

Understanding and usage of the pronouns *kami* and *kita* among Indonesian millennial and generation Z

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Abstract

The use of the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in Bahasa Indonesia is an issue for most Indonesian youths nowadays. Most of them use it incorrectly. This study explores the problematic usage of the pronouns *kami* and *kita* among Millennials and Gen Z in Indonesia. The research led to understanding how these generations comprehend and differentiate these words in daily use communication. A semantic approach is used to analyze the data since the basic difference between *kami* and *kita* pronouns is in the level of meaning. Interviews with ten respondents revealed that only three correctly understood the semantic differences between *kami* and *kita*. Most respondents understand the difference pragmatically, associating *kami* with formal contexts and *kita* with informal ones. Furthermore, most of them think that the difference between the two pronouns is in the number of subjects in a conversation. This misunderstanding often leads to incorrect usage in conversations. The study highlights the need for better awareness of semantic differences to avoid miscommunication. This research is expected to increase the awareness of Indonesian youths to use both pronouns correctly to avoid misunderstandings in communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool that reflects its speakers' culture, identity, and social dynamics. In the Indonesian language, the pronouns *kami* and *kita* are unique as they both refer to the first-person plural *we* or *us* but with a subtle distinction in inclusion and exclusion of the audience. *Kami* is an exclusive pronoun that refers to the speaker and others but excludes the listener, while *kita* is an inclusive pronoun that includes both the speaker

and the listener (Ewing, 2005; Djenar, 2006). This distinction is not only semantically significant but also affects the meaning cognitively, as it reflects the relational dynamics and social inclusivity within Indonesian communication (Lauder, 2002).

The use of *kami* and *kita* has been a subject of interest among linguists and anthropologists who study how language usage evolves over time and across generations. The Indonesian language, like many others, is experiencing shifts in its usage due to various factors, including globalization,

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technological advancements, and cultural exchanges (Crystal, 2001; Tannen, 2013). These changes are particularly evident among the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts, who are growing up in an era of rapid technological and social change (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Twenge, 2017).

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, are often characterized by their fluency in digital technology, global outlook, and adaptive linguistic behavior (Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2017). These generations are at the forefront of adopting new linguistic trends and integrating them into their daily communication. Consequently, their understanding and use of the pronouns *kami* and *kita* can provide valuable insights into the evolving semantics of the Indonesian language.

From the previous research by (Citraesmana, 2019.), The research discusses how Indonesian presidential debate on how often they used the words *kami* and *kita*. This article discusses the conceptual meaning of the pronouns *kita* and *kami* which were frequently used by both of the president and vice president candidates (01 and 02). In the Indonesian language, the pronoun *kita* has an inclusive meaning, while *kami* has an exclusive meaning, i.e., only the speaker is included in the conversation and the hearer is excluded (Citraesmana, 2019.). In this research, the writer also focused on how often the president and the vice president are on the odds of using *kami* and *kita* in the debate while also identifying if the choice of words is either exclusively or inclusive.

Research on the linguistic behavior of Millennials and Generation Z in Indonesia is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it helps linguists understand how traditional language forms are being adapted or altered by younger generations. Secondly, it sheds light on the social and cultural influences that shape language use in a modern context (Duranti, 1997; Sneddon, 2003). Finally, it offers a glimpse into how language functions as a marker of identity and community in a rapidly changing world (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Therefore, it is really interesting to find out the linguistic behavior of Millennials and Generation Z especially in terms of pronoun usage. In addition, there has never been research regarding pronouns *Kami* and *Kita*, particularly on how the recent generations' understanding of them. For instance, the research from (Manns, 2012; Santosa, 2014) who did an observation of the use of pronouns in Indonesian but focused on the discourse of presidential debate and also the variations of Indonesian pronouns related to its use.

