

SPEECH ACTS IN PUBLIC CONTROVERSY: A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF GUS EL'S CLARIFICATION ON VIRAL MISCONDUCT ACCUSATIONS

**Muhammad Fahri Jaya Sudding¹, Fauzan Hari Sudding²,
Ashabul Kahfi Susanto³, Ahmad Azhari⁴, Andi Kamariah⁵
Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia**

Email: ¹fahrisudding@unm.ac.id, ²fauzan.sudding@unm.ac.id,
³ashabul_susanto@unm.ac.id, ⁴ahmadazhari@unm.ac.id, ⁵kamariah@unm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Public clarification statements from religious figures play a significant role in shaping public perception during moral controversies, yet little is known about how such speakers use linguistic strategies to address accusations. This study examines how Gus El, an Indonesian religious leader, constructed his clarification in response to viral allegations of misconduct. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes a verbatim transcript of his YouTube clarification. The analysis focuses on the use of speech acts, politeness strategies, and selected apology elements. The findings show that expressive and commissive acts dominate the statement, particularly through explicit apologies, acknowledgement of personal fault, and commitments to self-improvement. Representative acts serve to contextualize and soften the perceived severity of the event. Politeness strategies, including humility, mitigation, and appeals to shared religious values, help the speaker manage face threats and maintain rapport with the audience. Overall, the clarification reflects a strategic use of language to express remorse, reduce negative judgment, and preserve credibility as a religious authority.

Keywords: *speech act, pragmatics, politeness strategy, apology strategy*

INTRODUCTION

Public controversies involving moral or ethical violations often trigger intense reactions in digital spaces, compelling public figures to issue clarifications or apologies as a means of managing public perception. In the digital era, such clarification statements circulate rapidly and become part of wider societal discourse, shaping how individuals negotiate responsibility, accountability, and moral legitimacy. Language therefore plays a central role not only in conveying information but also in reconstruing events, mitigating blame, and restoring one's social standing. For this reason, examining clarification statements through a pragmatic lens becomes essential for understanding how meaning, intention, and

interpersonal relations are strategically managed in moments of crisis.

A recent case in Indonesia illustrates this phenomenon clearly. A religious figure known as *Gus El* became the subject of nationwide attention after circulating photos and videos appeared to show him kissing and touching a young girl. The footage sparked widespread criticism and raised concerns about misconduct, especially given his status as a spiritual authority. In response to public backlash, Gus El released a clarification video addressing the accusations and attempting to provide an alternative interpretation of the event. His statement quickly became a focal point of online discussion, demonstrating how public crises involving religious leaders generate complex communicative acts that seek to repair trust and restore moral legitimacy (Wodak, 2006).

Previous studies on apology and clarification discourse have shown that individuals rely on various speech acts, such as; denial, justification, explanation, or expressions of regret to manage face-threatening situations (Benoit, 2014; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Holmes, 1995). Research has also emphasized the significance of politeness strategies and face management (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987) in mitigating public criticism. However, most existing literature focuses on political figures, celebrities, organizations, or institutional apologies. Studies examining clarification discourse produced by religious authorities, particularly within Indonesian or Southeast Asian contexts, remain limited. This gap is noteworthy because religious leaders hold a distinct type of moral and cultural authority that shapes their communicative choices during public controversies.

Given this background, the present study aims to investigate how speech acts are strategically employed in Gus El's clarification video to negotiate responsibility, manage face threats, and maintain moral credibility. More specifically, this study seeks to examine what types of speech acts are used, how these speech acts function within the context of public controversy, and in what ways they contribute to the reconstruction of the speaker's image in the eyes of the public. By addressing these issues, the study offers a pragmatic perspective on crisis communication involving religious authority figures in Indonesia.

