Ambivalent Attitudes of Islamic Boarding School Alumni Toward Arabic as a Religious Symbol and Communication Tool

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Abstract	This study aims to critically explore alumni's attitudes towards Arabic in the post-boarding context. This research is situated explicitly in Aceh, involving alumni from Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa, Aceh Besar, as representatives of an Islamic educational environment with strong religious and cultural characteristics. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative case study Design. The study relies on primary data obtained from purposively selected key informants to elicit in-depth experiential narratives. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires distributed to boarding alums with diverse professional backgrounds. The data analysis followed a thematic analysis framework, including stages of in-depth Reading, coding, thematic categorization, and interpretation grounded in the conceptual frameworks of ambivalence and language ideology. The results of the data analysis showed that the alumni recognized Arabic as an essential communication tool. Still, its use was limited to specific environments and did not continue actively after leaving the boarding environment. This study highlights the need for a sustainable learning approach and a community of practice that can maintain Arabic as a means of living communication.
Keywords	Ambivalence; Arabic Language; Communication; Religion Symbol.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not limited to grammatical rules and vocabulary, but also encompasses psychological and social dimensions that shape how language is perceived and used in everyday life (Romadhon et al., 2024). In this regard, Arabic occupies a unique position. As one of the oldest Semitic languages, Arabic has survived across the centuries not only because of its linguistic resilience but also because of its privileged status as a sacred language closely associated with Islamic revelation and religious authority (Dodego, 2022). This sacral position has significantly influenced how Arabic is learned, transmitted, and practiced within Islamic educational institutions, including *pesantren*.

Based on preliminary interviews with alums of Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar, Arabic is perceived as an integral part of santri life during their time at the boarding school. Institutionally, the Islamic boarding school enforces Arabic as a compulsory language for daily communication within dormitories and academic activities. Alumni reported that Arabic functioned not only as a medium for religious instruction through the study of classical Islamic texts, but also as a social communication tool among fellow santri in everyday interactions. These empirical findings align with the characteristics of the Islamic boarding school in Aceh, which positions Arabic as a marker of scholarly authority and religious identity (Sofia & Mahendra, 2024).

Further interview data indicate that although Arabic remains central to the construction of religious identity among alums of Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar, it does not continue to function as a primary communication tool in post-boarding school social life. This decline is primarily attributed to the lack of supportive social spaces for Arabic use beyond the Islamic boarding school, where Indonesian and local languages dominate daily interactions. Arabic tends to be sustained only among alums who remain in Arabic learning environments or academic religious circles. This pattern reinforces previous findings that Arabic among Islamic boarding school alums often undergoes functional reduction, being preserved primarily as a spiritual symbol rather than an active medium of social interaction (Al Yamin, 2023; Maf'udah et al., 2025). Therefore, this research is crucial for empirically examining how alums reinterpret Arabic in post-boarding life cycles and how ambivalent attitudes emerge between its symbolic and functional roles.

This ambivalence is further reflected in the language use patterns of the alums. However, alums of Islamic boarding schools in Aceh possess a strong mastery of *Nahwu* and *Sharaf* and are capable of performing in-depth analyses of classical texts (Ihwan et al., 2022). Studies on the Arabic-

language environment in Islamic boarding schools show that students' and alumni's linguistic practices remain heavily dependent on Indonesian and local languages as social *lingua francas*. At the same time, Arabic tends to be confined to instructional and symbolic domains (Makinuddin, 2025). This condition indicates a structural gap between passive linguistic competence and active communicative performance, reinforcing the ambivalent character of Arabic as a language learned but not lived in fundamental social interactions.

The use of Arabic in public spheres is frequently associated with symbols of religious exclusivity or even construed as performative piety. Research on the cultural perceptions of Islamic boarding school students toward Arabic indicates that the language is more commonly seen as a symbol of devotion and religious authority than as a functional tool for daily communication. In social contexts that strongly emphasize egalitarian interaction and communal harmony, the active practice of speaking Arabic outside formal religious settings is often perceived as pretentious and detached from shared social experiences (Armiyah, 2003). Sociolinguistic studies further indicate that although Arabic holds a high spiritual status, its representation beyond ritual domains is frequently constructed as foreign and less relevant to everyday conversation. This phenomenon occurs within the broader Indonesian sociolinguistic landscape, where local languages and Indonesian continue to function as the primary media of social interaction (Rahmatunnur & Rahmah, 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, the Arabic language instruction model in Islamic boarding schools in Aceh further reinforces this ambivalence. The dominant curriculum and teaching methods remain oriented toward grammatical mastery and text memorization, while functional communication practices have yet to become a primary priority. Research on Arabic language teaching in these institutions indicates that grammar-based approaches and classical texts still dominate, whereas communicative approaches are not yet optimally integrated into the learning system. Consequently, alums feel that the vocabulary and linguistic registers they have mastered are not entirely relevant to professional, academic, or discursive needs beyond the Islamic boarding school environment (Junaedi Abdilah & Al Farisi, 2023).

