

Kato Malereng: Indirect Speech Ethics in Maintaining Dignity and Social Hierarchy in Minangkabau Society

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze kato malereng as a form of indirect speech ethics in maintaining dignity and social hierarchy within Minangkabau society. In Minangkabau culture, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a system of values that regulates social relationships and preserves community harmony. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a library research method to examine cultural communication practices within the kato nan ampek system. Data were collected through the analysis of relevant literature on communication ethics, cultural values, and the social structure of Minangkabau society and were analyzed using descriptive-interpretative techniques to identify the forms, functions, and social meanings of kato malereng. The findings indicate that kato malereng functions as a cultural communication mechanism that preserves dignity, prevents conflict, and strengthens social cohesion through the use of figurative and polite language. Despite adjustments in modern communication contexts, the values of politeness and respect embedded in kato malereng remain relevant as communication guidelines. Therefore, kato malereng represents a form of local wisdom that contributes to the preservation of cultural values and social stability in contemporary society.

Keywords

Kato Malereng; Speech Ethics; Cultural Communication; Dignity; Social Hierarchy; Minangkabau

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indirect speech ethics has long served as a fundamental foundation for sustaining dignity and social hierarchy in Minangkabau culture, a tradition rooted in the principle of *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah*. The concept of *kato nan ampek*, which includes *kato mandaki*, *kato mandata*, *kato manurun*, and *kato malereng*, establishes speech patterns that are adapted to the status, age, kinship ties, and social position of both speakers and interlocutors. In practice, *kato malereng* is particularly positioned as a linguistic form used to honor respected figures such as *mamak*, in-laws, parents-in-law, and traditional leaders, ensuring that moral messages or advice can be conveyed without diminishing the dignity of the interlocutor (face-saving) while maintaining harmony within the *nagari* community (Yanti et al., 2021; Lestari et al., 2017; Arnawa et al., 2022; Putra, 2017). The emphasis on face management is consistent with the framework of Islamic communication ethics, which guides noble



expression (Qaulan Karimah) and encourages polite, gentle, and respectful behavior in communication among customary authorities (Rahmi et al., 2023; Arrasyid et al., 2019).

Various empirical studies and theoretical perspectives indicate that indirect speech functions as a mechanism for preserving the dignity of cultural leaders and maintaining social hierarchy by avoiding direct confrontation. Rhetorical expressions containing metaphors, proverbs, and allegories, for example through *cimeeh* and figurative expressions, enable educational messages to be delivered normatively without threatening the social face of audiences who are older or hold greater authority (Widya & Agustiana, 2023; Willis et al., 2022; Handrianto, 2020). However, contemporary dynamics suggest that the application of this ethical practice is dynamic and contextual. In the context of public criticism and communication across digital media platforms, several scholars have identified variations between preferences for indirect and direct communication depending on ethical objectives, audience characteristics, and specific social situations (Haristiani et al., 2023; Robbie et al., 2021; Sayuti et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding *kato malereng* as part of Minangkabau speech ethics requires a synergistic analysis of customary norms, Islamic teachings, and the dynamics of modern communication shaped by the digital era and globalization (Yanti et al., 2021; Arnawa et al., 2022; Nursanti et al., 2024; Robbie et al., 2021).

Practically, this study seeks to explain how the mechanism of indirectness in *kato malereng* mobilizes communal dignity through careful speech practices in traditional ceremonies, *mamak* sermons, and interactions within the *nagari*. The emphasis on the use of figurative language, proverbs, and allegories demonstrates that indirect speech remains relevant as a means of moral education that shapes character and maintains social harmony, without disregarding the potential for conflict or shifts in communication preferences among younger generations and social media users (Yanti et al., 2021; Widya & Agustiana, 2023; Nursanti et al., 2024; Haristiani et al., 2023; Robbie et al., 2021). Thus, this study not only confirms the consistency of politeness and face-work theories in the Minangkabau context but also illustrates how *kato malereng* functions as a rhetorical ethic that preserves the dignity of customary leaders and social hierarchy within the evolving Minangkabau society.

Key references relevant to this background include studies on the ethics of *kato nan ampek* and *kato malereng* as frameworks for Minangkabau speech practices (Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2023; Reihan et al., 2023; Rahmi et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2017), research on face mitigation and indirect speech strategies in Minangkabau interactions and their comparison with other cultures (Widya & Agustiana, 2023; Arnawa et al., 2022; Haristiani et al., 2023), as well as literature examining the relationship between *adab*, Islam, and communication practices in Minangkabau *nagari* communities and their implementation in modern contexts (Yanti et al., 2021; Robbie et al., 2021; Rahayu & Shasrini, 2022; Putra, 2017). This cross-referenced emphasis enables a comprehensive understanding of how indirect speech ethics contributes

to the preservation of dignity and social hierarchy within the dynamics of contemporary Minangkabau society.

