

Populist political communication: A sociolinguistic study of Dedi Mulyadi's language style on Instagram and YouTube

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the linguistic practices underlying Dedi Mulyadi's populist political communication on social media, particularly Instagram and YouTube. It adopts a qualitative approach, employing literature review and content analysis to explore how language is used strategically to construct a populist image and cultural identity. The data consist of videos uploaded on social media, with the analysis focusing on Dedi Mulyadi's utterances that reflect political communication styles. The researcher serves as the primary instrument, and the data are analyzed using content analysis at the level of discrete units. The findings reveal that Dedi Mulyadi consistently employs Sundanese and Indonesian through language choice, code-switching, and code-mixing, combined with narrative and affective speech styles. This communication style not only reflects his closeness to grassroots communities but also functions as a means of constructing symbolic power and expressing resistance to political elites. These findings underscore the significant role of language in digital spaces in shaping social relations, cultural identity, and effective political communication strategies.

Keywords: *populist communication, social media, linguistic practices*

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital communication era, social media has become a central arena where political actors construct their public image, communicate messages, and engage directly with society. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube function not only as channels for information sharing but also as spaces where political discourse is produced and infused with social and cultural meanings. As political communication shifts from institutional forms toward more personal and populist approaches, many political figures increasingly use social media to establish emotional and symbolic connections with the public (Nasrullah, 2020).

One notable example is Dedi Mulyadi, a politician from West Java recognized for his distinctive, grounded communication style rooted in local cultural values. Through his Instagram and YouTube platforms, he consistently constructs a narrative of himself as a humble, culturally aware, and spiritually oriented leader. His use of simple, narrative-driven language enriched with local nuances serves as a strategic means of reinforcing his authentic and populist image in the eyes of the public.

This phenomenon highlights the relevance of examining populist political communication, which emphasizes direct engagement between leaders and the people, often by positioning the leader as part of the "ordinary" public in contrast to political elites or systems perceived as detached from societal interests (Moffitt, 2020). From a sociolinguistic perspective, such practices reflect not only rhetorical strategies but also deeper dimensions of identity, ideology, and power embedded in language use.

Analyzing the linguistic practices of political figures on social media is therefore essential to understanding how political identities are constructed and negotiated. Language in this context is far from neutral; it is strategically employed to shape public perception, construct particular images, and sustain political narratives (Fairclough, 2022). At the same time, it reflects the cultural values embodied

by its speakers. In the case of Dedi Mulyadi, the use of Sundanese language, local wisdom, and everyday village expressions plays a key role in positioning himself as a leader “of and for the people.”

Previous studies have largely explored political communication on social media from perspectives such as visual representation, audience engagement, and media framing. However, research focusing specifically on the language style of local political figures and its connection to populism from a sociolinguistic standpoint remains limited, particularly those employing literature-based content analysis. In fact, language style can function as a powerful tool for shaping political narratives, fostering emotional closeness, and strengthening public trust and loyalty (Pratama & Fadillah, 2021). Other studies also emphasize that contemporary political communication is increasingly intertwined with the development of social media, which presents both opportunities and challenges in political engagement (Anshari, 2013; Alfiyani, 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze Dedi Mulyadi’s language style on social media as a form of populist political communication from a sociolinguistic perspective. It focuses on how language is strategically used to construct identity, project a relatable leadership persona, and articulate Sundanese cultural values within an increasingly personalized and symbolically driven digital communication landscape.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in library research, employing content analysis to investigate Dedi Mulyadi’s language style on social media, particularly Instagram and YouTube. It focuses on linguistic practices that reflect populist political communication strategies, the representation of cultural identity, and the construction of leadership images through distinctive language use. A library-based approach is selected to enable an in-depth exploration of documented sources, including journal articles, scholarly books, and relevant research reports. This choice is further justified by the extensive discussion of populist political communication on social media across various forms of media, especially in relation to Dedi Mulyadi. Accordingly, the study not only examines linguistic features in social media content but also considers their broader ideological and cultural implications.

The content analysis centers on video clips and captions published on Dedi Mulyadi’s Instagram and YouTube accounts between January and June 2024. Data were selected based on several criteria: (1) high levels of views or audience interaction; (2) thematic relevance to Sundanese cultural values and populism; and (3) the use of language that signals closeness to the community. The analysis is conducted qualitatively using sociolinguistic frameworks, including concepts such as speech style, code-switching, code choice, and language as symbolic power. In addition, a critical discourse analysis approach is applied to examine the relationship between text, ideology, and social structures, allowing the study to address not only how language is used but also why it is constructed in particular ways and within specific contexts of power.