By focusing on a high-profile case involving a religious leader, this research contributes to the broader field of pragmatics, particularly in understanding how speech acts operate within morally charged public controversies. It also expands the literature on digital crisis discourse by highlighting the linguistic strategies used by moral authorities when confronted with accusations that challenge their credibility (Sudding, et.al. 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory provides the foundational framework for analyzing how utterances perform actions in social interaction. Austin's pioneering work distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, emphasizing that speaking is often a form of doing—such as promising, warning, or apologizing rather than merely describing states of affairs. Developing Austin's ideas, Searle offers a systematic classification of illocutionary acts into categories such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, and elaborates how sentence meaning interacts with context to produce particular illocutionary forces. This taxonomy is particularly useful for analyzing public clarification statements, where a single utterance can simultaneously express regret, provide an explanation, and implicitly defend the speaker's moral standing (Sudding, et.al. 2025).

Moreover, speech act originally developed by Austin (1962) and later systematized by Searle (1969, 1976), provides a foundational analytical lens for understanding how language functions as action. Austin distinguishes three inseparable components in every utterance. The locutionary act refers to the literal production of linguistic form; its vocabulary, grammar, and propositional content. The illocutionary act concerns the speaker's intended function behind the utterance, such as apologizing, denying, explaining, or justifying. The perlocutionary act, meanwhile, pertains to the effect that the utterance has on the audience, including persuading, reassuring, calming, or mitigating anger. These three layers operate simultaneously, allowing speakers to use language not merely

to describe events but to perform social actions.

Building upon Austin's work, Searle classifies illocutionary acts into five major categories: representatives (asserting, stating, claiming), directives (requesting, urging, advising), commissives (promising, committing), expressives (apologizing, thanking, regretting), and declarations (officially altering social reality, e.g., resigning or appointing). This typology has been widely applied in pragmatic research, especially when analyzing how public figures negotiate accountability and manage face-threatening accusations. In highly sensitive contexts such as public controversies, speakers frequently embed multiple illocutionary forces within a single utterance, for example, providing an explanation while simultaneously shifting blame or minimizing the perceived offense.

Speech act theory is particularly relevant for the analysis of public clarification videos because such statements are inherently strategic. When responding to accusations, speakers must choose linguistic forms that reflect, mitigate, or reinterpret the alleged misconduct. For instance, a clarification may contain representatives used to assert factual details, expressives signaling regret or moral concern, or commissives that commit the speaker to corrective actions. At the same time, certain utterances may indirectly perform denials, counter-accusations, or claims of misunderstanding, depending on how the illocutionary force is constructed.

In the context of *Gus El*'s clarification video, speech act theory enables the identification of how he performs specific communicative actions to defend himself, explain his intentions, and navigate the moral expectations placed upon religious authorities. The framework also helps reveal how linguistic choices, whether explicit or implicit, serve to influence public interpretation, control reputational damage, and shape the perlocutionary effects on audiences who may be skeptical, critical, or emotionally affected by the controversy. By examining the interplay of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, this study uncovers the multi-layered pragmatic strategies mobilized in the midst of a public crisis.

Apologies as Speech Act and Politeness

Apologies have been widely studied as a particular type of expressive speech act that acknowledges an offense and attempts to repair social harmony between speaker and hearer. Early cross-cultural work by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) demonstrates that apologies typically involve strategies such as expressions of regret, taking responsibility, offers of repair, and explanations, and that the realization of these strategies is shaped by cultural norms and contextual factors. More recent studies continue this line of inquiry, examining apology strategies in different languages and settings, including naturally occurring data in digital communication.

Research on apology is closely tied to theories of politeness and facework. Goffman's notion of "face" conceptualizes social interaction as a process of maintaining one's desired self-image before others. Brown and Levinson develop this into a comprehensive politeness model, arguing that apologies often function as redressive actions to mitigate face-threatening acts and to attend to the hearer's positive or negative face. Empirical work on apology discourse shows that speakers routinely combine apology formulas with other politeness strategies, such as giving accounts, expressing concern, or emphasizing shared values to reduce the severity of the offense and to restore relational equilibrium. In the context of this study, apologies are not viewed as isolated formulaic expressions but as part of a broader cluster of speech acts and politeness moves. The analysis therefore considers how explicit or implicit apologies in Gus El's clarification co-occur with explanations, justifications, and self-presentation strategies that collectively aim to repair both interpersonal and public face.