Literatur Review

The literature on Minangkabau speech ethics generally positions *Kato Nan Ampek* as the principal framework guiding language use, etiquette, and face-saving in social interactions. In particular, *Kato Malereng* is regarded as a form of indirect speech that plays a role in preserving the dignity of customary leaders, *mamak*, and the hierarchy of age and social status within the *nagari*. A review of the literature indicates that the principle of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* serves as the normative foundation for communication practices that not only convey meaning but also uphold ethical values, moral conduct, and community cohesion through structured forms of speech (Rahmi et al., 2023; Rahayu & Shasrini, 2022; Reihan et al., 2023). In this context, the four forms of *kato nan ampek*—*kato mandaki*, *kato mandata*, *kato manurun*, and *kato malereng*—are widely recognized as practical instruments for navigating power relations and social positions. Consequently, indirect speech such as *Kato Malereng* is employed to reduce threats to the interlocutor's face while maintaining normative messages that educate the community (Arrasyid et al., 2019; Putra, 2017; Yanti et al., 2021).

Several studies in pragmalinguistics and linguistic anthropology emphasize that indirect speech functions as a mechanism for protecting the dignity of customary leaders and maintaining social hierarchy through the use of metaphors, proverbs, and allegories that convey educational meanings without direct confrontation. These studies also demonstrate that *Kato Malereng* operates as a rhetorical ethic that prioritizes face-saving and social harmony, with *mamak* and customary leaders serving as agents of language socialization who transmit cultural values and Islamic teachings in everyday communication practices (Nursanti et al., 2024; Reihan et al., 2023; Widya & Agustiana, 2023; Willis et al., 2022). Nevertheless, contemporary literature suggests that the application of indirect speech is contextual and dynamic. In contexts such as public criticism, digital media communication, or intercultural interaction, several studies have identified a tendency toward the use of direct or mixed communication strategies depending on ethical goals, audience characteristics, and relative power relations. This indicates that *Kato Malereng* is not static but adaptive to changes in communication media and modern social dynamics (Haristiani et al., 2023; Robbie et al., 2021; Sayuti et al., 2022).

Studies addressing face mitigation in Minangkabau interactions highlight that rhetorical devices such as hedges, euphemisms, and indirect formulations are routinely used to protect the face of all participants across various contexts, including *mamak* sermons, traditional ceremonies, and public conversations. These findings are consistent with the view that Minangkabau speech ethics, particularly through *Kato Malereng*, functions as a series of face-work practices that construct community identity while preserving the dignity of customary leaders and maintaining social hierarchy within the *nagari*

(Haristiani et al., 2023; Widya & Agustiana, 2023). Cross-cultural comparisons further confirm that although the general principle of face-saving is universal, the preference for indirect communication strategies in Minangkabau society reflects distinctive cultural characteristics that differentiate it from other cultures such as Japanese, Balinese, and Javanese societies. Thus, *Kato Malereng* highlights a communication pattern deeply rooted in *adab*, *raso*, and *pareso* within the framework of *kato nan ampek* (Arnawa et al., 2022; Haristiani et al., 2023; Nursanti et al., 2024).

The concept of linguistic politeness has long been a central concern in linguistic and anthropological studies. According to Leech (1983), politeness is associated with efforts to minimize disharmony in social interaction through language choices that consider the interests of others. Meanwhile, Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasize the concept of face, or “social face,” as a dimension of identity that must be maintained in communication to ensure harmonious social relationships. In the context of Minangkabau culture, Navis (1984) explains that Minangkabau customs strongly emphasize values of sensitivity, appropriateness, and wisdom in speech; language functions not only to convey messages but also to guide behavior and maintain social relationships within the community. Therefore, *kato malereng* can be understood as a local manifestation of politeness strategies that preserve social face as well as the dignity of individuals and groups within the Minangkabau social structure.

The implications of the literature for the study of *Kato Malereng* can be summarized in two main points. First, indirect speech ethics contributes to the preservation of the dignity of cultural leaders and social hierarchy through face-saving mechanisms supported by proverbs, metaphors, and allegories. Second, contemporary dynamics such as the digital era, multiethnic societies, and globalization require flexible theoretical frameworks to understand how *Kato Malereng* is applied in various contexts, including *mamak* sermons, *nagari* meetings, and intercultural interactions, without neglecting customary values, the principle of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah* (ABS-SBK), and Islamic norms that serve as pillars of Minangkabau culture. From a theoretical perspective, the literature supports the use of politeness and face-work frameworks as analytical tools to explain how indirect speech constructs cultural identity and maintains social harmony within the *nagari*, while acknowledging contextual variations that may lead to more direct communication practices in certain situations, such as public criticism or communication in new media environments (Haristiani et al., 2023; Nursanti et al., 2024; Sayuti et al., 2022; Yanti et al., 2021).

