employed in more intricate scenarios. It is evident that the notion of an indirect communication style in Javanese, as a representation of Asian high-context culture, is contested. Speakers should consider the sociocultural and hierarchical contexts when delivering their directive utterances, rather than relying on indirectness. This tendency is also observed in various other Asian cultures, like South Korea (Moon et al., 2019), Thailand (Maiklad & Numtong, 2025), and China (Hong, 1999; Lee-Wong, 1994).

### [S-] oriented directive speech

[S-], often called a mitigating modifier (Flöck, 2016) or downgrader (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), is a linguistic device used to reduce imposition, thereby lowering the directive force of an utterance (Pablos-Ortega, 2020). Within this category, by placing [S-] at the beginning, the directive utterances that are considered too direct or aggressive can be further softened. This is especially important in cultures that highly value indirectness and politeness (Revita et al., 2025), such as Javanese. A total of 193 utterances (36.7%) of the 525 data in this study were [S-] oriented. With this structure, speakers prioritize politeness markers in their utterances.

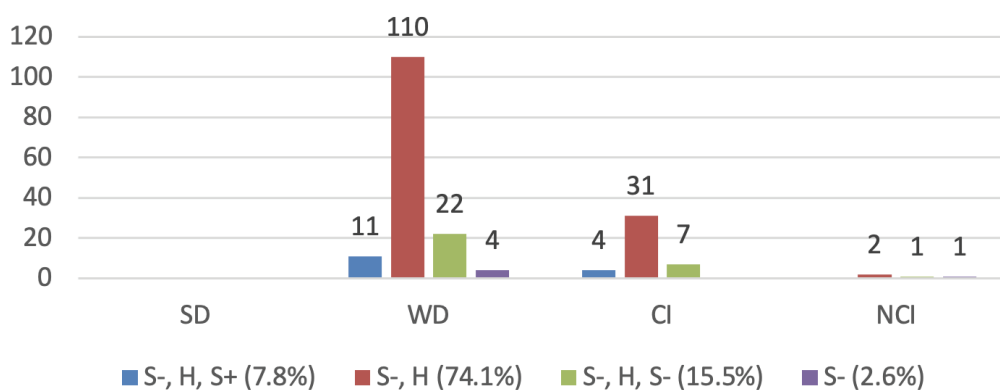


Figure 4. Distribution of the substructures and directive strategies in [S-]-oriented utterances

As shown in Figure 4, this structure is mostly used in the weak direct (WD) strategy. The [S-, H] formula is the most frequently used, and its frequency is much higher than the other three formulas. In this formula, the mitigator is placed at the beginning of the utterance before delivering the head act. The [S-] at the beginning of this utterance can be single or multiple. An instance of a single mitigator at the start of an utterance is illustrated in Extract 11.

Extract 11 *Lha iya apik kabeh, tapi nek njejuk maeman ki kudu nganggo tangan tengen, ora pareng tangan kiwa.* (17/4)  
[Yes, all are good, but when taking food, you have to use your right hand, not your left hand.]

A mother said this to her son, who is still in junior high school. The son just said that both the left and right hands are good. In this utterance, the mother employed a mitigator in the form of a cohesive device, ‘*lha iya apik kabeh*’ [yes, all are good]. This indicates agreement with the son’s statement, but also prepares the interlocutor for the command that will be given later. In her study, Flöck (2016) identified this cohesive device as the most frequently used mitigator in English directive utterances. She claimed that this marker functions to connect and convey agreement, so it is often used

to create solidarity and shared decisions. In this way, the mother's utterance becomes less confrontational.

In other contexts, some speakers employ more than one mitigating device to start their utterances, as shown in Extract 12.

Extract 12 *Ibu-ibu sedaya, wonten ing pepanggihan sonten menika kula ndherek menghimbau. Gandheng sak menika kathah sanget kejadian-kejadian kenakalan remaja, kula nyuwun Panjenengan sedanten sebagai orang tua ndherek mengontrol putra putrinipun.* (94/3) [Ladies, at this afternoon's meeting, I'd also like to make an appeal. Because there are so many cases of juvenile delinquency, I ask you all, as parents, to help monitor your sons and daughters.]

The speaker employed various mitigating strategies before presenting the core directive '*kula nyuwun Panjenengan sedanten sebagai orang tua ndherek kontrol putra putrinipun*' [I ask you all, as parents, to help monitor your sons and daughters.]. First, she began her speech with the address term or greeting '*ibu-ibu sedaya*' [ladies]. This initial feature is commonly referred to as an alerter, an element that precedes a request and functions to draw the listener's attention to the next speech act (Maros & Halim, 2018). In Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's term (1984), it is called an attention getter. The act of greeting, while seemingly simple, serves as a positive politeness strategy by highlighting solidarity and recognizing the identity of the interlocutor (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Then, the second mitigating device is the *Krama* style. This style shows elegance and politeness, suitable for formal occasions, and for speaking with people who are not very familiar or respected (Keeler, 1987). Therefore, while being appropriate to the context of the formal event in progress, the use of *Krama* style is also considered a mitigation because it implies respect for the interlocutor. Furthermore, the speaker also used the third mitigating device in the form of a downtoner by saying '*kula ndherek menghimbau*' [I'd also like to make an appeal]. The word '*ndherek*' [also] implies that she is not the initiator and not the only person instructing this, thus weakening her authority. The word '*menghimbau*' [make an appeal], which means 'to invite', also indicates that the instruction is not coercive.