The implications of this ambivalent attitude are profound for the sustainability of Arabic language competence among Ialumni of Islamic boarding schools. Arabic undergoes excessive sacralization that, paradoxically, weakens its communicative vitality, rendering it a religious symbol devoid of broader social utility. Research on language maintenance and student confidence indicates

that the limited use of Arabic in non-ritual social domains accelerates language attrition, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. Without a pedagogical and cultural reorientation, Arabic risks undergoing musealization, where it is whicholically revered yet functionally marginalized within the network of Islamic boarding school alums (Ginting et al., 2023).

Research by (Fuadah et al. (2025) demonstrates that Arabic serves as a potent symbol of religious identity among students in Islamic higher education environments. Their findings confirm that the use of Arabic is not solely motivated by communicative needs, but rather serves as a marker of religious affiliation and a symbol of social piety. However, Arabic remains dominant in symbolic and ritual contexts, while its everyday communicative function tends to be limited. While that study situates Arabic within the realm of religious identity, it does not deeply examine the tension between symbolic functions and pragmatic use after completing formal religious education.

Research by (Amid et al. (2024) examines the Arabic language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyyah*) in Islamic boarding schools and its impact on students' language proficiency. The findings reveal that although Arabic is institutionalized as the official language of the Islamic boarding school, oral communicative practices are less dominant than text-based and grammar-oriented instruction. Arabic primarily serves as a language of the book (*bahasa kitab*) and an intellectual symbol. At the same time, its communicative use remains confined to formal, highly regulated contexts.—Furthermore, research by (Udra et al.). (2025) emphasizes Arabic as a global communication tool with high functional potential in various contexts. Their findings highlight that Arabic should not be positioned solely as a religious language, but also as a vehicle for scientific and professional communication. However, this study remains conceptual and general, failing to address the sociocultural realities of specific religious communities, such as Islamic boarding school alumni who navigate tensions around linguistic identity.

Research B (Fadhol Nurae, 2025) reveals the role of Arabic in strengthening Islamic understanding while fostering communication across the global Muslim community. Arabic is viewed as an epistemological tool and a symbol of Islamic scholarly authority. Nonetheless, this study emphasizes the normative and ideal dimensions of Arabic language use rather than its actual practice in the daily social lives of Islamic boarding school alumni. Finally, a systematic literature review (2020–2025 was conducted by (ASiq & Abd. Ghani (2025) reveals that communicative approaches in Arabic language pedagogy continue to face significant structural, psychological, and pedagogical barriers. Arabic is frequently acquired for academic and religious purposes, yet it fails

to sustain itself as a medium of active communication once students leave formal learning environments.

Based on these five previous studies, it is evident that research on Arabic remains fragmented into two primary poles: Arabic as a religious symbol and identity marker, and Arabic as a functional communication tool. However, no study has specifically and empirically examined the tension (ambivalence) between these two functions within the community of the long school alumni, particularly in Aceh, which possesses a distinct religious and cultural character. The novelty of this research lies in its critical sociolinguistic approach, which explicitly positions Arabic as a site of tension between symbolic sacrality and pragmatic communicative needs. Unlike prior research focusing on active students, undergraduates, or purely pedagogical aspects, this study highlights Islamic boarding school alums in Aceh as subjects who directly experience the shift in Arabic language function after leaving the boarding environment. Consequently, this research provides a novel contribution to understanding how Arabic is maintained, negotiated, or undergoes functional degradation in post-boarding social life.

Language learning is profoundly influenced by the norms, beliefs, and communicative styles learners adopt from their cultural environment. In the context of *santri* and Arabic, the *pesantren* culture instills the belief that Arabic is a sacred symbol, prioritizing textual and formal grammar. This perspective creates an ambivalent attitude toward alums entering the public sphere, where language must primarily function as a communication tool (Rifa'i et al., 2025). The conflict arises between revering the language symbolically and the practical need to use it functionally, hindering sustained practice in speaking.