Moving to the west, (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2021; Zewei et al., 2024; Zhao, 2023) discussing the pronoun *we* in English that have the same meaning as *kami* and *kita* in Indonesian and also the use of pronouns in American English. In addition, the research conducted by (Ahn & Ha, 2023; Chen & Brown, 2022) trying to reveal what people know from the difference between Korean first person pronoun *ce* & *na* and second person pronoun *tangsin*.

Furthermore, take a look at what has been written by (Hoop et al., 2023; Tomlin, 2024) who talked about pronouns and its implied meaning pragmatically. Pronouns are not always semantically stated but they also often contain contextual meaning that must be observed based on its use. They said that pronouns can determine gender and also the formal or informal meaning.

This study aims to explore the knowledge and usage of the pronouns *kami* and *kita* among Indonesian Millennials and Generation Z. By examining their understanding of these pronouns, this research seeks to contribute to the broader field of semantics and sociolinguistics, providing a nuanced perspective on the intersection of language, culture, and generational change. This research comes with two research questions, namely:

1. How do Indonesian Millennials and Generation Zs understand the meaning of the Indonesian pronouns *kami* and *kita*?
2. How do Indonesian Millennials and Generation Z differentiate between the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in everyday communication?

***Kami and Kita*, a Definition**

In Bahasa Indonesia, there are two words that state a group of people, used to declare a certain person that wants to do something, the two words for instance are, *kami* and *kita*. In English these words are spelled as a word “we” and “us”, they all have the same meaning and usage in English. On the other hand *kami* dan *kita* may be defined similarly, in the usage they both merge their own definition into different kinds of reaction and action. The definition of both of these words is the target of the usage. If the target of speech is part of the action, people use *kita*, and if the target of speech is not part of the action that the speaker is doing, people use *kami*. Some people in Indonesia are kindly untrue and mistakenly use both of these words. Some find it as the level of manners, others find it because of the target of speech (Citraresmana, 2019). Expanding the analysis of inclusive and exclusive aspects.

Millennials and Generation Z Problems on Vocabulary

Writer analyzes that millennial generation had a different way in terms of doing something and talking from Generation Z. Millennials are people that were born between 1981 and 1996 and Generation Z started from 1997 and onwards. In the past, Millennials were often called post millennial because of some story. On the other hand Generation Z gained its name because of the trend and popularity. (Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins | Pew Research Center, n.d.).

Generational differences in language use between Millennials and Generation Z. Millennials are frequently influenced by the media references in conversations for epistemic, framing, and identity construction purposes (Sierra, 2011). They also use special diction, slang, jargon, and foreign words, often employing code-mixing and interference in their language style (Syafyahya, 2020).

Generation Z, however, demonstrates a better understanding of metathesis forms of words to conceal syntactical features during discourse (Talle Vacalares et al., 2023). While both

generations show a significant positive correlation in comprehending modern internet slang, Generation Z appears more adept (Sophomore Talle et al., 2023). These linguistic differences reflect broader generational characteristics, with Millennials described as digital natives and multitaskers, while Generation Z is seen as the next transformative force in higher education (Grace & Seemiller, 2016). As Generation Z enters higher education, their impact on campus planning and design is anticipated to be significant, building upon the changes initiated by Millennials (Grace & Seemiller, 2016).

Semantic Cognitive

Semantic cognition is a study where people learn about the meaning of language acquisition. It represents the symbol of the word and transcribes it into something that we know. It involves two key components like a long-term semantic memory store and semantic control processes (Jefferies & Wang, 2021). In cognitive science, mental models are the representations of reality that people use to understand and interact with the world. When someone uses *kami* (exclusive "we"), they activate a mental model where the speaker and listener are not in the same group, whereas *kita* (inclusive "we") includes both speaker and listener. This reflects how language guides the formation of social and conceptual boundaries in the mind. (Rogers & McClelland, 2004)

