The Social Construct of Compliments: Strategies of Meranaw College Students

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Abstract

Research reveals that there is a limited number of available local sources that deal with language use, particularly in the compliment behavior, of indigenous speakers in the Philippines. In addition, studies often generalize the language dichotomy across genders, overlooking the sociocultural variables that directly influence the linguistic behavior of speakers in a certain speech community. Thus, this paper aimed at critically investigating the compliment and compliment response strategies employed by selected Meranaw College students in the Philippines, and at examining the differences in their compliment behavior across genders. The investigation was participated by 70 Meranaw university students and the data were obtained using written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaires containing a total of 10 hypothetical scenarios. The results showed that both groups of participants strongly preferred using explicit and explanation strategies in giving compliments. Interestingly, four additional semantic formulas evident in the compliments of the participants were discovered: cultural and cultural references, using humor, conversation openers, and address terms. In returning a compliment, the results showed that male participants likely used agreeing utterances and offering utterances while the female participants tended to use appreciation tokens, shift credit, informative comments, return compliments, and downgrading utterances. Additionally, it highlights the discovery of two additional strategies in providing compliment response across genders: rhetorical questions and offering utterances. The results imply that Meranaws employ various strategies not only to strengthen the social ties among the interlocutors but also to uphold their cultural values and protect their maratabat or honor. Moreover, this work argues that the existence of language dichotomy across genders is largely affected by numerous sociocultural and religious factors present in one speech community. In the end, this investigation asserts the importance of understanding the socio-pragmatic variables present in intercultural communication to prevent the occurrence of miscommunication especially among speakers from diverse backgrounds.

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is essential in understanding how language use in human communication determines the conditions of society (Mey, 2001). Speech act is one of the central topics of inquiry in pragmatics (Huang, 2014) and is mainly concerned with the way words present an action and circumstances to people. Speech Acts hold much relevance in inter-ethnic communication by emphasizing that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a means of performing actions and establishing social relationships.

Understanding the nuances of speech acts is crucial in the context of diverse cultural interactions. Different ethnic groups possess varied linguistic norms, social expectations, and contextual interpretations. Thus, awareness of cultural differences in politeness, indirectness, and face-saving strategies is vital, as does recognizing contextual cues and non-verbal communication because it serves as a guide for navigating these complexities, fostering mutual understanding, respect, and effective communication in inter-ethnic discourse by encouraging sensitivity to diverse speech acts and their cultural interpretations.

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Compliment and compliment responses are considered very vital in making or breaking interpersonal relationships (Berowa, 2020). Holmes (1988) defined compliments as "speech acts that explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to someone for some "good" (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) that the speaker and the hearer positively value" (p. 485). The study of compliment and compliment responses is important in broadening the notions of pragmatics about cross-cultural implications and interrelationships among social groups as it deemed to be "mirrors of cultural values" (Manes, 1983 as cited by Furkó & Dudás, 2012, p.136). There are notable studies in linguistics that emphasize the connection between compliments and culture such as Wolfson (1981) and Hyunh (2023) who observed how compliments differ across culture, serving distinctive functions in diverse social contexts.

In the Philippines, compliment and compliment strategies were examined by various researchers including Zhang (2013) on compliments in Philippine English, and Berowa (2020) on compliment and compliment response strategies among Meranaw students. Zhang (2013) explored the formulaic use of compliments in Philippine English, particularly at the syntactic and lexical levels, and found that Filipinos are more likely to accept compliments than to reject them. In 2020, Berowa discovered in her study that Meranaws make use of exclusive linguistic expressions to those people with whom they share with same ethnic membership and religious belief to foster solidarity and to maintain the universal notion of face in a high-context culture. Their studies mainly highlight the characteristics of compliment and compliment response strategies concerning pragmatics across social and ethnic usage.

Despite the attempts, the previous studies did not explore the gender-based differences in compliments and compliment responses in a sociocultural context. Gender is a major concern in the study of speech acts because it shows essential characteristics of speech patterns between male and female speakers (Berowa, Ella & Lucas, 2019). Their differences in language use reflect their cultural values, traditions, ideologies, religion, social norms, and unique attributes in expressing politeness and propriety in a social context. An understanding of gender differences in various speech communities, particularly in the use of compliments and compliment responses, not only strengthens and fosters solidarity between native speakers but also promotes understanding and connection between people from different speech communities.