The main argument to be tested in this paper is that the ambivalent attitude of santri towards Arabic results from the dialectic between sacred religious identity and practical communication needs, which have not been adequately accommodated in the curriculum Design and Arabic learning methods in *pesantren*. By testing this argument, the author hopes to offer a new understanding of the symbolic and functional role of Arabic in the lives of santri, as well as provide data-based recommendations to improve the use of Arabic as a living communication tool, without reducing its religious meaning (Pane, 2018). The findings are also expected to contribute to the development of a holistic Arabic language learning curriculum in Islamic educational institutions.

Previous studies on language attitudes in religious contexts show that individuals or groups can have dual attitudes - positive and negative at the same time towards a language. This phenomenon is called ambivalence. Ambivalence usually arises when a language carries an ideological or symbolic burden that is not entirely aligned with users' pragmatic needs (Al Yamin, 2023). In the context of *pesantren*, ambivalence towards Arabic is not just a psychological phenomenon but also a social and ideological one (Nurcholis & Hidayatullah, 2019). It seems the ambivalence here lies between a sense of reverence and impracticality. However, this kind of study is still rare in the scope of Arabic language education. Santri value Arabic as a spiritual heritage but struggle to incorporate it into communication practices (Mustofa & Moh. Abdul Kholiq Hasan, 2023). This indicates a gap that needs to be explained in greater sociolinguistic depth.

Arabic is often associated with Islamic symbols and the purity of sacred texts. Within the *pesantren*, this symbolization is reinforced through rituals, prayers, and texts from the yellow book. Arabic is perceived as part of a religious identity that should not be practiced carelessly. Many studies focus on Arabic as the language of religion but ignore the reality that santri also engage in social interactions that demand the functional use of language (Pane, 2018). In this case, Arabic becomes a passive religious symbol and is 'locked' in a sacred space. However, there is a disconnect with the dynamic daily context (Zainuri, 2019). This shows the importance of examining how this language symbolization can actually hinder communicative language learning.

In a functional perspective, language should be a means of communication across contexts, both personal and social. However, studies in the context of *pesantren* still give Arabic minimal attention as a means of daily communication. Although many santri have good grammatical competence, they rarely use Arabic in interactions with friends because they feel unfamiliar with the communicative contexts that are not directly taught. This study shows the shortcomings in the development of learning approaches that encourage active language use (Hasnil Oktavera, 2019). The main criticism here is that the learning approach remains fixated on classical texts rather than on strengthening interpersonal communication skills.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the ambivalent attitudes of Islamic boarding school alums in Aceh toward the Arabic language, specifically regarding the tension between its status as a sacred religious symbol and its role as a tool for social communication. Theoretically, this research contributes to sociolinguistic studies on language ideology by offering a new conceptual understanding of how the process of language sacralization can inadvertently create

a communicative distance for its users. Furthermore, this study enriches the literature on language attitudes by demonstrating that a positive attitude toward a language's status does not always correlate with its frequency of use in practical interactions.

Pragmatically, this research is expected to provide a foundation for alums and practitioners of Islamic boarding school education to reposition the use of Arabic in public spheres. These findings can be utilized to foster a more inclusive social environment for Arabic usage, ensuring the language is no longer perceived merely as a symbol of exclusivity or a ritual language, but rather as a functional communication asset. Moreover, this study assists alums in overcoming psychological barriers to revitalize Arabic as an intellectual identity that is adaptive to the dynamics of modern society.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study Design, focusing on an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of alums of Islamic boarding school Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar toward the Arabic language in their post-board lives. A case study is a type of qualitative research that emphasizes an intensive examination of a particular phenomenon within a bounded context and a specific period of time (Elva & Murhayati, 2025). This research emphasizes detailed, contextual data exploration to capture the dynamics, meanings, and lived experiences of the research participants using a range of relevant data collection techniques. This approach was chosen to reveal the subjective meanings alums attach to Arabic, particularly in the tension between Arabic as a religious symbol and as a functional communication tool. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it enables researchers to understand the dynamics of attitudes, values, and perceptions of language that cannot be adequately explained by quantitative methods (Nurrisa et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. Observation was performed directly at Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar during January – February 2025, focusing on the boarding school's linguistic environment, Arabic language use in both academic and non-academic activities, and the communication culture developed within the boarding school setting. This observation aimed to provide an empirical description of the Arabic-language ecosystem that served as the background for the alums' linguistic experiences during their studies.