The choice between *kami* and *kita* could be linked to how individuals cognitively perceive their relationship with others. Millennials and Generation Z might struggle with these distinctions due to changes in communication patterns influenced by globalized media, where such nuances might be less emphasized. (Jefferies & Wang, 2021)

a. Lexical Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning in language. It shows how words, phrases, and sentences discover the meaning and how these meanings are interpreted by speakers and listeners. Semantics can be separated into several parts, including lexical semantics (the meaning of words), compositional semantics (how meanings

combine in phrases and sentences), and formal semantics (the use of formal systems to represent meaning)(Kortmann, 2020). This research mainly focuses on the lexical semantic scope on Indonesian Word *kami* dan *kita*

b. Clusivity

A grammatical distinction found in some languages that diverts some aspect of inclusive and exclusive in their first-person pronouns is what we called Clusivity. This different thing is not present in English but is commonly found in many other languages like research done by (Authier, 2021). The use of *kami* and *kita* talks about the concept of inclusivity and exclusivity in communication. *kami* shows exclusivity, where the speaker's group does not include the person being spoken to. In contrast, *kita* reflects inclusivity, where the speaker's group includes the person being spoken to. This explanation become vary into certain condition but still uses the same theory with inclusive and based theory which concluded from (Haas, 1969)

Exposure

Understanding the semantic distinction between inclusive and exclusive pronouns provides valuable insights into how language encodes social and communicative nuances. Therefore, there is some gap that exists between two generations and how they are using some words based on what they catch. This research is to see how much the gap and how each generation represents their knowledge into both words ‘kami” dan Kita” in terms of their meaning within the semantic approach. By examining clusivity through the lens of formal semantics, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the complexity and diversity of human language through Bahasa Indonesia.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a purposive sampling method for participant selection. Purposive sampling is a non-probabilistic technique that involves selecting participants intentionally based on certain (Braun & Clarke, 2019) characteristics relevant to the research objectives. Following the guidelines

outlined by (Roulston & Halpin, 2022) in their book, specifically in the chapter entitled Designing Qualitative Research Using Interview Data, this study selected 10 participants, consisting of 5 individuals from Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) and 5 individuals from the Millennial Generation (born between 1981-1996), in accordance with the year range identified by Beresford Research, with all participants living in Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta was chosen because it is an academic centre with a population that includes a variety of age groups, allowing this study to easily reach participants from Generation Z and Millennials. (Roulston & Halpin, 2022) also highlighted the importance of selecting participants who can provide useful and relevant data to ensure that the insights gained are in line with the research objectives. Therefore, this approach is critical to understanding generational differences in the use of *kami* and *kita* pronouns.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic analysis, which is a method in line with the principles of qualitative research. This thematic analysis involves identifying, categorizing, and then interpreting the main themes that appear from the interview data. After transcribing the interviews, the data needed to be systematically coded to reveal patterns of how participants from different generational groups understood and used the pronouns *kami* and *kita*. The identified themes were then organized to highlight these generational differences. This approach is in line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. As noted by (Braun & Clarke, 2019) reflexivity is essential in thematic analysis to ensure that researcher assumptions and biases are recognized and addressed. In addition, member checking is used to validate the findings. By involving participants in reviewing and confirming the accuracy of the analysed data, this study was able to ensure the logistics and accuracy of its conclusions, thus validating its findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this study is to understand and find out the use of *we* and *us* in the millennial generation and also Generation Z in Indonesia. The population of this research is Millennials and Generation Zs in Yogyakarta, where Yogyakarta is a city that is already famous for the city of education. In this study that will also explore to understand and want to solve the problem of;

1. How do millennials and Generation Z in Indonesia understand the meaning of the pronouns *we* and *us* in Indonesian?
2. How do millennials and Generation Z in Indonesia distinguish the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in daily communication?