Previous studies have extensively discussed politeness in the Minangkabau language; however, they have not specifically examined the communicative functions of *kato malereng* in the context of digital communication and modern social change. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap. Based on the background of the study concerning the role of *kato malereng* as an indirect speech ethic in maintaining dignity and social hierarchy within Minangkabau society, the research questions

of this study are as follows: a) How are the forms of *kato malereng* communication practices manifested as indirect speech ethics in Minangkabau society?; b) What are the social functions of *kato malereng* in maintaining dignity and harmonious social relationships within the Minangkabau customary structure?; c) How relevant is the use of *kato malereng* in the context of social change and modern communication in contemporary society?

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a cultural interpretive perspective to understand the practice of *kato malereng* as a form of indirect speech ethics in Minangkabau society. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting social and cultural phenomena related to values, norms, and communication practices within customary contexts, thereby requiring an in-depth understanding of the symbolic meanings and social functions of language in society. This approach enables researchers to understand social phenomena holistically and contextually, in line with qualitative research principles that emphasize the interpretation of meaning within specific social situations (Creswell, 2014; Moleong, 2017; Sugiyono, 2022). This research is categorized as library research, which utilizes written sources as the primary data to systematically examine concepts and social phenomena (Zed, 2014).

The data sources in this study consist of scholarly literature related to communication ethics, linguistic politeness, Minangkabau culture, and the concept of *kato nan ampek*, including journal articles, academic books, and relevant scholarly documents addressing theories of politeness and cultural communication. The selection of data sources was based on criteria such as relevance to the research topic, credibility of scholarly sources, recency of publication, and suitability to the cultural context of Minangkabau society. The literature used in this study primarily derives from scientific publications within the last ten years, while also considering classical works that have significant theoretical influence in the study of linguistic politeness and cultural communication (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Navis, 1984).

Data were collected using a documentation study technique, defined as a method of gathering data through systematic examination of written documents to obtain information relevant to the research focus (Sugiyono, 2022). The data collection process involved several stages, including identifying literature related to communication ethics and Minangkabau culture, selecting data sources based on relevance and credibility criteria, carefully reading and comprehending the literature, recording concepts, theories, and findings related to the practice of *kato malereng*, and categorizing the data according to themes and analytical categories. The unit of analysis in this study consists of concepts, communication practices, and forms of speech associated with *kato malereng* within the *kato*

nan ampek system, particularly those related to indirect speech forms, social communication functions, and cultural meanings in maintaining dignity and social hierarchy in Minangkabau society.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using descriptive-interpretative analysis techniques aimed at understanding the symbolic meanings and social functions of communication practices in Minangkabau culture. The analysis process followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing in accordance with the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The validity of the data was ensured through theoretical triangulation, which involved comparing various theoretical perspectives related to linguistic politeness, cultural communication, and the social structure of Minangkabau society in order to enhance the credibility and reliability of the research findings (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2022).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of Kato Malereng as an Indirect Speech Ethic

The findings of this study indicate that *kato malereng* represents a form of indirect communication that functions as an ethical mechanism for maintaining dignity and balance in social relationships within Minangkabau society. This form of speech is primarily used in interactions with individuals who hold higher social status, such as *ninik mamak*, customary leaders, or elders. These findings are consistent with previous studies that position *kato nan ampek* as the principal framework of speech ethics in Minangkabau culture, regulating social relationships based on age, status, and social position within the community (Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2023; Reihan et al., 2023; Rahayu & Shasrini, 2022).

From a cultural communication perspective, the use of indirect language in *kato malereng* reflects a collective awareness of the importance of preserving dignity and social harmony through respectful communication strategies. Research on Minangkabau communication ethics shows that communication practices that consider the feelings and social position of the interlocutor constitute politeness strategies aimed at minimizing conflict and maintaining social stability (Haristian et al., 2023; Rahmi et al., 2023). Therefore, the findings of this study reinforce the view that *kato malereng* can be understood as a localized form of face-work practice that serves to protect the social face of individuals and groups in Minangkabau social interactions.