In addition to observation, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with alums of Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar. The interview participants consisted of graduates with diverse professional backgrounds and social environments. The interviews focused on their experiences using Arabic during their time in the *pesantren*, changes in language attitudes and practices after graduation, and alum perceptions of the function of Arabic in social and religious interactions in post-*pesantren* life.

Furthermore, the research data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire distributed via the Google Forms platform. The respondents were alumni of *Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa Aceh Besar* who met the following criteria: (1) having studied at the *pesantren* for at least three years, (2) possessing direct experience in using Arabic during their period of education, and (3) being willing to reflect on the use of Arabic in social and religious life after graduation. The use of an open-ended questionnaire allowed respondents to narrate their experiences and perspectives, resulting in data that are reflective and contextual.

The data analysis technique employed in this study was thematic analysis (Rozali, 2022). Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique used to identify, analyze, and interpret thematic patterns emerging from research data. This method enables researchers to systematically examine data to uncover core themes that represent the phenomenon under investigation (Heriyanto, 2018). The analysis process involved several stages: (1) an in-depth reading of participants' narratives, (2) coding the data based on the emergence of ideas or recurring meanings, (3) organizing the codes into broader thematic categories, and (4) interpreting the findings using the conceptual framework of ambivalence and language ideology. The analytical focus was on understanding how alums interpret Arabic both as a religious symbol and as a functional communication tool, and on identifying the factors that influence shifts in Arabic's function across the post-*pesantren* life cycle. This analytical approach aligns with the research objectives, which emphasize an in-depth, contextual exploration of alums's ambivalence toward trabic

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The ambivalent attitude of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) towards Arabic does not only revolve around religious symbolic values, but is also sig. Still, significance is only related to how language functions as a means of communication in everyday life. Based on the questionnaire

results, most positive experiences were reported with the use of Arabic in *pesantren*. Most mentioned that Arabic is actively used in daily life, especially in learning activities, book discussions, and interactions with *ustaz* (religious teachers). This finding strengthens the assumption that Arabic in the *pesantren* environment is not only a religious symbol, but also a functional communication tool.

However, respondents' personal experiences show high enthusiasm for Arabic, but after graduation, its use declined dramatically. This indicates a discrepancy between the ideal of using Arabic in *pesantren* and the communicative practice outside it. Respondents with Islamic academic backgrounds tend to use Arabic selectively, while respondents from general majors almost do not use Arabic anymore. This shows that educational and professional backgrounds influence the maintenance of Arabic's communicative function.

One respondent mentioned that confidence in speaking Arabic is key to maintaining Arabic in communication. This confidence grows from the habit of speaking Arabic from an early age. The main obstacles identified by respondents in maintaining Arabic as a communication tool are weak mastery of *mufradat* (vocabulary) and a lack of practice media. This shows a disconnect between learning and real practice. When asked about expectations if they could repeat the *santri* period, respondents stated they wanted to further strengthen their communication in Arabic. This indicates a reflective awareness of the weak function of language as a means of communication in the past. One respondent stated that they had experienced ambivalence towards Arabic, admiring the language religiously, but rarely using it in daily communication. Interestingly, respondents studying in Egypt still use Arabic in daily interactions, due to sociolinguistic needs in the host country.

Table 1. Thematic Table Ambivalent Attitudes toward Arabic

No	Main Themes	Subthemes	Respondent Statements	Interpretation
1.	Arabic Language and Communication Practices	Lack of confidence & limited environment	"Not confident because I am not used to speaking Arabic."	A lack of language environment creates obstacles to using Arabic as a communication tool.
2.	Motivation and Learning	Habits are rarely used after graduation	"After leaving the hut, there was no more Arabic practice. So I forgot and found it difficult to speak."	The absence of post-boarding practice results in drastic skill reduction.
3.	Social Context of Arabic Language Use	Adaptation to Amiyah Arabic abroad	"It's hard to adjust because I'm used to Fushha, while people in Egypt use Amiyah."	The gap between standard language mastery and local dialects is an obstacle to communication.
4.	Use of Arabic in the	Teaching	"I use it only for studying,	Arabic tends to be used in

No	Main Themes	Subthemes	Respondent Statements	Interpretation
	Academic World		teaching, and reciting the Quran, not for daily conversation."	academic contexts rather than social ones.
5.	**Emotional Attitude towards Arabic**	Like but passive	"I like Arabic, but rarely use it other than when studying."	There is a sense of liking, but not accompanied by active use as a means of communication.

