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THE SEMANTIC SHIFT OF HONORIFIC ADDRESS TERMS FOR ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN INDONESIA: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the semantic shift of honorific address terms used to refer to Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia from a sociolinguistic perspective. Honorific address terms represent a form of language variation that functions not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of social relations, authority, and cultural–religious values within society. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a library research method. The data consist of linguistic units in the form of words and phrases functioning as honorific address terms, collected from various written and online sources, including books, scholarly journal articles, previous studies, and official religious and institutional websites. Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that there are diverse honorific address terms for Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia, varying according to regional and cultural backgrounds, such as kyai, buya, ajengan, tengku, tuan guru, and gurutta. Most of these terms have undergone a semantic shift from kinship or aristocratic meanings to religious honorific titles through mechanisms of metonymy, social legitimation, and local cultural traditions. This semantic shift highlights the close relationship between language, culture, and socio-religious structures in Indonesian Muslim society.
Keywords: sociolinguistics, semantic shift, honorific address terms, Islamic religious leaders, language variation.

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that situates language within the social life of its speakers. This field is grounded in the assumption that language use is always shaped by specific social conditions and, at the same time, plays an active role in constructing and representing social structures within society. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not understood merely as a formal system of signs, but rather as a social practice that is closely intertwined with culture, ideology, and power relations. Consequently, sociolinguistic inquiry is not limited to the internal structure of language, but also focuses on its social functions in everyday communicative activities. Research in this field encompasses a wide range of phenomena, including language variation, language change, diglossia, multilingualism, and language use across different social domains, including the religious domain.

Wardhaugh (2006) emphasizes that sociolinguistics is concerned with how language is used in social contexts. One prominent focus of sociolinguistic studies is the social evaluation of language variation and change, including shifts in the function and meaning of particular

linguistic elements. Language is inherently dynamic rather than static; it continuously evolves in response to ongoing social changes within society. Such changes may occur at the levels of sound, vocabulary, and meaning. In this context, sociolinguistics provides an analytical framework for understanding how social factors—such as social status, authority, and religious ideology—contribute to linguistic change and semantic shift.

The concept of language variation occupies a central position in sociolinguistic studies. Language variation refers to differences in linguistic forms and choices used by speakers within particular social communities. These differences may be influenced by geographical location, socio-cultural background, or speech situations. Language variation may manifest in the form of dialects, accents, lexical choices, speech styles, registers, and the use of specific terms or forms of address. Stockwell (2002) argues that language variation is closely related to social variables such as age, gender, region, occupation, and social status. Thus, language variation not only reflects linguistic diversity but also functions as a marker of social identity and a means of constructing social relationships among speakers.

One form of language variation with strong social and symbolic value is the use of address terms or honorific titles. Address terms are linguistic forms that reflect social relations between speakers and addressees, including levels of familiarity, hierarchical positions, and prevailing norms of politeness within a society. In many social contexts, address terms function not merely as communicative tools but also as mechanisms for asserting respect, status, and authority. Therefore, the study of address terms is essential for understanding social dynamics and value systems within a given community.

In the Islamic religious domain, the use of honorific address terms for religious leaders carries significant social meaning. Muslim communities in Indonesia employ various address terms to refer to Islamic religious figures, such as *kyai, ajengan, tuan guru, buya,* and *datuk,* among others. These terms not only signify religious roles but also represent spiritual authority, social legitimacy, and collective respect within the community. Notably, many of these honorific terms originated from kinship expressions or general social titles that were initially non-religious, but later underwent semantic extension and transformation into religious honorifics.

The semantic shift of these address terms indicates an ongoing process of semantic change influenced by social and cultural conditions. One mechanism underlying this change is metonymy, whereby meaning shifts occur due to conceptual proximity between the original meaning and the new one. In this context, terms that originally referred to kinship relations, age, or specific social positions have come to be used to address individuals who possess religious authority and respected status within society. This process illustrates how language adapts to

evolving social structures and religious values in Indonesian Muslim communities.