Furthermore, the use of metaphors, proverbs, and allegories in *kato malereng* demonstrates that language in Minangkabau culture functions not only as a means of communication but also as an instrument of moral and social education. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that figurative language in Minangkabau traditions serves as a medium for conveying customary values in a subtle and normative manner without direct confrontation (Putra, 2017; Willis et al., 2022; Widya, 2020). In the context of family and social education, these cultural communication values are also

integrated into parenting practices and character formation based on local cultural principles (Amelia & Faridy, 2023; Hardiyanti et al., 2023). Thus, indirect communication practices in *kato malereng* can be understood as a cultural mechanism that integrates communicative functions with social educational functions within society.

From the perspective of customary social structure, the function of *kato malereng* as a means of preserving dignity and respecting social hierarchy indicates that language plays a strategic role in maintaining stability in social relationships within customary communities. This is consistent with findings showing that the *kato nan ampek* system serves as a practical instrument for navigating power relations and social positions in Minangkabau society, making the use of indirect speech part of a social mechanism to prevent conflict and strengthen community cohesion (Arrasyid et al., 2019; Yanti, 2021; Rahmi et al., 2023).

Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that the practice of *kato malereng* is not only related to interpersonal communication but also to the preservation of cultural values and social identity within Minangkabau society. In this context, language becomes part of a cultural value system that shapes social character and ensures the continuity of tradition in community life. Research on Minangkabau social structure and cultural values confirms that customary principles and the matrilineal kinship system play a significant role in shaping communication ethics and social cohesion within the community (Firdaus, 2019; Syaputra et al., 2019; Rahmi et al., 2023).

However, contemporary social dynamics indicate that indirect communication practices in *kato malereng* have undergone changes in their patterns of use. The development of communication technology and digital culture, which tend to prioritize speed and clarity of messages, has led to an increasing tendency toward more direct communication, particularly among younger generations. These findings align with contemporary studies showing that the application of *kato nan ampek* values is contextual and adaptive to social change and can be integrated into cultural education and learning practices at various educational levels (Handrianto, 2020; Anggraini et al., 2020; Yeni & Netri, 2021).

Nevertheless, the ethical values embedded in *kato malereng* remain relevant in modern society, especially in communication contexts that require social sensitivity and respect for cultural norms. In this regard, indirect communication practices can be understood as a form of cultural intelligence that enables individuals to adjust their speech according to social conditions. Therefore, the findings of this study affirm that *kato malereng* is not merely a traditional cultural heritage but also an adaptive communication strategy with an important social function in maintaining harmonious social relationships in contemporary Minangkabau society.

The Social Functions of Kato Malereng in the Customary Structure

The results of the analysis indicate that *kato malereng* plays a significant social role in maintaining

the stability of social relationships in Minangkabau society through three principal functions: preserving dignity, preventing conflict, and respecting social hierarchy within the customary structure. This form of indirect speech functions as an ethical communication mechanism that strengthens social cohesion while maintaining norms of politeness and social order in everyday interactions. Literature on Minangkabau speech ethics confirms that the concept of *kato nan ampek* (*kato mandaki*, *kato manurun*, *kato malereng*, and *kato mandata*) serves as a framework of linguistic politeness and face-work practices that regulate social relationships through the use of figurative language, metaphors, and proverbs to uphold proper conduct and prevent conflict, particularly when interacting with respected individuals (Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2023; Haristiani et al., 2023; Reihan et al., 2023; Arrasyid et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2022; Khair et al., 2022; Handrianto, 2020).

In contemporary contexts, the values of *kato nan ampek* remain relevant as a source of character education and cultural learning, demonstrating adaptive capacity in responding to social change and digital communication without losing the core ethical principles of respecting dignity and social face within society (Yanti, 2021; Hardiyanti et al., 2023; Anggraini et al., 2020; Rahayu & Shasrini, 2022; Widya, 2020; Amelia & Faridy, 2023; Rahmi et al., 2023; Yeni & Netri, 2021).

The Relevance of Kato Malereng in Contemporary Society

Changes in the practice of *kato malereng* in Minangkabau society are influenced by advances in communication technology and the dynamics of social interaction among younger generations, which encourage faster and more open communication patterns. These conditions have led to shifts in the context of politeness strategies, particularly in everyday interactions increasingly shaped by digital media. However, these changes do not eliminate the underlying ethical values; rather, they encourage the adaptation of traditional communication practices to meet the demands of modern communication (Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2023; Haristiani et al., 2023; Reihan et al., 2023; Putra, 2017; Rahayu & Shasrini, 2022; Arrasyid et al., 2019).