Thus, this study was conducted to discover the compliment and compliment response strategies of Meranaw people, and to determine if there are differences in the strategies employed by this identified group in performing such speech acts across genders. This study illustrates that Meranaw people are heavily influenced by traditional norms and values that shape their language use and linguistic habits. In this paper, the researchers explored the different aspects of culture and traditions that Meranaw compliments and compliment responses entail such as religion and beliefs, norms, and social roles of males and females. Moreover, this investigation explored the challenges in performing such speech acts to provide a comprehensive discussion about the social and cross-cultural implications of the Meranaw language. This paper is centered on the analysis of gender-based differences in compliment and compliment response strategies among Meranaws and observes the linguistic construct as influenced by their socio-cultural beliefs and practices. This study would hopefully contribute to the body of literature about the compliment behavior of Meranaw speakers by diving into the influence of gender as socio-pragmatic factor in their compliment utterances. Furthermore, the researchers aspire that with this study, future researchers will be inspired to delve into the pragmatic lens of indigenous languages in Philippine context.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three theoretical perspectives: Speech Act Theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987), and Community of Practice of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). The Speech Act Theory views language as action, moving beyond the idea of language as a mere system of symbols. The theory makes the difference between *locutionary acts*, which deal with the meaning of the words; *illocutionary acts*, which

address what the speaker wants to achieve; and *perlocutionary acts* which refer to effect on the listener.

On the other hand, Politeness Theory centers on the concept of face or an individual's public self-image. It posits that people engage in politeness to maintain face. It has two aspects: positive face (the desire to be liked) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). Compliments are generally considered acts of positive politeness. It also considers how factors like gender influence politeness strategies in complimenting behavior. Lastly, Community of Practice (CoP) emphasizes that language and gender are constructed within social groups, highlighting the influence of sociocultural practices on linguistic behavior.

1.2. Research Objective

This study aims to critically investigate the language use of Meranaw speakers based on their compliment behavior. To be specific, this paper sought to identify and assess the different compliment and compliment response strategies employed by Meranaw College students and examine the varying differences of their compliment behavior across genders. Additionally, this paper seeks to explore the relevant social and cultural contexts in compliment behavior, including proximity and familiarity between Meranaw interlocutors.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study used quantitative research design to investigate the compliment and compliment response behavior of Meranaw college students. The use of frequency count and percentage determined the pattern of the linguistic phenomenon being investigated which provided more detailed analysis and interpretations on participants' responses.

2.2. Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were 70 Meranaw university students, 35 males and 35 females, whose age ranged from 19 to 23 years old. Regardless of their year level, students were considered to participate in the study if they met the inclusion criteria. The selection of

participants is based on the following criteria: the student must (1) be a member of the Meranaw ethnic group, (2) practices Meranaw culture, and (3) proficient in the Meranaw language. Meranaws are cultural minority group of the Philippines that mostly resides in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte (Disoma 1999; Ulla, 2014 cited in Bantog & Sarip-Macarambon, 2021). They are also found in some places across the country such as in Cotabato, Bukidnon, Maguindanao, and as far as North Burneo (Nolasco, 2004). The researchers believed that the said number of sample participants was adequate to draw substantive data since it has a larger sample compared to the previous conducted by Berowa (2020) which deals with compliment behavior of Meranaw people with a total of forty-nine participants.

2.3. Research Setting

This study was conducted at the Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, Philippines. The university is in the southernmost part of Mindanao and holds the largest population of students in the entire BARMM (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao) region, majority of which are Meranaws. MSU is known for its rich and diverse instream of sociocultural development and integrated learning. The university upholds several goals and principles in maintaining a dynamic learning environment. It consists of seventeen colleges on the main campus and has seven branches located in other areas in Mindanao. It was chosen by the researchers as the locale of this study due to its location and constituents as a potential abundant source of data about Meranaws.