Speech Act in Public Controversy and Religious Authority

Studies on speech acts in public controversy have typically focused on politicians, corporate leaders, or celebrities. These investigations show that when speakers respond to accusations in highly visible arenas, they often layer multiple illocutionary forces, apologizing, denying intent, reframing events, and appealing to shared values within single messages. Such complex speech act constellations

are designed to address both the immediate offense and the broader moral expectations of the audience. However, comparatively fewer studies examine how religious authorities engage in similar discursive practices, despite their prominent role as moral exemplars and community leaders.

Religious figures occupy a distinct communicative position: their authority is grounded not only in institutional roles but also in perceived spiritual integrity. When they face allegations of misconduct, their public responses must therefore attend simultaneously to personal face, institutional credibility, and religious values. Existing scholarship on religious communication often addresses preaching, theological discourse, or pastoral counseling, but systematic pragmatic analyses of clarification or apology statements by religious leaders are still scarce. This gap is particularly evident in Southeast Asian and Indonesian contexts, where religious authority is deeply intertwined with everyday social and moral life.

The present study responds to this gap by applying speech act theory to a high-profile clarification video produced by an Indonesian religious leader, Gus El. By integrating insights from speech act research, apology and politeness studies, and image repair literature, the study aims to show how specific types of illocutionary acts are mobilized to negotiate responsibility, manage face threats, and reconstruct moral credibility in the midst of a digital public controversy.

Politeness Theory

Politeness theory plays a crucial role in understanding how speakers strategically manage interpersonal relations, especially in situations involving conflict, criticism, or accusations. The foundation of politeness research is grounded in Goffman's (1967) notion of face, defined as the positive social value individuals claim for themselves during interaction. According to Goffman, social encounters require participants to actively maintain face through various linguistic and behavioral strategies. When a speaker is confronted with accusations or moral scrutiny—as in public controversies—face becomes especially vulnerable, and communicative acts must be crafted carefully to prevent or repair face-threatening damage.

Building on Goffman's work, Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a

comprehensive framework of politeness based on the concepts of positive face (the desire to be approved of, appreciated, or valued) and negative face (the desire for freedom from imposition or interference). According to their theory, many speech acts inherently function as face-threatening acts (FTAs). Apologies, denials, explanations, and justifications—all common in clarification discourse—can simultaneously threaten the speaker's own face or challenge the hearer's expectations. As a result, speakers employ various politeness strategies to mitigate such threats and restore equilibrium in the interaction.

Brown and Levinson identify two main types of politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies aim to appeal to shared values, emphasize solidarity, or affirm common ground. Examples include expressing concern, invoking moral commitments, or stressing good intentions. These strategies are particularly salient in public statements by religious figures, who often draw upon communal beliefs and moral frameworks to maintain credibility. Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, involve minimizing imposition, using indirectness, hedging, or softening potentially confrontational statements. Such strategies help speakers avoid appearing defensive or authoritative when responding to sensitive accusations.

Empirical studies on public apologies show that politeness strategies often work in tandem with other speech acts. Speakers may express regret (an expressive act) while also providing accounts or explanations to reduce perceived responsibility. This phenomenon aligns with Brown and Levinson's argument that politeness is not limited to formulaic politeness markers but extends to broader discursive structures designed to protect face. Research in digital crisis communication further indicates that public figures often combine positive and negative politeness strategies with implicit justifications or disclaimers to maintain their moral stance while minimizing face damage.

In the context of Gus El's clarification video, politeness theory provides an important analytical lens for understanding how the speaker negotiates his status as a religious authority while responding to allegations involving inappropriate conduct. His linguistic choices may reveal strategic attempts to

safeguard both personal face (as an individual accused of misconduct) and social face (as a respected religious figure whose moral image must be preserved). Positive politeness may be reflected in appeals to shared religious values, expressions of humility, or efforts to reaffirm solidarity with followers. Negative politeness may appear in mitigation devices, indirect explanations, or attempts to distance himself from intentional wrongdoing. By analyzing these politeness strategies, the present study highlights the nuanced ways in which language is employed to manage reputational risks and navigate morally sensitive controversies.

