

# Speech Acts of Condolences in English and Indonesian: A Cross-Cultural Study

**Frisca Regina Agung Putrisia**

Sastra Inggris, PSDKU, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

[25111794077@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:25111794077@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

**Haniifatun Ubaidillah**

Sastra Inggris, PSDKU, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

[25111794029@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:25111794029@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

**Valerie Raissa Wilhelmina Pasaribu**

Sastra Inggris, PSDKU, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

[25111794074@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:25111794074@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

**Azzahrine Rahmania Ravena Imron**

Sastra Inggris, PSDKU, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

[25111794043@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:25111794043@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

**Wirdatul Khasanah**

Sastra Inggris, PSDKU, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

[wirdatulkhasanah@unesa.ac.id](mailto:wirdatulkhasanah@unesa.ac.id)

## Abstract

Using Searle's (1979) Speech Acts framework and Elwood's (2004) Semantic formulas, this study investigates how condolences are expressed differently in four grief-related scenarios by both British and Indonesian. The data were collected through a Discourse Completion task (DCT) completed by 10 Indonesian participants and 10 British participants. The finding shows that while Indonesian participants rely most on religious expression and future-oriented remarks, British predominantly employ expressions of sympathy and offer assistance. Both groups demonstrate similarities in using personal questions and empathetic comments. However, the variation occurs based on closeness of the relationship. This result highlights the cultural sensitivity of condolence expressions and the importance of understanding cross cultural communicative strategies in emotionally charged interactions.

**Keywords:** condolence strategies, speech acts, cross-cultural pragmatics

## Abstrak

Menggunakan kerangka Speech Acts (Searle, 1979) dan Semantic Formula dari Elwood (2004), penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat perbedaan cara masyarakat Inggris dan Indonesia dalam mengekspresikan ucapan bela sungkawa dalam empat skenario. Data yang digunakan pada penelitian ini diperoleh dengan menggunakan Discourse Completion Task (DCT) yang diisi oleh 10 partisipan orang Indonesia dan 10 partisipan orang Inggris. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa partisipan orang Indonesia lebih banyak menggunakan ungkapan religius dan pernyataan yang berorientasi pada akhirat, sedangkan partisipan orang Inggris cenderung menggunakan ungkapan simpati dan menawarkan bantuan. Kedua kelompok menunjukkan kesamaan dalam penggunaan pertanyaan personal dan komentar empatik. Namun, cara menyampaikan ucapan bela sungkawa bervariasi saat kedekatan dengan pihak yang berduka berbeda. Hal ini menegaskan adanya sensitivitas budaya dalam ekspresi belasungkawa serta pentingnya memahami strategi komunikasi lintas budaya dalam situasi emosional.

**Kata Kunci:** Strategi ucapan belasungkawa, speech acts, Pragmatik lintas budaya

## INTRODUCTION

The fundamental thrust of speech act theory comes from the premise that language does not simply function as a means of communication, language has the ability to produce certain language actions such as requests or promises (Behnam, Hamed and Asli, 2013). In this way, communication is considered successful when language expressions can perform certain actions effectively. Furthermore, Yule (1996) argues that effective communication occurs when a person conveys the proper message to the appropriate receiver at the optimal time. Searle (1979) categorizes speech acts into five main classifications: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. He also places the act of conveying condolences in the realm of expressive speech acts. Moghaddam (2012) explains that expressive speech acts represent the speaker's attitude towards the event being discussed.

In the case of death events, expressing condolences is a challenge because a person tries to convey their empathy and support to the bereaved family, but at the same time must be careful not to add to their grief or emotional burden. The complexity of expressing condolences is relatively easy to resolve when the speaker and listener come from the same linguistic and cultural background. Shared perspectives, cultural norms, and belief systems facilitate communication; they also understand the expressions of condolences that are common in their culture. However, this dynamic becomes awkward, and even potentially contentious, when the parties involved come from different cultural contexts. The manner and form of expressions of condolences can vary greatly, where actions or words that are considered sensitive and acceptable in one cultural framework may be considered offensive or inappropriate in another culture, and vice versa.

Several researchers have conducted similar studies by examining the differences in the ways condolences are expressed between two different cultures. In 2004, Kate Elwood carried out a comprehensive survey that analyzed the methods of expressing condolences by English speakers and Japanese speakers. Using a discourse completion test consisting of seven scenarios, including two death-related scenarios, her research showed that participants displayed a variety of semantic structures in their expressions of condolences. While English (American) speakers tend to use "future-oriented remarks" more frequently, Japanese speakers show a lower tendency to use this semantic frame. In addition, Americans are also more frequently offer future help and express concern compared to Japanese speakers. Japanese speakers, on the other hand, focus more on the specific situations they are currently facing than American speakers.