Source: Processed from open-ended questionnaire data collected via Google Forms, 2025

Theme 1: Arabic Language and Communication Practices

This theme highlights that the transition of Arabic from a classroom subject to a functional communication tool remains fraught with significant barriers. The primary obstacles identified are a profound lack of self-confidence and the absence of a supportive linguistic ecosystem. Respondent statements, such as "Not confident because I am not used to speaking Arabic," suggest that the lack of habituation in daily interactions is a more critical barrier than the lack of theoretical knowledge. Although many alums possess a firm grasp of Arabic syntax and morphology *(Nahwu-Sharaf)*, the absence of a communicative environment prevents these linguistic structures from being internalized as a natural means of expression. These findings suggest that linguistic proficiency, without the support of an active social environment, tends not to develop into functional communicative competence.

Theme 2: Motivation and Learning Processes

The data regarding motivation and learning reveals a sharp decline in Arabic proficiency once the external pressure of the Islamic boarding school environment is removed. The statement "After leaving the boarding school, there was no more Arabic practice. So I forgot and found it difficult to speak," illustrates a failure in language sustainability. This phenomenon, known in sociolinguistics as language attrition, occurs when the absence of maintenance of post-formal education leads to a rapid erosion of productive skills. The findings show that without the "forced" linguistic discipline of the boarding school, alumni struggle to maintain their fluency, either through intrinsic motivation or external opportunities. Consequently, the loss of routine practice not only diminishes speaking fluency but also creates psychological distance, making the language feel increasingly foreign over time

Theme 3: Social Context of Arabic Language Use

This theme sheds light on the "reality shock" alumni face when encountering the linguistic diversity of the Arabic-speaking world. There is a notable discrepancy between the formal, literary

Arabic *(Fusha)* taught within the Islamic boarding school and the dialectal variations *(Ammiyah)* used in real-world social contexts. For instance, the remark "It's hard to adjust because I'm used to fushha, while people in Egypt use Amiyah," underscores a pedagogical gap. While the boarding school prepares students for classical text analysis, it often fails to equip them with the sociolinguistic flexibility needed for modern, informal interactions. This inability to adapt to local dialects frequently leads to communicative frustration, where alums, despite years of study, feel functionally illiterate in the face of native everyday speech.

Theme 4: Use of Arabic in the Academic Domain

The findings indicate that Arabic is predominantly confined to formal and sacred "enclaves," such as instructional settings and religious rituals. The statement "I use it only for studying, teaching, and reciting the Quran, not for daily conversation," confirms that the language is perceived through a narrow, utilitarian lens. Arabic is positioned as an "intellectual and ritual artifact" rather than a living social language. This compartmentalization reinforces the perception that Arabic belongs only to the mosque or the classroom, thereby stripping it of its potential as a medium for secular or casual social interaction. As a result, the language becomes a symbol of religious authority and scholarly identity, but remains dormant in the broader public and social spheres.

Theme 5: Emotional Attitudes toward the Arabic Language

The final theme reveals a complex psychological state: a strong emotional attachment to Arabic that does not translate into active use, a hallmark of linguistic ambivalence. Respondents expressed a deep love and respect for the language, as seen in the comment "I like Arabic, but rarely use it other than when studying." This indicates that, while Arabic is highly "venerated" as the language of Islam, its "vitality" in daily life is remarkably low. This disconnect demonstrates that positive attitudes toward language do not automatically correlate with language behavior. Alums may feel a strong spiritual and emotional attachment to Arabic. Yet, they continue to treat it as a "sacred relic" to be honored rather than a modern tool to be utilized, further entrenching its marginalization in their post-boarding school lives.

Discussion

This discussion is grounded in empirical findings from alums of Ruhul Islam Anak Bangsa, which indicate a shift in the function of the Arabic language after santri leave the *pesantren* linguistic ecosystem, particularly in negotiating Arabic's position between a religious symbol and a functional communication tool in post-*pesantren* life. The active use of Arabic within *pesantren* environments

fosters strong communicative competence as long as santri remain within a controlled linguistic ecosystem. This finding reinforces the concept of *linguistic habitus*, namely language habits formed through repeated and institutionalized social practices (Awwaludin et al., 2022). The use of Arabic in conversation occurs when both speakers and listeners recognize and understand the language according to their respective levels of proficiency (Rahman & Maisurah, 2023). Studies on the language environment in *pesantren* also demonstrate that intensive interaction in Arabic, both in academic and non-academic settings, plays a crucial role in internalizing santri's communicative competence rather than merely mastering linguistic structures (Hamid et al., 2024; Ningrum & Tazqiyah, 2024). Accordingly, these findings strengthen the argument that Arabic in *pesantren* functions not only symbolically, but also operationally when supported by a conducive linguistic environment.

