

Language as a Gateway to Authentic Tourism: Leveraging Bugis-Makassar Expressions in South Sulawesi's Tourism Industry

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Abstract—This study aims to thoroughly examine the role of local language in the development of tourism based on local wisdom in South Sulawesi. Using a qualitative approach supported by quantitative data from questionnaires distributed to tourism actors, local communities, stakeholders, and tourists, this study highlights the importance of using local terms such as "*tabe*", "*siri na pacce*", and "*sipakatau*" in building authentic tourism experiences. The research results show that local language is not only a communication tool but also a means of preserving cultural values and collective identity that strengthens social relationships in the tourism realm. The high support for training in using the local language and the desire to integrate it into tourism promotion indicate great potential in revitalizing the local language through the tourism sector. These findings reinforce the sociopragmatic theoretical view of the social meaning of language while providing practical contributions to formulating culture-based tourism policy strategies.

Index Terms—local language, local wisdom, sustainable tourism, South Sulawesi, cultural identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is rich in culture and traditions, as well as the diversity of local languages (Radjaban et al., 2025). Being passed down from one generation to another makes it hard to separate society from the culture it already has (Takwa et al., 2024). When discussing culture, some linguistic experts argue that language holds a central position in cultural studies, as it is created by a group of ethnic or tribal communities (Takwa et al., 2024; Mofu et al., 2024). Language itself is a tool in communication where both sender and receiver are on an equal footing (Asri et al., 2023). Language should be understood fully together with its cultural background (Kuswanty et al., 2023). It commonly happens that people mistakenly interpret a language because of a lack of understanding (Iksora et al., 2022). A different cultural background, the use of figurative expressions, and the development of the digital age, which has drastically changed how we live and behave, are some significant reasons for this kind of misunderstanding (Baa et al., 2023; Manugeren et al., 2023; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). Most people do not realize the value of cultural norms in their social interactions (Arafah et al., 2024). In other words, culture and language have an interdependent relationship (Arafah et al., 2023). Each region or ethnic group lives with its own local language, concept, and local wisdom.

As explained by Arafah et al. (2025), the leadership values and local wisdom of the Bugis people are not only passed down through oral and written traditions but are also strongly reflected in everyday communication and social interaction practices. In the context of tourism, values such as "*siri na pacce*" respect for guests, and ethics in conveying messages become crucial foundations in building trust and comfort for tourists. The affirmation of these cultural values through the local language shows that tourism is not only about destinations but also about a communication experience that reflects the character of local communities.

The development of cultural tourism is not only determined by physical aspects such as infrastructure and visitor numbers, but also by language and cultural communication aspects that can convey local identity authentically. One important but often overlooked aspect is politeness in language use in tourism interaction, which also determines the

success of deep and meaningful tourism experiences (Said et al., 2024).

However, in practice, the use of local languages in tourism services tends to be minimal and unsystematic. Many tourism practitioners prefer to use Indonesian or even foreign languages to welcome tourists, especially those from outside the region. In the tourism sector, English is mainly used as an international language that people from all over the world can understand (Karamoy et al., 2024; Kaharuddin et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2023). This phenomenon puts the local values contained in local languages at risk of being unrecognized or forgotten in tourism interactions. On the other hand, both domestic and international tourists seek authentic experiences, including through the use of local languages that are considered able to provide a distinctive and profound cultural atmosphere (Cohen, 2012).

It cannot be denied that along with the advancement of technology, people's behavior tends to alter therewith (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b). The world has shifted towards a more modern concept, leading to several changes in the environment (Yudith et al., 2023; Jaelani et al., 2024). Not only that the new generation spends lots of time on social media, but the netizens from all range of ages (especially for those who are expected to preserve local traditions) also engage on social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their daily life (Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2025; Kaharuddin et al., 2024). The existence of local traditions is essential as it aims to recall the past, understand the present, and prepare for the future (Takwa et al., 2025). Unfortunately, there are not many people who are aware enough of this condition.

In South Sulawesi, cultural diversity—including the Bugis, Makassar, and Toraja languages—is a highly potential asset. However, communication practices in the tourism sector still often use Indonesian or foreign languages, which results in local languages and traditional communicative values being marginalized. According to Said et al. (2024), in the context of the Bugis community, communication practices that rely on politeness in language and local values can build meaningful social relationships and strengthen social trust between tourism actors and tourists. This shows that the use of local languages politely and ethically can enrich interactions and enhance the image of cultural destinations.