Table 1. Respondents' Information

Name (Initial)	Generation	Age in 2024	Occupation
RFM	Generation Z	20	Student
ARA	Generation Z	20	Student
IYP	Generation Z	20	Student
YWW	Generation Z	20	Student
APNB	Generation Z	20	Student
VF	Millennial	34	Notary
ASD	Millennial	34	Land Registrar
SJT	Millennial	42	Police Officer
YSW	Millennial	34	Entrepreneur
MNA	Millennial	34	Educator

Understanding the Meaning of the Pronouns *kami* dan *kita* Among Millennials and Generation Z in Indonesia

After the research, we found that few people understand the meaning of *kami* and *kita* pronouns; 3 out of 10 respondents understand the meaning of *kami* and *kita* (2 Millennials and 1 Generation Z) while the other respondents don't understand the meaning of *kami* and *kita* semantically. They consider that the difference between *kami* and *kita* is in the pragmatic level of understanding.

From the interview, we found that the respondents consider the difference between *kami* and *kita* to be pragmatic. In fact, *kami* and *kita* are not different pragmatically, instead, it is different from the semantic point of view. Most of them consider that *kami* and *kita* are the same as *aku* and *saya* in Indonesia which mean "I" in English. In Indonesia *aku* is used for non-formal situations while the use of *saya* is more directed towards formal situations. In fact *kami* and *kita* are different from *aku* and *saya*, one of the respondents who understand the meaning of *kami* and *kita* pragmatically even said

"I think the word *kami* refers more to formal conversations while the word *kita* is more like people who are close". (VF)

The result of this research is a counter-argument for the findings of (Sujatna, et.al., 2024) which stated that the word *kami* is correctly used in written expressions such as magazines, novels, etc. It shows that there is a different understanding between a spoken and written expression regarding *kami* and *kita* where people tend to use it incorrectly in a spoken expression or in a conversation. Similar cases happened to the other respondents; when the interview was held few answers stated similarly but they delivered the statement differently. Similarities that we can highlight from the statement are "formal" and "informal" situations. A few respondents who have similar statements in the interview "formal" and "informal" situations among the respondents are RFM, ARA, IYP, YWW. One of the statements from the respondents that represent the similar case is

"I think *kami* is for formal use such as when presenting or speaking to a large audience, whereas *kita* is for informal use such as friends, family, coworkers or college colleagues" (ARA).

From the research we found a similar statement of understanding in the contextual meaning. Hence, we understand from ten respondents, half of the respondents only understand the *kami* and *kita* as an incorrect

contextual meaning. We know that if the respondents don't understand the contextual meaning of “*kami*” and “*kita*” it will lead to misunderstanding in textual meaning. Research from (Britayana, 2023) also mentions the difference between *kami* and *kita* in the Indonesian Youth Pledge in 1928. She explained that the youth, at that time, used the word *kami* instead of *kita* because they refer to the Indonesian youth and not other communities which were excluded from the narrative.

Out of the ten respondent statements, two respondents answered correctly in understanding the semantic use of the words *kami* and *kita*. These respondents include MNA, a millennial generation who explains correctly in understanding the semantic use of *kami* and *kita*, MNA is a language teacher who focuses on English. Not only that, the respondent with the initials SJT from the millennial generation who explained correctly and was an English Literature student at one of the universities in Yogyakarta. Finally, from five Generation Z interviewed, there was only one Generation Z who was correct in explaining the meaning of the semantic use of the words *kami* and *kita* with the initials APNB who is an English literature student in one of the universities in Yogyakarta.

How Indonesian Millennials and Generation Z differentiate between the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in everyday communication.

The conversations between the pronouns *kami* and *kita* had differences that were answered by some of the 10 respondents. In the conversational use, some respondents said that when speaking using *kami* and *kita* with a focus point on number. In addition, some respondents have opinions that lead to politeness and impoliteness in the conversation. In this Interview there's few respondents who conclude the context of *kami* and *kita* are measured based on the number of the people inside the context of the words, when they are in some conversation. Some statements mentioned by ASD and YSW are as follows:

“*Kami* can be both if there are more than two of *kita*. For example, when I am dealing with a

client, my staff and I use the word *kami* like (“sudah *kami* kerjakan”) when discussing *kami*, but if the opponent is a friend, we use *kita*.”(ASD).