Data collection involves selecting and reviewing representative content from both platforms based on thematic consistency (e.g., populism, local culture, and social empathy), levels of public engagement (such as likes, views, and comments), and the distinctiveness of linguistic style and cultural symbolism. The analysis integrates sociolinguistic and discourse-oriented perspectives to understand how language functions in constructing social identity and articulating populist ideology. Key analytical concepts include speech style, linguistic identity, locality, and language as a resource of power. Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis framework is employed to explore the interplay between language, ideology, and power in Dedi Mulyadi’s communication practices (Fairclough, 2022). To support the analysis, secondary data in the form of journal articles, books, research reports, and other scholarly publications are used as conceptual references and points of comparison. These sources are particularly important for contextualizing digital political communication, populism, and sociolinguistic approaches to the language styles of public figures. The literature is carefully selected from publications within the past five years, with priority given to studies conducted in Indonesia and those closely aligned with the research focus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Short Profile of Dedi Mulyadi

Dedi Mulyadi is a prominent political figure from Purwakarta, West Java, who served as Regent of Purwakarta for two consecutive terms (2008–2018) and later as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) from 2019 to 2024. He is widely recognized for his grounded political approach, humanistic engagement with society, and strategic use of social media—particularly Instagram and YouTube—to establish direct communication with the public. His leadership style is marked by narratives that emphasize closeness to ordinary people, the preservation of Sundanese cultural values, and elements of local spirituality. Through consistently produced digital content, he delivers social messages in a manner that is simple yet meaningful. These characteristics make him a compelling subject for examining populist political communication, especially from a sociolinguistic perspective that highlights the interplay between language, identity, and symbolic power.

Populist Political Communication in Social Media

Populist political communication is generally characterized by efforts of political actors to position themselves as part of the “common people,” aligning closely with everyday life while distancing themselves from elite imagery (Mudhofir, 2021). In Dedi Mulyadi’s social media presence, this strategy is reflected in narratives that foreground direct engagement with grassroots communities, including villagers, laborers, farmers, and indigenous groups.

For instance, in a YouTube video titled “*Ngobrol Sareng Tukang Becak*” (Chatting with Pedicab Drivers), he not only listens to people’s concerns but also positions himself as an equal conversational partner. This approach illustrates a horizontal mode of communication, which is a defining feature of populist discourse. His use of accessible, down-to-earth language avoids rigid political terminology and instead relies on narrative and affective expressions that resonate with broader audiences.

In this context, language functions as a strategic resource for constructing a relatable and popular persona while simultaneously signaling an anti-elite stance. Such practices reinforce the perception of Dedi Mulyadi not merely as a public official, but as a representative of ordinary citizens who happens to occupy a leadership position (Hidayat, 2023). To provide a clearer picture of the data analyzed in this study, Tabel 1 shows the selected social media content that forms the basis of the analysis.

Table 1. Documentation of Dedi Mulyadi's Instagram Content

No.	Upload Date	Title Content	Caption / Comment	Like & Comment	Summary	Language Notes
1	July 3, 2024	<i>We don't need mutual love, mutual reparation, mutual care</i>		55 thousand likes, 1,312 comments	Invite residents to preserve Sundanese cultural values	Sundanese philosophical expression, a form of moral affirmation
2	April 9, 2024	<i>Dunya mah teu salawasna fair...</i>		60 thousand likes, 1,910 comments	Reflections on the lives of small people	Emotional language, melancholic style
3	June 22, 2024	<i>The mother of the family fighter</i>		40 thousand likes, 950 comments	Appreciation of traditional market mothers	Emotional, narrative, appreciative
4	May 27, 2024	<i>Teu hayang kawasa, hayang aya guna</i>		53 thousand likes, 1,620 comments	Reflection of an ideal leader	Spiritual and humble language
5	June 15, 2024	<i>Fathers, shoe sole makers and living</i>		42 thousand likes, 1,100 comments	Life story of ordinary	Narrative style, people's identity

<i>teachers</i>	<i>comments</i>	<i>people</i>
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Table 2. Documentation of Dedi Mulyadi's YouTube Content