Previous studies on address terms, such as Rahima (2021), have primarily focused on address variation in informal contexts, particularly intimate and casual speech styles in everyday interactions. These studies tend to emphasize speech situations and levels of familiarity among speakers, without providing an in-depth discussion of semantic change or the use of honorific address terms in formal and institutional domains, especially within religious contexts. As a result, research on the semantic shift of honorific address terms for Islamic religious leaders within Indonesia's socio-cultural diversity remains relatively limited.

Based on this background, the present study offers a novel contribution by examining the semantic shift of honorific address terms used to refer to Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia from a sociolinguistic perspective. The research addresses two main questions: (1) what are the forms and directions of semantic shift in honorific address terms for Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia, and (2) what social and cultural factors influence the occurrence of such semantic shifts. Through this investigation, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and religious authority, as well as the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping semantic change within the formal and hierarchical religious domain.

Table 1: This is an example

Data	Data	Data
Xxxxx	Xxxx	Xxxx
Xxxxx	Xxxxxxx	Xxxxxxx

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a library research method. This approach was chosen because the research aims to describe and analyze the semantic shift of honorific address terms used for Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia based on textual data. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth interpretation of linguistic meaning by taking into account the social and cultural contexts in which language is embedded. This study does not involve the collection of field data through interviews or direct observation. All data were obtained from written and digital sources; therefore, this research is categorized as library-based research with a focus on document analysis.

The data sources consist of various written and online materials, including academic books, scholarly journal articles, previous research findings, and websites containing information on the use of honorific address terms for Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia, such as official Islamic boarding school websites and religious platforms. The research data comprise linguistic units in the form of words and phrases functioning as honorific address

terms that exhibit a semantic shift from their original meanings.

Data collection was carried out using documentation techniques, involving the identification and selection of relevant data from online sources. The collected data were systematically recorded and organized, then classified in tabular form to facilitate grouping based on linguistic form, meaning, and regional usage. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using Miles and Huberman's (1992) interactive model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, data relevant to the research focus—namely honorific address terms that have undergone semantic shift—were selected. The data display stage involved the systematic description and analysis of the data to reveal patterns of semantic shift and the socio-cultural factors influencing them. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on a comprehensive analysis of the data.

FINDINGS

1. Islamic Religious Figures in Indonesia

Religious figures are individuals who play a significant role in religious life and social communities. They function as spiritual leaders, educators, and moral exemplars for their followers. According to Muin (1996), a religious figure is a person who possesses extensive religious knowledge, demonstrates noble character, and is proficient in religious rituals, thereby serving as a role model within society. In Indonesia, cultural diversity strongly influences the ways in which communities address and show respect to Islamic religious figures. The forms of address used vary according to cultural background, region, and the social context of the community. This phenomenon reflects the close relationship between language, culture, and social structure from a sociolinguistic perspective.

2. Varieties of Address Terms for Islamic Religious Figures in Indonesia

Based on a review of the relevant literature and online sources, this study identifies various address terms used for Islamic religious figures in Indonesia. The following table summarizes the language of origin, original meaning, current meaning, regional usage, and mechanisms of semantic shift for each address term.

Table 1. Honorific Address Terms for Islamic Religious Figures in Indonesia

No.	Address Term	Language of Origin	Original Meaning	Current Meaning	Region of Use	Mechanism of Semantic Shift
1	*Ajengan*	Sundanese	Religious figure	Islamic religious leader / *kyai*	West Java	Local tradition