“ If *kami* is more than four, if *kita* is maybe two, three, and four people”(YSW).

Additionally, this research identified several insights into how respondents understand and differentiate between the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in their daily interactions. Many respondents interpret these pronouns not only as grammatical choices but as markers of politeness, using them to indicate respect or familiarity based on context. For instance, some respondents perceive the contextual meanings of *kami* and *kita* as essential in determining the level of politeness, especially when interacting with family, close friends, significant others, and other social groups. A notable example is that when addressing older individuals or authority figures, respondents often choose *kami* to maintain a respectful distance. However, in interactions with close friends or peers, they generally prefer *kita*, as it reflects a sense of inclusivity and intimacy. These findings suggest that the choice between *kami* and *kita* plays a significant role in how Indonesian Millennials and Generation Z navigate social relationships and convey politeness. Among the respondents who had the same highlights were; YWW, RFM, IYP, ARA, ASD, and VF.

“ I think *kami* is for formal use such as when presenting or speaking to a large audience and whereas *kita* is for informal use such as friends, family, or coworkers or college colleagues.”(ARA).

“*Kami* can be both if there are more than two *kita*. For example, when I am dealing with a client, my staff and I use the word *kami* like (“sudah *kami* kerjakan”) when discussing *kami*, but if the opponent is a friend, we use *kita*.”(ASD).

“*kami* is formal, *kita* is non-formal. *kami* is like distance, *kita* is already close”(IYP).

It can be said that starting from formal and informal will lead to unconsciousness that this

leans towards politeness and impoliteness in conversation. The politeness or impoliteness of using the pronouns *kami* and *kita* in conversation is not appropriate.

The incorrect use of Indonesian pronouns *kami* and *kita* is an issue for Indonesian youth nowadays. A research from (Ocktarini and Santoso, 2016) also mentions that the use of *kita* is more than the use of *kami*, but most youths use it incorrectly, and sometimes it creates an ambiguous meaning. In this case, radio takes a big deal because the radio announcer mostly uses the incorrect use of *kami* and *kita*. Hence, we also need to consider the influence of digital media in the use of diction by the youths.

This research needed to also analyze the role of social media for Millennials and Generation Z because those generations tend to be influenced by social media. Furthermore, their understanding in a pragmatic context also needs to be analyzed. Therefore, future research on this topic should also concern factors influencing communication strategies and also the pragmatic context inside it.

CONCLUSION

The aim and scope of this research are to explore and understand how Millennials and Generation Z in Indonesia, could understand and use the pronouns *kami* and *kita* properly. The data shows that a variable portion of respondents, both Millennials and Generation Z, do not completely understand the semantic differences between these pronouns. Instead, they frequently precept and understand it pragmatically, delivering *kami* with formal contexts and *kita* with informal situations. This mistake highlights the problem of a gap in younger generations' semantic awareness of certain pronouns. Moreover, this research also stated that the usage of *kami* and *kita* might cause communication problems, particularly in the written and spoken context of linguistic assessment. Our findings suggest that the uncertainty expands to spoken language, since respondents commonly use these pronouns in misuse and misinterpretation. However, potentially leading to misunderstandings.

Thus, this research is conducted to see how those two words could interpret in many conditions. For future research, it would be good and futureproof to explore factors that connect millennials and Generation Z Interpretations of *kami* dan *kita* in greater depths, particularly looking into some of the educational, social, and digital influences. Such Insight could deepen our understanding of linguistic behavior trends in Indonesia, shedding light on how language adapts within a rapidly changing society. All in all, the writers expect that this research can bring benefit to the young generation to be more aware of the language and use it properly and correctly.

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