No.	Upload Date	Video Title	Number of Views	Video Content	Linguistic Focus
1	May 12, 2024	<i>Chatting with a Pedicab Driver</i>	1.2 million	The story of a rickshaw driver & social criticism	Code switching, populist narrative
2	June 24, 2024	<i>Meeting Mak Ecih at the Market</i>	980 thousand	Market price story, family economy	Emotions, social solidarity
3	April 17, 2024	<i>Silaturahmi with the Residents of the Traditional Village</i>	800 thousand	Promoting cultural & traditional interactions	Cultural symbols, local languages
4	June 30, 2024	<i>Taking care of Ka Sakola's Orphans</i>	1.1 million	Educational assistance & spiritual values	Language of empathy, moral appeal
5	July 5, 2024	<i>Ngadéngékeun Grandma Complains about her fate</i>	920 thousand	A life story full of struggle	Melancholic language, spiritual narrative

Language Style: Simplicity, Narrative Form, and Local Nuance

Dedi Mulyadi's language style in his YouTube videos and Instagram captions is characterized by the use of simple sentences, a strong narrative structure, and a predominance of everyday Sundanese vocabulary. He often opens with a friendly greeting, includes lighthearted humor, and concludes with a moral reflection or life values. An example of this narrative style is seen in a video of him visiting the home of an orphaned grandmother. "*Kuring Henteu thought that, in Ayeuna's era, there were still creatures living alone without sacmna*". This sentence not only conveys information but also evokes empathy and social solidarity. Furthermore, code-switching between Sundanese and Indonesian strengthens engagement with local audiences while reaching a national audience. This code-switching is used strategically: Sundanese for emotional engagement, and Indonesian for broader ideas (Nurdin, 2020).

Representation of Sundanese Cultural Identity

Beyond his role as a political figure, Dedi Mulyadi positions himself as a cultural representative of Sundanese identity within a modern political landscape. This identity is constructed through various symbolic elements, including traditional attire, local expressions, communal values, and spiritual references embedded in his content. In many videos, he is seen wearing an "*iket*" (a traditional Sundanese headband), greeting people with "*sampurasun*," and discussing Sundanese life philosophies such as "*leuleus jeujeur, silih asih, silih asah, silih asuh*." These are not merely cultural symbols, but rather discursive strategies to connect political identity with local traditional roots, creating a synergy between nationalism and locality. This approach aligns with the theory of language and identity, which

states that the use of language and cultural symbols is a strategy for constructing a social identity oriented toward audience acceptance (Holmes, 2018).

Audience Interaction Dynamics

One important aspect of digital political communication is audience engagement or response, which can be observed through comments, likes, and shares. In the case of Dedi Mulyadi, such interactions play a significant role in shaping public perception. His narrative and approachable communication style encourages not only passive consumption but also active participation from audiences. For example, on the video "Ngobrol Sareng Tukang Becak" (Chatting with Pedicab Drivers), generated thousands of comments, many of which expressed appreciation for his empathy and communicative approach. A notable portion of these responses were written in Sundanese, indicating a strong sense of cultural affinity and shared identity between him and his audience. Comments such as "Nu ieu mah pantes jadi pamingpin" or "Kuring jadi ingingu bapak" demonstrate that Dedi's communication style creates a strong emotional connection.

This pattern suggests that language in digital contexts functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a tool for building emotionally engaged communities. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, such dynamics highlight how language style can generate conative effects that reinforce loyalty and symbolic closeness between political figures and the public (Hidayat, 2023).

Comparison of Other Characters' Language Styles

To deepen the analysis, Dedi Mulyadi's language style can be compared with that of other prominent Indonesian political figures active on social media, such as Ridwan Kamil and Ganjar Pranowo. Ridwan Kamil, for instance, tends to combine humor, visually appealing content, and educational messaging in his communication style (Nasrullah, 2020). In contrast, Ganjar Pranowo often adopts a relatively formal tone, complemented by casual greetings and everyday content to maintain relatability (Nasrullah, 2020).

Compared to these figures, Dedi Mulyadi places stronger emphasis on Sundanese cultural and spiritual elements. His frequent use of local dialects, traditional values, and narrative storytelling distinguishes his communication style. While Ridwan Kamil often appeals to urban digital audiences and Ganjar Pranowo targets a broader national constituency through institutional imagery, Dedi Mulyadi focuses more on grassroots communities, building emotional and cultural connections through local symbolism. This comparison demonstrates that language style in digital political communication is closely aligned with political identity and audience segmentation. In this context, Dedi Mulyadi's approach reflects a symbolic linguistic strategy deeply rooted in local culture, which serves as a means of political differentiation (Pratama & Fadillah, 2021).

Language as a Tool of Power and Resistance

Although Dedi Mulyadi's language appears simple and approachable, it can also be understood as a form of symbolic power. Through his linguistic choices, he implicitly positions himself in contrast to elitist and bureaucratic leadership styles, without engaging in overt criticism. This subtle strategy reflects a form of resistance to formal political structures while simultaneously projecting an image of leadership that is moral, spiritual, and closely connected to the people.