Despite transformations in communication forms, the literature indicates that *kato malereng* remains relevant as a form of local wisdom in contexts that require a high degree of politeness. This practice continues to be consistently used in customary forums, *nagari* deliberations, intergenerational interactions, and communication with respected figures within the customary social structure. This demonstrates that the *kato nan ampek* system functions as an ethical framework that preserves dignity and social harmony in Minangkabau society (Reihan et al., 2023; Amelia & Faridy, 2023; Yeni & Netri, 2021; Syaputra et al., 2019).

In practice, the use of figurative language through metaphors and proverbs remains an effective communication strategy for conveying messages subtly without causing conflict. This strategy reflects cultural awareness of the importance of respecting the feelings and social position of others in social

interaction. Therefore, figurative language in *kato malereng* functions not only as a communication tool but also as an ethical mechanism that maintains balance in social relationships within customary communities (Willis et al., 2022; Khair et al., 2022; Yanti, 2021; Firdaus, 2019).

Conceptually, contemporary dynamics show that the practice of *kato malereng* has adapted in form and context without experiencing a decline in its core values. Fundamental principles such as respect for dignity, awareness of social position, and the values of *malu*, *raso*, and *pareso* remain the ethical foundation of social interaction in Minangkabau society. This adaptation is also reflected in the strengthening of cultural education and the preservation of customary values in schools and communities as part of efforts to sustain local wisdom in the modern era (Rahmi et al., 2023; Widya, 2020; Hardiyanti et al., 2023; Anggraini et al., 2020; Alpetoti & Fakhri, 2023; Putra, 2017).

Table 1. Summary of Findings on the Forms, Functions, and Social Meanings of Kato Malereng

No	Forms of <i>Kato Malereng</i> Speech	Linguistic Characteristics	Communicative Functions	Social Meanings
1.	Indirect requests	Use of figurative expressions or analogies	Expressing needs politely without pressure	Demonstrating respect toward elders or authority figures
2.	Subtle criticism or insinuation	Symbolic, implicit, and non-confrontational language	Reminding or reprimanding without hurting feelings	Preventing conflict and maintaining social relationships
3.	Advice in customary deliberations	Collective, diplomatic, and considerate expressions	Conveying opinions politely in communal forums	Maintaining social balance and community harmony
4.	Customary advice or moral counsel	Use of proverbs, sayings, or allegories	Instilling moral values and social norms	Strengthening cultural identity and customary values
5.	Expressions of caution	Implicit language with strong social consideration	Demonstrating politeness and self-control in speech	Preserving the dignity of individuals and groups within the social structure
6.	Indirect refusal	Use of symbolic reasons or polite expressions	Declining requests without causing embarrassment	Maintaining harmony and protecting social face (<i>face-saving</i>)
7.	Customary admonition	Figurative language containing normative messages	Correcting behavior in a respectful manner	Maintaining social order and customary norms
8.	Expressions of respect	Polite and metaphorical word choices	Showing appreciation toward customary leaders or elders	Reinforcing social hierarchy within society

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that *kato malereng* represents a form of indirect speech ethics that plays a significant role in preserving dignity, social harmony, and relational stability within Minangkabau society. The use of figurative language, analogies, and implicit meanings in *kato malereng* reflects cultural awareness of the importance of respecting social hierarchy and avoiding conflict in social interaction. This communication practice functions as an ethical mechanism that regulates speech behavior, strengthens social cohesion, and transmits moral and cultural values within community life.

Beyond serving as a means of interpersonal communication, *kato malereng* also functions as an instrument of social education that shapes the character and cultural identity of Minangkabau society. In the context of social change and the advancement of communication technology, the practice of *kato malereng* has adapted in both form and context of use; however, the values of politeness, respect, and prudence in speech remain relevant as guiding principles for respectful and ethical communication. Therefore, *kato malereng* can be understood as a form of local wisdom with adaptive functions in maintaining balance in social relationships and sustaining cultural values in modern society. These conclusions align with the study's findings that the primary functions of *kato malereng* include preserving dignity, preventing conflict, and respecting social hierarchy as part of a mechanism for stabilizing social relationships within the Minangkabau customary structure.

Limitation

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study employs a library research approach and therefore does not involve direct observation of communication practices within Minangkabau society in real-life social contexts. Second, the data used in this study are limited to available literature sources, meaning that the interpretations produced depend on conceptual representations presented in written documents. Consequently, the findings of this study are primarily conceptual in nature and are not intended to represent the full range of communication practices within Minangkabau society.

Implication

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications for the development of cultural communication studies and the preservation of linguistic politeness values within Minangkabau society. Practically, the results of this study may serve as a foundation for the development of character education based on local cultural values, as well as a guideline for ethical communication in modern social interactions, particularly in the context of digital communication.

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