2	*Angku*	Minangkabau	Uncle	Young religious leader / assistant of *Buya*	West Sumatra	Metonymy (kinship → authority)
3	*Buya / Abi / Abuya*	Arabic / Minangkabau	Father	Honorific title for religious leader	Sumatra	Language variation & metonymy
4	*Datuk*	Malay	Elder / respected person	Honorific title for religious leader	Sumatra	Metonymy (kinship → religious status)
5	*Gurutta / Anreguru*	Bugis / Makassar	Teacher / to teach	Highly respected religious leader / "grand teacher"	South Sulawesi	Social legitimation & local culture
6	*Gus*	Javanese	Son of a *kyai* / "handsome"	Son of a *kyai* / respected santri	Java	Kinship tradition → religious honorification
7	*Kyai / Romo Yai*	Javanese	Respected elder	Highly knowledgeable religious leader	Java	Local culture & social status
8	*Lora*	Madurese	Son of an ulama / Persian origin	Son of a prominent *kyai* / pesantren leader	Madura	Cultural variation & lineage

9	*Tengku*	Malay	Aristocrat / noble	Honorific title for religious leader	North Sumatra	Metonymy (social status → religious authority)
10	*Tuan Guru*	Banjar / Lombok	Teacher / learner	Religious leader / pilgrim (*hajj*)	Lombok, South Kalimantan	Local tradition & religious legitimation
11	*Sunan*	Javanese	King / noble	Honorific title for Islamic saints (*wali*)	Java	Metonymy (royalty → religious authority)

Forms of address used for Islamic religious figures in Indonesia vary according to local cultures and regions. Each area, shaped by distinct cultural backgrounds, has its own characteristic address terms for religious leaders. Based on a review of the relevant literature and online sources, various terms are employed by communities to address or show respect to Islamic religious figures. The following section discusses several major address terms.

1] Ajengan

The term *ajengan* is one form of address used for Islamic religious figures. It originates from the Sundanese language and literally means 'religious figure'. This address term is still widely used today, particularly within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), indicating that this honorific title continues to be preserved and respected within Sundanese society.

2] Angku

The term *angku* originates from the Minangkabau language and originally means 'uncle'. According to the online *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), *angku* refers to an uncle or a form of address for a person who deserves respect. In its honorific usage, *angku* is applied to adult males who are recognized as having advanced religious knowledge. Putra (2024) notes that *angku* is commonly used to address younger religious figures or assistants of a *Buya*, indicating a semantic shift from a kinship term to a socio-religious honorific.

3] Buya

The terms *buya, abi*, *abu*, or *abuya* originate from the Arabic word *abun*, meaning 'father'. Through linguistic variation, the term evolved into *buya* and is widely used as an honorific address for Islamic religious leaders in Sumatra, particularly among Minangkabau and Acehnese communities. Notable figures addressed by this title include Abuya Muhtadi, Buya Hamka, and Buya Syakur. This semantic development reflects the adaptability of language to socio-religious contexts.

4] Datuk

The term *datuk* originates from Malay and initially means 'elder' or 'a respected person'. According to KBBI (2025), *datuk* may refer to a grandfather or an honorific title for a respected elder. In socio-religious contexts, the term is used to address elderly men who are highly respected and possess extensive religious knowledge. This phenomenon exemplifies semantic shift through metonymy, whereby a kinship-based meaning develops into a socio-

religious honorific. The use of *datuk* is particularly prevalent in Malay-speaking communities in Sumatra.

5] Anreguru/Gurutta

The terms *anreguru* or *gurutta* refer to individuals who possess profound religious knowledge and exemplary moral conduct. This title is reserved exclusively for ulama who have gained communal recognition. According to Kadir (2012), the etymology of *anreguru* derives from *anre* ('to eat') and *guru* ('teacher'), forming the meaning 'grand teacher'. Among Bugis and Makassar communities, religious scholars are commonly addressed as *anreguru* or *gurutta*, with the suffix -*ta* meaning 'our', thus signifying 'our teacher'. Not all religious teachers receive this title; it is also associated with the belief that its holders possess *karomah*, or special spiritual power.

6] Gus

In Javanese society, the sons of a *kyai* or Islamic religious leader are respectfully addressed as *Gus*. A prominent example is former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as *Gus Dur*. Within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community, the term is also used for students (*santri*) studying at Islamic boarding schools. Dhofier (1984) explains that *Gus* derives from *Agus*, meaning 'handsome' or 'good', and is used for the sons or sons-in-law of a *kyai*. The term is not age-restricted; both young and adult descendants of *kyai* may be addressed as *Gus*, reflecting respect grounded in religious status and kinship.