In this sense, language operates as a resource for constructing an alternative form of power—one that is derived not solely from institutional authority, but from public trust and symbolic closeness. Such practices reinforce the notion of populism as a mode of political communication that draws on the dichotomy between "the people" and "the elite," articulated through culturally and linguistically grounded strategies (Bourdieu, 1991).

Language Behavior Analysis

Building on the discussion of populist strategies and cultural symbolism, this section examines the patterns of language behavior evident in Dedi Mulyadi's social media communication through a sociolinguistic lens.

Code Choice

Code choice refers to a speaker's selection of a particular language or variety from their linguistic repertoire in a given context. In multilingual settings, this may involve choosing between different languages, whereas in more homogeneous contexts it may involve shifts in dialect or register. As noted by Gumperz and Levinson (2021), code choice functions as a communicative strategy through which speakers pursue specific social and interactional goals.

In his social media content, Dedi Mulyadi frequently employs Sundanese, particularly in opening segments or when addressing local audiences directly. Expressions such as "sampurasun" are regularly used at the beginning of his videos or during interactions with village communities. This consistent preference highlights the strategic use of language as a means of cultural engagement. Sundanese, in this context, serves to affirm cultural identity, strengthen social bonds, and foster a sense of linguistic intimacy with local audiences.

Code Switching

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single communicative event. According to Wei (2020), this phenomenon is common in multilingual societies and reflects a speaker's ability to adapt to varying social contexts. Code-switching may occur across sentences (intersentential) or within a single sentence (intrasentential).

Dedi Mulyadi frequently alternates between Sundanese and Indonesian in his content. For instance, he may use Sundanese when engaging directly with local individuals and shift to Indonesian when addressing a broader audience. In one video "Bertemu Mak Ecih di Pasar" (Meeting Mak Ecih at the Market), he states: "*Neng ieu mah, teu aya nu miara... makanya pemerintah kudu aya solusi.*" This pattern demonstrates how code-switching serves both communicative and symbolic purposes: it maintains inclusivity while ensuring that messages are accessible to diverse audiences.

Code Mixing

Code-mixing involves the insertion of elements from one language into another within a single utterance, without altering the overall structure or communicative roles. As explained by Muysken (2021), this differs from code-switching in that the base language remains dominant while elements of another language are embedded within it. Code-mixing typically occurs at the level of words or short phrases.

In Dedi Mulyadi's discourse, Sundanese expressions are often embedded within Indonesian sentences. This form of code-mixing is more subtle than full code-switching. For example, "*Kalau hidup urang hayang berkah, kudu silih asah jeung silih asuh.*" This strategy allows him to preserve local identity while simultaneously communicating broader messages, reinforcing both cultural proximity and accessibility.

Speech Style and Register

Speech style and register are variations in language use shaped by context, audience, and communicative purpose. Finegan and Biber (2020) note that speech style reflects speakers' linguistic choices based on levels of formality, interpersonal relationships, and situational context, while register is associated with language variation across specific domains or activities.

Dedi Mulyadi's communication is characterized by a narrative and informal speech style. His discourse often begins with personal experiences or observations that are light yet emotionally resonant. The integration of humor, Sundanese expressions, and culturally grounded references contributes to the

construction of a relatable and approachable persona. At the same time, this style reinforces a populist discourse aimed at fostering connection with grassroots audiences.

CONCLUSION

Dedi Mulyadi's language use on social media illustrates that populist political communication is shaped not only by what is communicated, but also by how messages are framed and delivered. Through strategic language choices—particularly the use of Indonesian and Sundanese—alongside practices of code-switching and code-mixing, and a narrative, emotionally engaging speaking style, he constructs a persona of a leader who is approachable, relatable, and grounded. This communication style reflects not only personal expression but also a deliberate strategy to foster social closeness and broaden audience engagement. Moreover, the consistent incorporation of Sundanese cultural elements, conveyed through both narrative forms and visual symbolism, reinforces cultural identity while simultaneously functioning as a means of political differentiation from more formal, bureaucratic, and elite-centered representations of leadership.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these linguistic practices demonstrate the performative power of language in shaping social relations and constructing symbolic authority. Language, in this context, operates not merely as a medium of communication but as a resource for building identity, fostering solidarity, and expressing subtle forms of resistance toward dominant political structures. This study also highlights the potential for further research to examine the linguistic practices of other political figures in digital environments, as well as to conduct comparative analyses of populist communication styles across different cultural and regional contexts.

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