2.4. Instrument of the Study

The instrument of this study is a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire which is predesigned to present situations in particular contexts and scenarios that aim to elicit the speech acts from the participants of this study. DCT questionnaire can easily produce large data that is useful in the initial understanding of a speech act in dialect or language (Beebe & Cummings 1996; Berowa, 2020, as cited in H. Abbas & Berowa,

2022). This study adapted the DCT questionnaire of Berowa (2020) where it has a total of ten (10) scenarios that will be divided into two parts. The first part consists of five (5) scenarios which require the participants to provide compliments in given situations. The second part consists of another five (5) scenarios supposed to compliment responses from the same participants. To capture the authenticity of Meranaw compliments, the participants were asked to answer the hypothetical scenarios with their native language (i.e., Meranaw).

2.5. Method of Analysis

In analyzing the collected data, the taxonomies or coding systems provided by Yuan (2002) and Holmes (1986, 1988, 1993) were used to categorize and analyze the compliments and compliment responses of Meranaw college students. The data collected was translated and tabulated using frequency

and percentage count to determine the compliment and compliment responses strategies of the participants. The data were then categorized based on the participants' gender to determine the differences in strategies between male and female participant. The answers from DCT were also coded by the choice of words and patterns. The highest frequency of speech pattern was regarded as the most common compliment strategies among Meranaws.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Compliment strategies employed by Meranaw College Students

The results show that Meranaw college students employ various compliment strategies as reflected on their compliment speech act. Shown in Table 1 is the overall percentage and frequency distribution of semantic formulas employed by the participants.

Table 1. Compliment strategies of Meranaw College Students

Semantic Formula	Overall Tokens					
	Male		Female		Overall	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Compliments - Unbound						
Explicit Compliment	**126**	**39.87**	**155**	**43.05**	**281**	**41.56**
Implicit Compliment	16	5.06	5	1.38	21	3.10
Compliments - Bound						
Explanation	59	18.67	94	26.11	153	22.63
Information Question	5	1.58	10	2.77	15	2.21
Future Reference	10	3.16	1	0.27	11	1.62
Contrast	3	0.94	0	0	3	0.44
Advice	3	0.94	3	0.83	6	0.88
Request	2	0.63	4	1.11	6	0.88
Additional Semantic Formula						
Cultural and Religious Reference	40	12.65	44	12.22	84	12.42
Using Humor	19	6.01	15	4.16	34	5.02
Conversation Openers	4	1.26	3	0.83	7	1.03
Address Term	12	3.79	11	3.55	23	3.40
Non-Complimentary Replies						
Non-Compliment	10	3.16	10	2.77	20	2.95
Opt Out	7	2.21	5	1.38	12	1.77
TOTAL:	**316**	**46.74%**	**360**	**53.25%**	**676**	**100%**

Alqarni (2020) explained that unbound semantic formulas indicate expressions that can function as independent compliments. Meanwhile, bound semantic formulas refers to those complimentary expressions that cannot function alone without the help of the two unbound semantic formula – the explicit and implicit strategy. Explicit compliment is often a general statement with at least one positive semantic carrier unlike implicit strategy which does not necessarily require a presence of a positive semantic carrier but infers positive meaning from what is said in a particular context (Yuan, 2002). On the other hand, non-complimentary replies refer to expressions with neither positive semantic carrier nor positive meaning. This includes the non-compliments and the opt outs (Yuan, 2002).

As presented in Table 1, Meranaw participants have strong preference on using explicit compliment with the highest percentage of 41.56% of the overall frequency of raw tokens. This corroborates the findings of Zhang (2013) that explicit strategy is very common and popular among speakers of Philippine English. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with the result of the study of Berowa in 2020 that compliment speech act of Meranaw speakers utilize explicit strategy like any Filipino who value maintaining healthy interpersonal relationship with one another. The researchers believe that the participants' use of explicit strategy is closely tied to their *maratabat* as also inferred by Berowa (2020) in her study. *Maratabat* is defined as the deep sense of personal honor, dignity, self-esteem, and reputation of the Meranaw people (Cimene, Cabrillos & Santdander, 2018). Hence, it is natural for Meranaw speakers to opt for explicit strategies or direct compliments to save face and to avoid insulting other people as a means of conformity towards their cultural norms and beliefs.