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in pragmatic analysis. A qualitative approach was chosen because the objective of this study is to interpret how linguistic choices perform specific communicative functions—particularly speech acts, politeness strategies, and limited apology strategies—within a public clarification statement. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring variables, the analysis focuses on understanding the meanings, intentions, and interpersonal functions encoded in naturally occurring discourse. This design is therefore appropriate for describing pragmatic phenomena embedded in spoken data during a public controversy.

2. Data Source

The primary data for this study were obtained from the public clarification video uploaded to YouTube. The video was downloaded and manually transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcription included all spoken utterances relevant to the pragmatic analysis, as shown below:

“Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh. Kediri, 12 November 2025. Dengan penuh kerendahan hati saya yang paling dalam, saya Muhammad Ilham Yahya Al-Maliki memohon maaf yang sebesar-besarnya kepada seluruh masyarakat atas beredarnya beberapa potongan video lama yang menimbulkan kegaduhan. Saya mengakui hal tersebut sebagai kekhilafan pribadi dan

menghapus video tersebut dari seluruh media sosial resmi kami. Saya berkomitmen untuk memperbaiki diri dan menyampaikan dakwah dengan cara yang lebih bijak, sesuai ajaran agama dan nilai-nilai akhlakul karimah. Semoga Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala mengampuni kekhilafan saya dan membimbing saya ke jalan kebaikan.”

3. Analytical Framework

Since this research is a qualitative linguistic study, no physical research instruments (such as questionnaires, tests, or observation sheets) were used. Instead, the analysis relied on an analytical framework derived from established theories in pragmatics. The framework served as the conceptual tool for identifying and interpreting pragmatic features within the clarification video. The analytical framework consists of three components:

1. Speech Act Theory

This component draws on Austin's (1962) distinctions of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, as well as Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary categories. These models were used to classify the types of speech acts performed in the clarification, including representatives, expressives, commissives, directives, and potential declarations.

2. Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework served as the basis for identifying positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, and other face-saving moves employed by the speaker. This framework was essential for analyzing how facework operates in a morally sensitive public controversy involving a religious authority figure.

3. Apology Strategy Indicators

The analysis also referenced Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) apology strategy components—such as expressions of regret, acknowledgement of responsibility, and promises of corrective action—to support the interpretation of relevant utterances. These indicators helped clarify how

apologetic elements intersect with broader speech act functions.

Together, these theoretical lenses formed the analytical framework through which the clarification video was examined. They acted as the conceptual “tools” guiding the coding, interpretation, and categorization of pragmatic phenomena within the data.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This section presents the linguistic features identified in the clarification text based on the three analytical approaches: speech acts, politeness strategies, and apology-related elements. The findings are summarized in the table below for clarity.

Table 1. Findings of Speech Act

Extracts	Speech Act Type	Politeness Strategy	Apology Element	Pragmatics Functions
“Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh”	Expressive (greeting)	Positive politeness (solidarity)		Establishes rapport; frames message in religious context
“Kediri, 12 November 2025”	Representative	-		Marks official tone and situational authenticity
“Dengan penuh kerendahan hati saya yang paling dalam...”	Expressive	Positive politeness (self-humbling)		Signals sincerity and reduces social distance
“...memohon maaf yang sebesar-besarnya kepada seluruh masyarakat...”	Expressive (apology)	Negative politeness (remorse)	Explicit apology (IFID)	Acknowledges fault and addresses public audience
“...atas beredarnya beberapa potongan video lama yang	Representative	Mitigation (lexical softening)	Explanation / account	Minimizes severity; softens contextual