In addition, the speaker also provided a grounder or reasoning behind the appeal, '*gandheng sak menika kathah sanget kejadian-kejadian kenakalan remaja*' [because there are so many cases of juvenile delinquency.] This reasoning further reduced the imposition, as it aims to make sure that the interlocutor already understood the problem before the request was conveyed. By presenting several mitigators before delivering the main request, the directive's force was softened, more polite, and less coercive, as it seemed like an invitation to cooperate. The employment of multiple mitigating devices in one utterance may reflect the character of '*alus*' (refined)

in Javanese culture as an effort to avoid emotional turmoil, frank criticism disagreement, and conflict (Sugiharto, 2008).

Within this [S-] category, there are also instances of utterances that comprise solely mitigation devices without any head act. This formula is primarily employed within the inviting function, as demonstrated in Extract 13.

Extract 13            *Mangga, Mbak Anya.* (99/3)  
[Please come in, Mbak Anya.]

Seeing Anya standing near the door, the speaker said this to ask her to come in and join. This constitutes a non-sentential utterance due to the absence of a predicate. If expressed in a complete sentence, the directive command would likely be '*Mangga tindak mlebet, Mbak Anya.*' [Please come in, Mbak Anya]. However, due to the participants' shared understanding of the context, just saying '*mangga*' [please] was sufficient for the interlocutor to recognize that the utterance was an invitation for her to enter. This non-sentential utterance, which is spoken in *Krama* (high variation) and lacks a verb to indicate the necessary action, signifies a high level of politeness, showing respect and hospitality.

With a more complex formula, but only in small numbers, some utterances begin with a mitigating device but end with an aggravating one.

Extract 14 *Aku ki sebagai kancamu ming arep ngelingke supaya kowe ora terpengaruh karo cah cilik-cilik kae sebab uripmu bakalan cilaka. Tenin kuwi.* (14/4)  
[As your friend, I just want to remind you not to be influenced by those young people because your life will be miserable. This is real.]

Kenthos opened his statement with '*aku ki sebagai kancamu*' [as your friend], highlighting the bond they share. Similar to his statement in Extract 10, this mitigator serves as a cajoler (persuader) to express solidarity, aiming to convince Parto that what Kenthos was about to convey is beneficial for him, given their strong relationship. After delivering the persuasive message, he then stated the core of his directive, '*kowe ora terpengaruh karo cah cilik-cilik kae*' [you not to be influenced by those young people]. To reinforce this, he added an aggravating device in the form of a negative consequence, '*sebab uripmu bakalan cilaka*' [because your life will be miserable,] to make Parto comply with the command he conveyed. Then, after stating the consequence, he emphasized his point by saying '*Tenin kuwi*' [This is real] to further convince. The word '*tenan*' [true], which he changed to '*tenin*,' highlights the emphasis on 'absolutely real'. This utterance demonstrates that the speaker used modification devices in directive utterance strategically. By employing mitigating and aggravating strategies

simultaneously, the speaker would achieve a specific effect of strengthening solidarity while ensuring the directive is taken seriously. In this manner, he seeks to balance politeness with a firm command.

Although the [H] oriented structure dominates overall, with its greatest variety of substructures, the most commonly employed substructure is predominantly within the [S-] oriented category, particularly the [S-, H] substructure. Introducing a directive utterance with a mitigating adjunct indicates that the speaker intends to reduce the strength of the directive before conveying the main point of the utterance. This type of structure is frequently observed in cultures that favor indirect communication styles (Revita et al., 2025). By delivering the directive style in a less direct manner, it further lightens the imposition, reduces face threat, and avoids conflict (Flöck, 2016; Jarudecharat & Worathumrong, 2023; Leech, 2014). This aligns with the emphasis on harmony and the avoidance of conflict and confrontation within Javanese society (Geertz, 1960; Magnis-Suseno, 1997). However, as shown in the last data sample, the use of these mitigating devices is also adjusted to the needs. The greater the burden placed by the speaker on the interlocutor, the more complex the pragmatic formula and the higher the level of politeness strategies applied (Klinkajorn, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Javanese culture represents a high-context Asian culture that is assumed to prioritize indirect communication (Gupta & Sukamto, 2020; Hall, 1976; Ward et al., 2016). This study seeks to test this long-held assumption with contemporary data by analyzing directive speech in modern Javanese short films. Using a qualitative-dominant mixed methods approach with the inductive-sequential design, this study analyzed the pragmatic structure of directive speech acts in twenty short films produced by *Paniradya Kais-timewan*, Provincial Government of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The results show the prevalence of directive utterances featuring an [H] oriented structure, which starts with the directive core or head act. It reflects the Javanese people's preference for direct communication. However, in certain contexts, like situations that might be face-threatening or interactions with strangers or seniors, speakers may begin their utterances with politeness markers or mitigating adjuncts [S-]. The use of [S+] or an aggravating adjunct at the beginning of an utterance is uncommon. As this structure enhances the directive force and may incite conflict, it is likely employed only in urgent situations. Additionally, simple speech patterns also tend to be used more often than complex ones, suggesting a preference for concise and effective speech, as overly complex structures risk creating ambiguity or excessive directness, which can hinder communication.

Overall, these findings challenge the classical paradigm of Javanese communication as inherently indirect. The analysis reveals that Javanese speakers achieve effective yet polite directives by combining simple pragmatic struc-

tures, which ensure clarity and reduce processing load, with strategic mitigating devices to lessen imposition. Contesting the claim that indirectness necessarily implies politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987), these findings suggest that directness and politeness are, not contradictory but, complementary communication goals, particularly in this modern era. Therefore, concise statements are not inherently impolite, as their interpretation is always governed by the prevailing sociocultural and hierarchical context.

While contributing to the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics by providing empirical data on the shift of a major cultural speech style and offering insights into how traditional values are negotiated in modern communication, this study has a clear limitation that the data were taken from scripted films, rather than naturally occurring interactions. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to investigate whether this preference for directness holds true in real communication.

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