Similar research has been conducted by Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2020). They examined 20 Indonesian adolescents aged between 11 and 19 years in the way they expressed condolences. Using a discourse completion task consisting of six different scenarios, their findings showed that Indonesians generally seek for the god's forgiveness as the main strategy in expressing condolences. In addition, they also found that the power dynamics between speakers significantly influenced the strategies used in various contexts.

In her research, Elwood (2004) systematically classified her findings into six categories of speech acts. These categories include acknowledgment of death, expressions of sympathy, offers of help, future-oriented remarks, expressions of concern, and an additional category that includes expressions of empathy, sharing of similar experiences, statements of uncertainty, expressions of limited words, and related questions.

Wakfield and Itakura (2017) argue that although expressions of condolence may appear to be standardised across cultures, the sensitive nature of the experience of loss makes it difficult to express these sentiments verbally. Furthermore, Williams (2006) asserts that even native speakers of a language face difficulties in

choosing the most appropriate vocabulary to convey condolences effectively. The act of expressing condolences is considered highly sensitive; therefore, failure to convey appropriate condolences in the context of grief can have a negative impact on the interpersonal dynamics between the speaker and the recipient (Elwood, 2004). Therefore, it is often found, as noted by Zunin and Zunin (1992), that individuals faced with the grief of their acquaintances or relatives often say, 'I don't know what to say.'

Given the complexity of expressing condolences in various cultural contexts, this study aims to examine how British and Indonesian cultures express condolences when faced with bereavement. Using the Speech Acts theory proposed by Searle (1979), this study will analyse both the differences and similarities, as well as the strategies used by both cultures in expressing condolences. To achieve this objective, this study seeks to answer two main questions, namely: 1) What are the differences and similarities between British and Indonesian cultures in expressing condolences? 2) What strategies are used by British and Indonesian cultures when facing bereavement in each context?

## METHOD

### Participants

This study involved 20 participants, 10 from the United Kingdom and 10 from Indonesia, all aged between 20 and 40 years old. In this study, gender was not considered a variable; therefore, the questionnaire did not include a gender identification column.

### Instrument and Data Collection

This study used an online Discourse Completion Task (DCT) featuring four grief scenarios: the death of a grandfather, sister-in-law, father, and pet. Two culturally adapted versions of the DCT were developed, one in English for participants from the UK and another in Indonesian for participants from Indonesia, allowing respondents to provide answers in their native language. The complete description of the situations presented in the DCT is as follows:

#### Situation 1:

*Your friend told you that her father passed away last week. Your response: .....*

#### Situation 2:

*Your friend's dog was hit by car and died. You say: .....*

#### Situation 3:

*You are informed that your brother's wife has died. You come to see him. You say: .....*

#### Situation 4:

*You haven't seen your friend for couple of weeks. Later when you see him, you know that his grandfather passed away, so he was away from school. Your response: .....*

### Data Analysis

After collecting data through an online questionnaire, responses were analyzed using Elwood's (2004) semantic coding framework. Coded responses were then classified into the following categories:

#### a. Acknowledgment of death

This includes exclamatory expressions such as "Oh my God," "Oh no," and similar expressions.

#### b. Expressions of sympathy

This includes condolence phrases such as "My condolences" or "I am sorry for your loss."

#### c. Offers of help

This includes statements offering help, such as “What can I do for you?”

*d. Future-oriented statements.*

This includes statements of support that look to the future, such as “You will get through this” or “I hope you can overcome this.”

*e. Expressions of concern*

Any statement related to questions about the well-being of the bereaved, such as “How are you doing now?”

*f. Others*

As defined by Elwood (2004), this category includes expressions of empathy, stories about similar personal experiences, acknowledgment of uncertainty, acknowledgment of difficulty finding words, affirmative statements, expressions of shock, and related questions or observations.

However, to adapt the culture to the Indonesian context, additional semantic formulas have been included, adapted from Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2019). This category, called ‘seeking forgiveness from God,’ includes religious expressions such as ‘innalillahi wa inna ilaihi rajiun,’ which literally means ‘Truly we belong to Allah and to Him we shall return.’ As a result, the analytical framework for this study consists of six semantic formulas in total.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Result

In this part, we report the research findings. The prevalence of each semantic formula adapted from Elwood (2004) is described for each situation.

#### Situation 1: The Death of Father

*“A friend of yours tells you that his father died last week.”*

Figure 1. illustrates the distribution of the semantic formulas used in situation 1 by each participant.