7] Kyai

The address term *kyai* is widely recognized in Javanese society and is generally used for elderly individuals with extensive Islamic religious knowledge. Noer (2001) suggests that *kyai* derives from the word *yahi*, connoting sanctity, sacredness, and reverence for elders. In *Boesastra Djawa* (1939), *kyai* is defined as 'a respected elder'. The term *romo* means 'father', while *yai* is an abbreviated form of *kyai*. In certain regions, such as Yogyakarta, the title *Romo Yai* is used for religious figures with royal lineage, combining religious reverence with social and aristocratic status.

8] Lora

In Madurese society, the sons of ulama are commonly addressed as *Lora*, a term believed to be influenced by Persian language and culture. Faylasuf (2022) explains that *Lora* is functionally equivalent to *Gus* in Javanese contexts, signifying respect for the descendants of *kyai* who lead Islamic boarding schools. This address term illustrates how local languages adapt foreign elements to fit socio-religious contexts.

9] Tengku

The term *tengku* originates from Malay and was initially used to address members of the aristocracy. According to KBBI (2025), *tengku* denotes a Malay noble title and has undergone a semantic shift to become an honorific address for Islamic religious leaders, particularly in North Sumatra. This shift reflects the interaction between social status and religious authority within linguistic practice.

10] Tuan Guru

In Lombok and South Kalimantan, the title *Tuan Guru* is used for individuals who have studied Islamic knowledge and actively engage in religious preaching. The word *guru* refers to a religious teacher, while *tuan* conveys respect and honor. This designation emerged after the eighteenth century, alongside social structures in Lombok that recognized the religious authority of teachers who had performed the pilgrimage (*hajj*). The title emphasizes both social and religious legitimacy and marks hierarchical relations within local Muslim communities.

11] Sunan

The term *sunan* originates from Javanese and was initially used for respected kings or saints (*wali*) (Boesastra Djawa, 1939). KBBI also defines *sunan* as a royal title used in Surakarta. In contemporary usage, *sunan* is rarely employed to address current religious figures, as the title is strongly associated with historical Islamic saints, such as the *Wali Songo*. Javanese society tends to prefer the term *kyai* for contemporary religious leaders, reflecting sociolinguistic adaptation shaped by historical and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that the variety of honorific address terms used for Islamic religious leaders in Indonesia reflects linguistic variation that is closely related to socio-cultural backgrounds and regional languages. Each form of address represents local identity as well as hierarchical structures within society, and most address terms have undergone a semantic shift from kinship- or aristocracy-based meanings to religious honorific titles through the process of metonymy. This shift underscores the significant role of language in representing authority, respect, and socio-religious legitimacy. Thus, honorific address terms function not only as means of communication but also as reflections of social, cultural, and religious dynamics in Indonesian society.

In line with these findings, this study highlights the importance of preserving local languages and traditional forms of address, as such terms serve not only as markers of respect but also as cultural heritage that embodies local identity and social values. Future research is encouraged to expand its geographical scope in order to map address term variation across the Indonesian archipelago, including underrepresented regions, thereby enabling a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between address terms, social status, and religious practices. The integration of sociolinguistics and religious education is also essential, particularly in Islamic boarding schools and religious institutions, to foster awareness of the cultural and social contexts surrounding the use of honorific titles and to promote appreciation of local wisdom and linguistic politeness. Furthermore, systematic documentation of address terms and their meanings is necessary to preserve their historical trajectories, etymologies, and patterns of variation, both as academic references and as resources for future linguistic and cultural research. Raising public awareness of the socio-religious meanings embedded in address terms is likewise crucial, as such awareness can enhance respect for religious leaders and contribute to the maintenance of social harmony in everyday life.

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