This phenomenon revives the society's awareness to be more active in cherishing local traditions (Arifin et al., 2022). In line with this, recent studies in South Sulawesi, including the "Vitality of Local Languages in South Sulawesi" program (Fitrawahyudi et al., 2023), emphasize efforts in digitalization, translation of folk tales, and strengthening local languages as cultural preservation strategies in destination development. Another study on the effectiveness of machine translation, specifically Google Translate (GT), in accurately translating languages, addresses its advantages and disadvantages within the Indonesian cultural context. The results indicate that written translations by GT outperform image-based translations, emphasizing the importance of considering cultural context in communication technology to bridge language and cultural barriers (Latief et al., 2020). Another attempt that has been made includes introducing local languages to the academic field, such as giving students reading materials in the form of literary work (Arifuddin et al., 2024; Arafah et al., 2023). Literary work is rich in cultural aspects since language is its carrier of ideas (Arafah et al., 2024). Moreover, most authors instill their cultural backgrounds into their works (Sunyoto et al., 2022). However, there are still few empirical studies exploring how local languages are practically integrated into tourism services, as well as how they influence the perceptions of key actors such as tourism practitioners, communities, stakeholders, and visitors.

In other words, there is a gap between the cultural potential possessed by the people of South Sulawesi and the actual practices in tourism services. They need to invest more time and effort to solve the problem, to implement local traditions in tourism successfully, and to regain their confidence, because success means giving a reasonable effort (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Arafah et al., 2024). This study is important to bridge that gap by exploring perception data from direct actors in the field.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Goffman's (1959) concept of "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" explains how individuals perform roles in social interactions to create desired impressions. In the psychological aspect, individuals have already been taught to be friendly since childhood due to others' happiness (Yudith et al., 2024). This idea is relevant in tourism, where hosts and tourists negotiate impressions through language and behavior. Furthermore, Gudykunst et al. (1988) highlight that culture profoundly influences interpersonal communication styles, including politeness and face-saving strategies, which impact tourism encounters. This behavior relates to the desire where individuals strive to maintain a friendly image to please people (Yudith et al., 2024).

The sociopragmatic perspective emphasizes how language use functions to maintain social harmony and identity within a cultural group. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies vary across cultures but share the common goal of mitigating face-threatening acts. In the Bugis-Makassar cultural context, terms such as "*siri na pacce*" (honor and mutual respect), "*sipakatau*" (humanity and empathy), and "*mappasilasa*" (forgiveness and reconciliation) are integral politeness norms that help sustain social relationships and are pivotal in tourism communication.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection. Qualitative data

were obtained through in-depth interviews and participant observation with local community members, tourism entrepreneurs, and tourists. Quantitative data involved distributing questionnaires to measure attitudes towards the use of local language in tourism settings.

Sampling techniques included purposive and snowball methods to identify key informants who are knowledgeable in cultural values and language practices in tourism. Data analysis involved thematic coding for qualitative material and descriptive statistics for quantitative responses.

According to Arafah et al. (2025), research that highlights local values in social practices requires an approach capable of capturing cultural and social contexts in depth, including in intercultural communication practices.

A. Data Sources

The data sources in this study consist of four main groups of actors involved in local tourism practices: (1) tourism practitioners (tour guides, homestay managers, souvenir business actors), (2) local communities living around the destinations, (3) stakeholders (village government, tourism office, traditional leaders), and (4) tourists (both local and international). The number of respondents involved totaled 97 people who completed an online questionnaire distributed selectively across five regencies/cities in South Sulawesi: Makassar, Maros, Bulukumba, North Toraja, and Wajo.

B. Research Instrument

The research instrument consists of a semi-structured questionnaire comprising 25 items. This questionnaire includes aspects of perception, the use of local terms, cultural values contained in language, as well as views on the need for training or preservation of local languages in the tourism domain. The questions were designed based on literature studies such as Cohen (2012), and Fitrawahyudi et al. (2023), which emphasize the importance of language as a tool for cultural representation in tourist destinations.

C. Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis technique was conducted thematically with a categorization process based on the emergence of key topics: (1) perceptions of the importance of local languages in tourism, (2) local terms used, (3) cultural values associated with local languages, and (4) support for efforts to preserve and integrate local languages into destination communication strategies. Each theme was manually coded and analyzed about one another to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of local language use in the tourism sector.

D. Data Validity

Data validity was tested through source triangulation (cross-verification among respondent groups), as well as through discussions with two experts in the fields of cultural linguistics and tourism to confirm the interpretation of the results. This analysis aims to provide a realistic picture of how local languages are not only communication tools but also means of preserving local cultural values in sustainable tourism.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. General Perceptions of Local Language as a Cultural Identity

The findings indicate that 86% of respondents agree on the importance of using local language as a medium to create an authentic tourism experience. The roles of phrases such as "*tabe*" (greeting), "*siri na pacce*" (honor and mutual respect), and "*sipakatau*" (humanity and empathy) are frequently mentioned as essential elements in communication between hosts and tourists. These expressions are not only linguistic tools but also carriers of cultural values that foster a sense of belonging and trust.