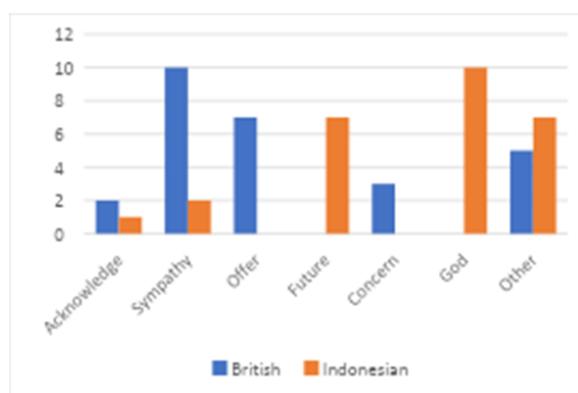


Figure 1. Situation 1: The Death of Father

From the data presented, it can be seen that participants from the British are more likely to use sympathy formulas, while Indonesian participants use more formulas of absolution of God (seeking for God’s forgiveness or God’s mercy). Another important finding is that none of the Indonesian participants offer help to the bereaved, while most of the British participants use this strategy. A similar pattern emerges in the use of future oriented remarks, which Indonesian participants often use, while British participants do not use them at all. The details of each semantic formula that appeared in situation 1 are as below:

*a. Acknowledgement of Death*

In the first situation, despite being insignificant, both British and Indonesian participants use acknowledgement of death when expressing condolences regarding the death of their friend's father. A total of 2 British participants use this strategy, while only 1 Indonesian participant do the same. Expressions from British participants included "Shit, oh my God" and "Oh God", while Indonesian participants express "Ya Allah" which has a similar meaning to "Oh God".

b. Expression of Sympathy

In terms of expressions of sympathy, the British participants all used this strategy when expressing their condolences: in contrast, only 2 Indonesian participants use this approach. The phrase "I am sorry to hear that" is the most commonly used expression of sympathy among the British participants. In Indonesia, the expression "Turut berduka cita" which means "deepest condolences", is used.

c. Offer Assistance

In terms of offering assistance, none of the Indonesian participants use this semantic formula when expressing condolences, however, 7 British participants use this expression using the most common phrase, "Is there anything I can do to help?". Other expressions included "If you need me, I am here" and "If you need something, just contact me".

d. Future-Oriented Remark

Different from offer assistance, in the use of future-oriented remark, there are 7 Indonesian participants who use this strategy when interacting with friends who recently lost their father. No one of British participants refer to the future-oriented remark. The word most commonly used to express future oriented remark is "semoga amal dan ibadah ayahmu diterima" which literally means "May your father's good deeds and worship be accepted". Another expression is "yang tabah ya" which implies encouraging the person to remain patient.

e. Expression of Concern

In the expression of concern formula, 3 British participants use this expression by the words "How are you?" or "How are you feeling?" in relation to the death of their father's friend. In contrast, no one of the Indonesian participants use this expression when conveying their condolences who recently lost a father.

f. Seeking Absolution from God

In a similar way to the expression of sympathy commonly used by British participants, all of the Indonesian participants in this research used expressions that convey the meaning of seeking absolution or surrendering to God upon hearing news of someone's death. The form of expression here is "Innalillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un" which literally means "We belong to Allah and to Allah we shall return".

g. Other

Responses that do not fit into any of the other semantic category, is classify in this part. In situation 1, various expressions used by British participants including: "What happened?", "He was a wonderful man", "I had not realized he had been ill", and "I am thinking of you". Whereas, Indonesian participants use expressions such as: "Meninggal kenapa? Kapan?" (When did he pass away?), "Sakit apa ayahmu?" (What illness did your father have?)

## Situation 2: the Death of Pet

*Your friend's dog was hit by car and died.*

In situation 2, individuals from the UK generally express condolences through expressions of sympathy, while individuals from Indonesia express condolences by asking for forgiveness from God. In addition, the cultural groups studied in this research tend to use alternative strategies, such as referring to pet dogs. The following discussion will provide a detailed analysis of each strategy used.