Extracts	Speech Act Type	Politeness Strategy	Apology Element	Pragmatics Functions
menimbulkan kegaduhan”				framing
“Saya mengakui hal tersebut sebagai kekhilafan pribadi”	Expressive + Representativ	Negative politeness (admitting fault with softened label)	Responsibility-taking	Accepts blame while framing as unintentional lapse
“...dan menghapus video tersebut dari seluruh media sosial resmi kami”	Representative (corrective action)		Corrective action	Shows initiative to reduce public harm
“Saya berkomitmen untuk memperbaiki diri...”	Commissive	Positive politeness (shared moral norms)	Promise of forbearance	Signals future moral improvement
“...menyampaikan dakwah dengan cara yang lebih bijak...”	Commissive	Positive politeness		Reaffirms moral alignment with audience
“Semoga Allah... mengampuni... dan membimbing saya...”	Expressive + Directive-to-divine	Morality-based facework	Appeal for forgiveness	Reinforces repentance & religious sincerity

1. Textual Analysis

The article employs evaluative and contrastive vocabulary that establishes two opposing forces in the discourse:

- the government, represented as ambitious, assertive, and progressing toward “realisasi”;
- economists, represented as cautious, warning of risks, instability, and potential failure.

Key lexical items such as “menghidupkan wacana lama” (reviving an old discourse), “ambisius”, and “tahap realisasi” frame the government’s action as

proactive yet somewhat politically charged. In contrast, words associated with expert reactions—“kekhawatiran,” “risiko,” “tidak stabil,” “kegagalan,” “inflasi meningkat tajam”—create semantic tension by foregrounding concerns rather than optimism.

2. Discursive Practices

The article follows a typical economic-journalistic structure:

- Government announcement of redenomination,
- Simplified explanation of the policy,
- Expert criticism and risk projection,
- Return to policy documents (PMK 70/2025 and the RUU timeline).

By placing the government’s voice at the beginning but allocating more textual space to economists, the article constructs a dialogic tension between authority and expertise.

3. Social Practice

The discourse exists within a period of exchange-rate volatility, post-pandemic recovery, and public anxiety about inflation. Government attempts at redenomination function not just as monetary policy but as symbolic economic governance. Three ideological formations are visible:

- Technocratic Rationality — economists positioned as guardians of rational policy.
- Fiscal Prudence — emphasis on “high costs,” “system adjustment,” and “hundreds of billions” constructs redenomination as financially burdensome.
- Market Stability Ideology — focusing on rupiah stability reproduces narratives common in neoliberal governance.

4. Integrated Interpretation

Synthesizing the three dimensions, the article constructs a coherent ideological stance:

- Government = proactive but potentially reckless
- Economists = rational protectors of stability
- Redenomination = symbolically modern but practically dangerous

The article subtly shifts from reporting a policy plan to warning the public of its risks, privileging expert criticism over government optimism. Thus, the discourse reinforces technocratic legitimacy while reducing the rhetorical impact of the government's ambition.

DISCUSSION

Beyond the micro-level patterns identified in each extract, the clarification statement demonstrates a broader pragmatic architecture shaped by the interplay between speech acts, politeness strategies, and the speaker's religious identity. One significant observation is that the clarification is constructed as a linear moral narrative: it begins with solidarity-building, moves into acknowledgment of wrongdoing, offers contextual explanation, presents corrective action, and culminates in a spiritual appeal. This sequential organization mirrors the structure of ritual repentance within many religious traditions, suggesting that the speaker intentionally frames his clarification not merely as a public announcement but as a form of moral self-purification performed in front of his audience.

A key feature emerging from the data is the dominance of expressive and commissive acts. This is consistent with crisis communication literature, which shows that expressions of regret and promises of reform are central to repairing damaged moral credibility. In this case, however, expressive acts carry an additional cultural weight. Because the speaker is a religious authority, expressions of sorrow, humility, and reliance on God are not only communicative choices but identity performances. They reaffirm the speaker's position within a moral hierarchy where spiritual integrity is expected to guide behavior. Thus, speech acts operate simultaneously on pragmatic and identity levels: they communicate remorse *and* reconstruct the speaker as a spiritually grounded individual committed to ethical restoration.