B. Distribution of Local Term Usage by Actor Groups

- Tourism Practitioners: 73% stated they recognize local terms, but only 42% use them in daily practice. The main obstacles are a lack of confidence and the assumption that tourists do not understand them.

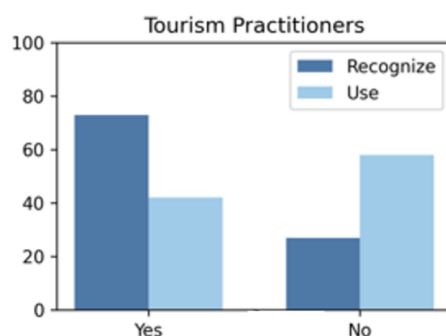


Figure 1. Local Term Usage by Tourism Practitioners

- Local Communities: 88% feel that their local language is an important part of building the tourism image. Some even show personal initiative to teach local terms to visitors as part of the cultural experience.

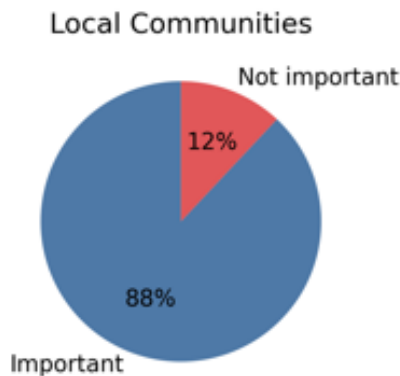


Figure 2. Local Term Usage by Local Communities

- Visitors: 69% of domestic tourists and 54% of international tourists respond positively to being greeted in the local language. This is associated with a sense of hospitality and exotic value.



Figure 3. Local Term Usage by Visitors

- Stakeholders: almost all (92%) stated the need for local language training for tourism practitioners and believe that language preservation programs should be integrated into cultural promotion policies.

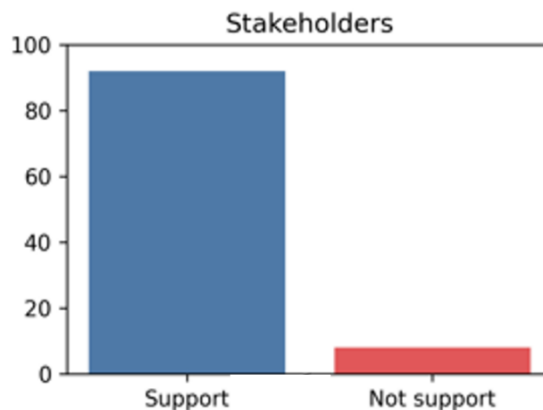


Figure 4. Local Term Usage by Stakeholders

The interview data revealed that local tourism entrepreneurs actively integrate these local terms into their services, such as during greetings, narrating cultural stories, and mediating conflicts, which enhances tourists' cultural immersion. Community members expressed strong enthusiasm to participate in language revitalization programs, highlighting that language preservation is intertwined with their cultural identity and economic well-being through tourism.

Furthermore, stakeholders suggested that local language training should be institutionalized within tourism education, and promotional materials should highlight local expressions to attract culturally sensitive tourists. Integrating local wisdom language into digital marketing and tourist guides could elevate the uniqueness and competitiveness of South Sulawesi's tourism offerings.

C. Local Cultural Expressions Emerging in the Questionnaire

From qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions, more than 20 local terms were identified relating to tourism services, etiquette, and noble values. Key terms include:

- *Tabe* (excuse me, polite greeting)
- *Siri na pacce* (dignity and social empathy)
- *Sipakatau, sipakainge, sipakalebbi* (equality, mutual reminders, and mutual respect)
- *Mappasilasa* (reconciliation, fostering harmonious social relationships)

These expressions not only serve as markers of cultural identity but also function as communication strategies that create a positive emotional atmosphere in tourist interactions.

The quantitative data supported qualitative insights, with 78% of tourists surveyed reporting a deeper appreciation for local culture when local language elements are incorporated in their tours. This supports Cohen's (2012) view of authenticity as a key driver in sustainable tourism development.

D. Recommendations for Local Language Revitalization

Support for local language training is very high (81%). Furthermore, 67% of tourism practitioners expressed willingness to participate in training if provided for free by the government or local institutions. Respondents also suggested that tourism promotional materials include local phrases familiar to the community as an indirect form of promoting the local language.

Some concrete suggestions from respondents include:

- The creation of a bilingual pocket dictionary (Indonesian–Bugis/Makassar) for tourism practitioners
- Cultural and language workshops every 3 months for tour guides
- Integration of local language into digital tourism applications

Overall, the research results indicate that local language is not only understood as a means of communication but also as a strategic instrument in designing a distinctive, immersive tourism experience rooted in local wisdom.