However, the drastic decline in Arabic use after graduation reveals the fragility of communicative competence once the linguistic ecosystem is disrupted. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of *language attrition*, in which language abilities, particularly productive skills, deteriorate due to limited use in everyday life (Aini & Septi, 2022; Hasnil Oktavera, 2019). Recent studies emphasize that language sustainability depends heavily on the availability of social spaces that enable meaningful and repeated use of the language (Yusuf et al., 2023). In other words, alums' Arabic competence does not diminish due to weak linguistic mastery, but rather due to the absence of social functions that support its continued use.

Furthermore, findings indicating that academic background and professional engagement influence the continuity of Arabic use reinforce the sociolinguistic view that a language survives only insofar as it holds practical value in social life (Evi Nurus Suroiyah & Dewi Anisatuz Zakiyah, 2021). Alums engaged in Islamic fields tend to maintain Arabic selectively, while those in non-religious fields largely abandon it. This pattern corresponds with studies showing that minority or second languages persist only when they serve clear and socially relevant communicative functions (Rachman et al., 2020). Thus, alum ambivalence should not be understood merely as an individual attitude, but as a reflection of social structures that constrain the function of Arabic beyond the institutional space of *pesantren*.

Psychological dimensions also play a significant role in reinforcing this ambivalent attitude. Low self-confidence, as revealed in the findings, is directly associated with limited mastery of vocabulary and minimal post-*pesantren* practice. This is consistent with studies emphasizing that

self-confidence is a key factor in sustaining foreign language communication practices (Fahimah et al., 2023; Triana et al., 2022). Other research shows that without adequate media support and practice spaces, language competence tends to stagnate and lose its functional relevance (Sanjaya, 2024; Ummah et al., 2024). Therefore, alum ambivalence can be understood as the outcome of the interaction between linguistic, psychological, and structural factors that mutually reinforce one another.

In addition, findings on the sustained use of Arabic among alums pursuing further studies in Arabic-speaking countries, such as Egypt, underscore the critical role of communicative environmental pressure. A full-immersion context positions Arabic as a social, academic, and administrative necessity, enabling it to serve as a daily communication tool rather than merely a religious symbol (R.U. et al., 2025). Previous studies indicate that when Arabic is integrated into everyday activities across multiple domains, levels of retention and communicative competence increase significantly (Samin, Pebrian, et al., 2025). These findings affirm that language sustainability is determined not solely by religious attitudes, but by concrete communicative needs.

From a pedagogical perspective, alum ambivalence reflects the limitations of Arabic language instruction that overly emphasizes grammatical mastery and classical texts. Numerous studies highlight that the dominance of structural approaches without communicative integration renders Arabic an academic artifact and a symbolic entity (Junaedi Abdilah & Al Farisi, 2023; Samin, Akzam, et al., 2025). A functional communicative approach including the integration of modern dialects (*'ammiyah*) alongside *fuṣḥā* is considered essential to bridge the gap between academic competence and real communicative needs (Iqbal et al., 2024; Rifa'i, 2021).

Based on the overall analysis, this study views alums's ambivalent attitudes toward Arabic as a consequence of symbolic dominance that is not balanced by a sustainable language ecology. Therefore, the proposed solutions are not only pedagogical but also sociocultural, grounded in a *language-ecology* approach that involves educational institutions, alum communities, and public spaces. When Arabic is repositioned as a communication tool with social and professional value rather than merely a symbol, the tension between symbolic meaning and communicative function can be minimized. Consequently, Arabic has the potential to become a living and sustainable linguistic asset throughout the life cycle of Islamic boarding school alums.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Arabic language use among *pesantren* alums is characterized by functional ambivalence: the language is highly venerated for its religious and scientific value, yet remains underutilized as a daily communicative tool. Active language practice is primarily confined to formal academic and ritual contexts, with sustained proficiency observed only among alumni in high-immersion environments, such as those studying in Egypt. The absence of supportive linguistic ecosystems, low self-confidence, and a lack of practical social necessity drive the significant decline in post-graduation fluency (language attrition). Consequently, ensuring the sustainability of Arabic requires a shift toward a language-ecology approach, focusing on the formation of active speaking communities and the integration of practical communicative training aligned with broader socio-professional contexts.

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