The use of politeness strategies throughout the text further strengthens the speaker's management of face-threatening implications. Brown and Levinson argue that every apology inherently threatens the speaker's positive face because it involves admitting wrongdoing. In this clarification, the speaker softens the

threat through several mechanisms: self-humbling expressions, mitigation via lexical choices, and appeals to shared religious values. These strategies help re-align the speaker with the community's expectations, signalling that although he has erred, he remains part of the same moral collective. This is especially crucial in religious contexts, where leaders are not only expected to maintain moral discipline but to embody the values they preach. The politeness strategies thus serve as discursive tools for reintegration into the moral community.

Another important dynamic in the data is the way reframing functions as a subtle yet powerful representative act. Phrases such as “potongan video lama” and “kekhilafan pribadi” reduce the perceived intentionality and severity of the wrongdoing. This does not negate responsibility; the speaker clearly acknowledges fault, but it shifts the interpretive burden away from malice toward human fallibility. Pragmatically, this aligns with research showing that effective apologies often include mitigation to avoid total moral collapse. For a religious figure, this balance is even more delicate: admitting too little risks appearing defensive, while admitting too much risks eroding spiritual authority. The speaker's framing achieves a middle ground that allows space for remorse without surrendering the legitimacy of his religious leadership.

The final part of the clarification, the prayer for divine forgiveness, plays a unique pragmlinguistic role that extends beyond typical apology structures. While it functions as an expressive and directive act, it also serves as metapragmatic reinforcement, signalling that the apology is not only directed at the public but also accountable to a higher moral authority. This dual accountability is a powerful resource in religious discourse. It allows the speaker to present himself as morally transparent—not only subject to human judgment but also submissive to divine scrutiny. This can strengthen audience perception of sincerity because it situates the apology within a theological framework, rather than a purely public-relations framework.

Overall, the clarification text presents a highly compressed but sophisticated form of moral crisis communication. The combination of explicit apology, contextual mitigation, self-reform commitments, and religious facework

demonstrates how pragmatic strategies can be adapted to preserve the speaker's moral identity in the face of public accusations. The linguistic choices do not merely serve communicative needs but also function symbolically to reconstruct the speaker's credibility. The text shows that pragmatic strategies are not simply about repairing speech—they are about repairing identity, particularly when the speaker occupies a role in which moral authority is central to public legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the pragmatic structure of Gus El's public clarification video by analyzing its speech acts, politeness strategies, and apology elements. The findings demonstrate that the clarification is not merely a textual response to controversy but a deliberate discursive construction aimed at managing moral accountability and restoring public trust. Expressive and commissive speech acts dominate the statement, highlighting the speaker's attempt to acknowledge wrongdoing, express remorse, and commit to future ethical improvement. Representative acts help contextualize and reframe the controversy, minimizing perceived intentionality while still allowing space for responsibility-taking.

Politeness strategies play a crucial role in mitigating the face-threatening nature of the accusation. Through self-humbling expressions, lexical mitigation, and appeals to shared religious values, the speaker protects both his personal face and his institutional identity as a religious leader. These strategies demonstrate how politeness is mobilized not only to soften admissions of guilt but also to preserve alignment with the community's moral expectations.

Apology elements—explicit apology, acknowledgement of responsibility, corrective action, and promise of forbearance—further strengthen the speaker's crisis response. The integration of religious expressions and supplication to God adds a unique spiritual dimension, framing the apology within a process of repentance rather than mere public relations. The clarification therefore functions as a multi-layered pragmatic performance in which language serves to repair moral identity, negotiate social face, and reassert legitimacy.

Overall, the study reveals that even a brief clarification text can employ a complex array of pragmatic strategies to navigate public controversies, particularly when the speaker's authority is rooted in moral and religious legitimacy. The findings contribute to broader discussions in pragmatics, discourse studies, and crisis communication by demonstrating how speech acts and politeness strategies are adapted in religious contexts where moral credibility is central to the speaker's identity.

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