This study discusses three main focuses: perceptions and practices of local language use by four leading actors; types of local expressions reflecting cultural values; and the extent of support for training and integration of local language in tourism promotion.

First, perceptions and practices of local language use in tourism vary considerably. From the distributed questionnaires, the majority of tourism practitioners stated that using local languages such as Bugis or Makassar strengthens the impression of authenticity and enhances the comfort of interactions. Local communities also show pride when tourists attempt to use local terms. Regional tourism stakeholders have begun to recognize the strategic value of local languages as part of destination identity. Even tourists show interest in the local language as a form of cultural appreciation, although this remains limited to greetings and specific expressions.

Second, four dominant local expressions—*tabe*, *siri na pacce*, *sipakatau*, *sipakainge*, *sipakalebbi*, and *mappasilasa*—reflect the local wisdom values of South Sulawesi communities. The expression *tabe* functions as an initial politeness form in Bugis-Makassar culture, reflecting an egalitarian social structure and respect in interpersonal communication. In the tourism context, *tabe* is a communication opener between tourism actors and tourists containing pragmatic politeness strategies as formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987). The use of *tabe* shows the tourism practitioners' awareness of the importance of face-saving, creating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere. In sociopragmatic theory, this reflects conformity between cultural context and communication strategies chosen to build harmonious relations.

Siri na pacce shows the moral and empathetic dimension of Bugis-Makassar culture. *Siri*, meaning dignity or honor, demands that individuals act honorably in every social interaction, including tourism services. *Pacce*, meaning empathy or social solidarity, emphasizes sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others. This concept aligns with Goffman's (1959) ideas on self-presentation and social honor as part of identity constructed in interaction. When tourism practitioners display *siri*, they maintain service quality as a form of honor preservation. *Pacce* appears in empathetic responses to tourists' needs and comfort, forming ethical and respectful relations.

Sipakatau, *sipakainge*, and *sipakalebbi* form a Bugis social ethics trilogy that underpins human relations based on mutual respect. *Sipakatau* (humanizing each other) reflects the principle of social equality, regarded in ethnography of communication theory (Hymes, 1972) as a community cohesion strategy. *Sipakainge* (mutual reminders) reflects corrective principles based on affection, while *sipakalebbi* (mutual glorification) symbolizes reciprocal appreciation in cultural communication. In tourism contexts, these principles manifest through polite provision of information, guidance, and correction to tourists, alongside services respecting both parties' honor. Thus, this trilogy strengthens interactions based on local norms that can integrate into global service practices.

Meanwhile, *mappasilasa*, meaning reconciliation or fostering harmonious social relations, reflects the value of reconciliation in Bugis culture. In tourism practice, this concept is often applied when conflicts arise between tourists and locals, where collective mediation and dialogue maintain harmony. This relates to cross-cultural communication approaches emphasizing meaning negotiation and culturally grounded conflict resolution (Gudykunst et al., 1988). Questionnaire findings show that local communities still uphold *mappasilasa* values, using it as a strategic approach to maintain social stability amid multicultural interactions in tourism.

Third, data also show that a majority of respondents (over 80%) from the four main groups support training in local language use within tourism contexts. There is a strong push for local governments and destination managers to develop training modules, multilingual glossaries, and to include local language elements in brochures, websites, and other promotional materials. This aligns with Smith and Richards' (2013) view that cultural symbols, including language, strongly influence destination identity.

Theoretically, this discussion refers to a *sociopragmatic* approach emphasizing the social function of language in a particular cultural context (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a). Furthermore, Cohen's (2012) cultural branding concept is referenced to explain how local language strengthens a destination's position in global tourism competition. Use of local language is not just communication, but part of a cultural branding strategy.

Thus, revitalizing local language in tourism can be seen as a cultural strategy combining cultural preservation with destination innovation. Synergies among communities, business actors, governments, and tourists in using and valuing local languages will strengthen South Sulawesi's position as a destination deeply rooted in local values while remaining open to the world.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the local language plays a crucial role in supporting the development of tourism based on local wisdom in South Sulawesi. The use of specific local expressions such as "*tabe*," "*siri na pacce*," and "*sipakatau*" enriches the tourism experience by providing authenticity and deepening the cultural connection between hosts and visitors. This cultural-linguistic integration enhances tourists' understanding and appreciation of local values, ultimately promoting sustainable tourism development.

Community engagement in language preservation efforts reflects a strong awareness of the relationship between cultural identity and economic benefits derived from tourism. Institutionalizing local language training among tourism stakeholders and integrating it into promotional strategies are essential steps to maximize these benefits.

The findings suggest that local language is not only a communicative tool but also a strategic asset for cultural preservation and tourism competitiveness. Future tourism policies should thus prioritize cultural and linguistic elements as foundational pillars for tourism development in South Sulawesi.

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