Interestingly, the researchers discovered four additional semantic formulas evident on the compliment utterances of the participants. These formulas are *cultural and religious reference, using humor, conversation opener,* and *address term.* Unlike in the study

of Yuan (2002), these semantic formulas are evident on DCT data and not in natural data, suggesting that participants regularly use these strategies as they inherently opted for it even through writing. Findings revealed that most of the participants offer direct compliment along with other bound strategies. Most prominently used next to explanation is cultural and religious reference. This strategy is often observed on the use of linguistic items with direct relation to culture and religion.

The use of Arabic terms such as *Alhamdulillah* (All praise is due to Allah), *Tabarakallahul feekh* (May Allah bless you), *Ma Shaa Allah* (Allah wills it), and *In Shaa Allah* (if Allah wills) to politely express compliment is a strong indicator that proves religion as a social factor that affects the speech of the participants. In the study of Berowa (2020), she found out that most of Meranaw make use of the distinctive expression *Ma Shaa Allah* in their compliments, a strategy that is not found in any taxonomy of compliment speech act. Similarly, the presence of other culturally bound linguistic items such as *bangsa* (clan) and *kandori* (thanksgiving) prove that the compliment speech act of the Meranaw people is heavily influenced by their Community of Practice (CofP). Meranaws strongly adhere to their sociocultural and religious practices which naturally shape how they construct their speech.

Meanwhile, the use of humor, conversation openers, and address term are typically employed by the participants to initiate conversation with the subject of compliment and to maintain healthy interpersonal relationship and further strengthen their solidarity with them.

3.2. Compliment Response Strategies Employed by Meranaw College Students

The findings illustrate that Meranaw College students employ various compliment response strategies. Shown in Table 2 is the overall percentage and frequency distribution of semantic formulas employed by the participants.

Table 2. Compliment Response Strategies of Meranaw College Students

Compliment Response Strategies		Overall Tokens					
		Male		Female		Overall	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
ACCEPT							
	Appreciation Tokens	**73**	**10.80**	**161**	**23.82**	**234**	**34.62**
	Agreeing Utterance	21	3.11	60	8.88	81	11.99
	Downgrading Utterance	54	7.99	21	3.11	75	11.10
	Return Compliment	0	0	0	0	0	0
REJECT							
	Disagreeing Utterance	2	0.29	4	0.59	6	0.89
	Question Accuracy	3	0.44	38	5.62	41	6.06
	Challenge Sincerity	3	0.44	17	2.25	20	2.96
EVADE							
	Shift Credit	60	8.88	22	3.25	82	12.13
	Informative Comment	9	1.33	32	4.73	41	6.06
	Request Reassurance	0	0	0	0	0	0
ADDITIONAL SEMANTIC FORMULA							
	Sarcasm	50	7.40	2	0.29	52	7.69
	Offering Utterance	41	6.06	3	0.44	44	6.50
	TOTAL:	**316**	**46.74%**	**360**	**53.25%**	**676**	**100%**

The researchers have observed that the use of *appreciation tokens* ("*Thank you!*", "*Thanks*", etc.) is often followed by return compliments. The same pattern occurred in most of the responses under the acceptance strategy. This shows that Meranaw College students are likely to respond to compliments through simple and brief expressions of appreciation and frequently with return compliments as a courtesy. The most popularly used appreciation in Meranaw is *salamat* (thank you), as shown in the statements given, but it is never used alone in response. The researchers observe that Meranaws perceive return compliments as a necessary part of appreciative expressions to show politeness. This shows that Meranaws deem simple and brief appreciation tokens such as salamat (*thank you)* as uncommon because it implies to many as recognition of oneself as deserving of the compliment. Therefore, appreciation tokens are always accompanied by return compliments to shift credit to others and to express humility.

In this study, the order of the most preferred compliment response strategy, with *accept* as the most frequent followed by *evade* and the least favored, *reject* concur with the study of Zhang (2013) that suggested that compliment and compliment response on Philippine English speakers are more likely to accept compliments than to reject it. A similar study was conducted by Berowa (2020) regarding the compliment and compliment response strategy among Meranaw EFL learners, which showed acceptance as the most frequently used compliment response among Meranaws. However, the sequence of the compliment response strategies presented in this study in terms of the most to least preferred strategy differs from Berowa (2020) and Zhang (2013). Both studies suggested that *reject* is the second most preferred compliment response of the Meranaws while this study disconfirms it with *evade* as the second most preferred strategy in the data.

Findings revealed that *evade* strategy, as the second most preferred compliment response by Meranaw college students, has a significant implication in this study. This pattern suggests that Meranaws have a bulk of strategies in evading compliments, not to show impoliteness towards others, but rather, it is their way of being courteous toward them. This means that politeness among Meranaws is not only evading compliments but also directing compliments toward someone else, or most

often to God. The expressions of Meranaws are usually equipped with words and terms relevant to God and other people involved around them, such as family and cousins. The number of such responses emphasizes the collective identity of the Meranaws apparent in their language use.

In the analysis of the data, the researchers have found several compliment response strategies that do not fall under Holmes' categories. These tokens were identified as *sarcasm* and *offering utterances* under additional semantic formula, as shown in Table 2. Sarcasm and rhetorical questions were used by respondents to express humor or to downgrade themselves. The *offering utterances*

are compliments responses that show sincere, and objective offers from the receiver of compliments.

The offering utterances show the polite practices of Meranaws in the casual conversations among them. In most cases, offering an item or something to someone who gave the compliment is a common response to show courtesy, as observed in the data. The distance and proximity between the interlocutors affect the use of offering utterances by the informants. They used *offering utterances* when sincere in their offers as shown in the following:

English	Meranaw
Can I buy you one?	Ba kawn pamasa?
Do you like it?	Banga pekababayai?
I have another one at home.	Aden a ped aken a bag sa walay.
I will give this to you.	Ibegay aken reka aya.

Offers that were categorized in *sarcasm* were insincere expressions that were used to evade compliments.

3.3 Compliment and compliment response strategies across genders

The research found that compliment strategies employed by Meranaw male and female participants do not differ since both equally prefer using explicit strategy followed by explanation and cultural and religious reference. However, the researchers discovered that both groups of participants differ in terms of their compliment response strategies. Female participants have apparent similarities in the strategies they employ. Their responses are mostly combinations of multiple semantic formulas such as the use of appreciation tokens preceding return compliments and downgrading utterances in compliment responses. The researchers observed that the responses from females tend to be polite and specific. They are likely to compliment the person who offered a compliment after showing appreciation through agreeing utterances, and appreciation tokens, but are less likely to use downgrading utterances. In the study of Lakoff (1975), distinctions between men and women

were made by suggesting that women's speech tend to be polite because it shows indirectness, mitigation, and hesitation which are characterized by hedge, tentativeness, and tag questions

This study also found that Meranaw women tend to give more compliments considering the number of tokens drawn from the compliments of female participants which is consistent with the findings of Herbert (1990) and Mojica (2002). The researchers believe that the sociocultural and religious practices of the participants prominent in their community is a huge factor that influence the manner of speech of Meranaw women. In Meranaw community, women are expected to be obedient, modest, and well-kept who upholds the teachings of Islam (Pimping, 2018). Thus, it is not strange that women's linguistic behavior is polite by utilizing strategies that will allow them to build strong interpersonal relationships with their fellow Meranaws and to also protect their honor or *maratabat*.

On the other hand, it was shown that Meranaw male participants is empathetic and equally polite to women's speech despite their strong preference of direct compliments. This is evident on the low frequency count of *non-complimentary replies* and their inclination to

use strategies that allows them to deeply socialize and connect with other people (e.g. explanation, cultural and religious reference, using humor, and address term). According to Nolasco (2004), traditional Meranaw men are expected to be responsible and imbibe certain traits such as *malai-takdir* (concerned and committed), *malai-sekdel* (deeply concerned), and *mawaraw* (brave). The same set of expectations demanded by their religion. Hence, it is natural that their linguistic behavior is not only direct but also polite and empathetic. This is well depicted in the male participants' response strategies which constitute most of the *agreeing utterances* and are attributed with direct expressions of gratitude. This finding is consistent with Montgomery (1998) that male speakers use polite language especially when they are speaking to women (Keikhaie & Mozaffari, 2013) since most of the situations in the provided hypothetical scenarios in the DCT has woman as its subject of compliment.

In relation to the use of religious references ("*Mashaa Allah!*", *"Tabarak Allah", "Allahumma barik"*, etc.), Meranaw female college students prefer to use them more frequently than males do as appreciation tokens. Male informants employ Meranaw expressions based on cultural and religious references to evade compliments offered to them, such as *"so bantogen na sii ko Allah"* which means *All praises to Allah*.

The compliment response strategies used between male and female informants differ based on how they perceived compliments and the features that characterize the choice of words and how expressions were formulated. The study of Holmes (1988) also defined the differences based on the perception of male and female informants to compliments in that females generally use compliments to each other more often than men do to each other. The findings of this study also suggest that the Meranaw female college students to have presented more details in providing polite expressions through appreciation tokens, shift credit, informative comments, return compliments, and downgrading utterances. The male college students on the other hand are attributed with agreeing utterances, sarcasm, and offering utterances.

4. Conclusion

This study illustrates the compliment and compliment response strategies employed by Meranaw college students at Mindanao State University – Main Campus. The result of this study reveals that Meranaw compliments and compliments responses are extensive in linguistic form. They tend to be specific, explicit, and definite in terms of the choice of words and the formulation of words and sentences. This reveals how Meranaws employ a variety of semantic patterns to express and get their meaning across to people. The compliment strategies they employ tend to be explicit and direct. Meranaws tend to use definitive words, phrases, and sentences to avoid ambiguity and misunderstandings among them as reflected in the result of this study. Their expressions are substantive to people and things involved such as indirect reference to family members and relatives to elicit response from others.

However, in the case of compliment response strategies, the participants used vague expressions to express their thoughts and to imply meanings. It implies that evading compliments is part of Meranaw practice in that it is not perceived as impolite or discourteous but a means of being considerate of others during a conversation as evident in the most prevalent pattern of compliments and compliment responses in the data. It suggests that one way of being polite in Meranaw culture is directing compliments towards other people or most often to God. The expressions of Meranaws are usually equipped with words and terms relevant to God and other people involved around them such as family and cousins. The number of such responses emphasizes the collective identity of the Meranaws apparent in their language use.

Furthermore, the result of this implies that Meranaws employ various strategies not only to strengthen the social ties among the interlocutors but also to uphold their cultural values and protect their *maratabat* or honor. This is observed on how Meranaw men and women socially construct their speech in accordance with the norms prevalent in their community to save face. This only suggests that Meranaw people appear to acknowledge the universal notion of face in human society which is the need to protect and to maintain the face of

interlocutors in any form of linguistic interactions. This study demonstrates the importance of understanding and acknowledging the socio-pragmatic variables present in intercultural communication to establish a more harmonious relationship among the interlocutors. Moreover, this study may serve as reference in the implementation of pedagogical approaches in the Philippines to foster and elevate the socio-pragmatic competence and improve the intercultural skills of learners. It is recommended for future researchers to extend the findings of this study by exploring other relevant variables such as socioeconomic status, education level, and age to deepen understandings of the intracultural variation in Meranaw speech acts.

5. Recommendations

Considering the findings of this study, researchers and linguists are encouraged to conduct further investigations into the newly identified semantic formulas in the compliment behavior of Meranaw speakers, which include cultural and religious references, humor, and offering utterances. These patterns offer valuable insights that can broaden existing frameworks in pragmatics and enrich the understanding of speech act theory, particularly within indigenous Philippine languages. Moreover, the study revealed gendered differences in compliment response strategies, which are shaped by sociocultural norms and religion. The findings suggest the need for further research into other influential variables such as socioeconomic status, education level, age, and other social factors. Exploring compliments and compliment response strategies can provide a deeper and more comprehensive view of intra-cultural variation and pragmatic behavior in high-context communities. In sum, the study highlights the intricate link between language use, cultural values, and traditional practices, reinforcing the importance of localized linguistic research in advancing studies on discourse and sociolinguistic frameworks in Philippine context.

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