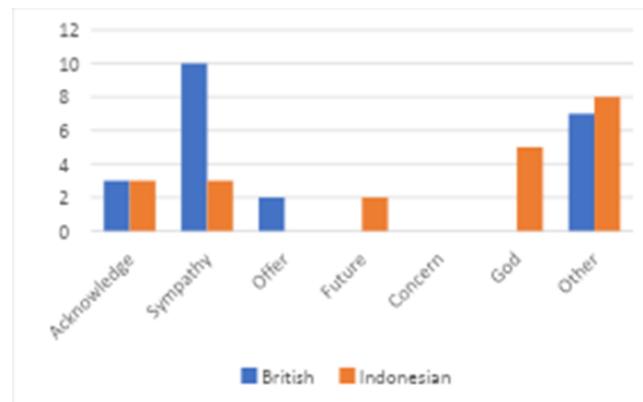


Figure 2. Situation 2: the death of pet

a. Acknowledgement of the death

Within this semantic framework, British and Indonesian cultures show equal frequency of occurrence, as evidenced by the use of expressions acknowledging death by three participants from each cultural context. The expressions used include: “Oh no, that's really sad,” “Oh no, that's terrible,” “Oh my God,” and “Oh my goodness.”

b. Expression of Sympathy

While all British participants in this study expressed condolences to convey their grief over the death of their friend's dog, only three Indonesian participants expressed similar condolences. The phrases used by British individuals included “I'm sorry to hear that” or “I share your grief over your loss”; meanwhile, Indonesian participants used expressions such as “turut berduka cita” (deep condolences) and “Aku turut bersedih atas kematian anjingmu” (I am also saddened by the loss of your dog), which can be literally translated as “I am also saddened by your loss”.

c. Offer Assistance

In this semantic formulation, a pair of British individuals express their sympathy by offering assistance. They use the phrases “please let me know if you need any help” and “I am ready to help if you need support” as rhetorical strategies to convey their condolences.

d. Future-Oriented Remark

In future-oriented statements, only 2 participants from Indonesia used this semantic formula, saying “may your dog be at peace there” (literally meaning “We hope your dog is at peace there”) and “don't let having a pet traumatised you” (meaning “don't let having a pet scare you away from having another one”).

e. Expression of Concern

None of the participants expressed their sympathy through this particular semantic structure.

f. Seeking Absolution from God

Similar to the previous situation, all Indonesians use identical phrases when learning about someone's pet's death.

g. Other

In other semantic formulas, English and Indonesian speakers use almost the same number of expressions. They convey feelings such as “Where did it happen?”, “I know how much you love your dog,” and share similar personal stories.

Meanwhile, Indonesians often express sympathy by asking when the accident happened or simply saying “kasian”, which means “poor thing”.

### **Situation 3: The Death of Sister-in-law**

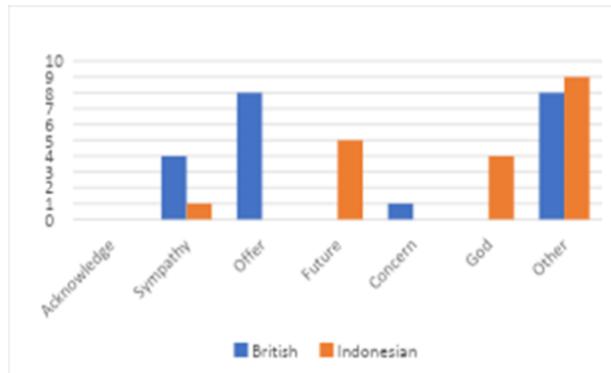


Figure 3. Situation 3: The Death of Sister-in-Law

#### **a. Acknowledgement of Death**

Neither the British nor Indonesian participants expressed condolences through explicit acknowledgement of death.

#### **b. Expression of Sympathy**

Four British participants and one Indonesian participant expressed their sympathy by saying things like ‘I am sorry for your loss’ and offering their deepest condolences.

#### **c. Offer of Assistance**

None of the Indonesian participants offered assistance. In contrast, eight British participants offered assistance, especially in situation 3. The majority of them used similar phrases such as ‘Is there anything you require, just let me know’ or ‘if you need assistance, I shall be available’.

#### **d. Future-Oriented Remark**

Unlike offers of help, none of the British participants used formulations that referred to future-oriented remarks. However, half of the Indonesian participants referred to similar expressions such as: ‘emoga Kakak diberikan ketabahan,’ and ‘Semoga beliau tenang di sisi-Nya.’

#### **e. Expression of Concern**

Regarding expressions of concern for the bereaved, almost no participants discussed this topic. Only one British participant mentioned it.

#### **f. Seeking Absolution from God**

Interestingly, only four Indonesian participants referred to seeking absolution from God, while no British participants engaged in this practice.

#### **g. Others**

In another semantic framework, several expressions used by British participants included phrases that indicated an inability to find the words to convey their sentiments, such as ‘I do not know what to say’. Meanwhile, Indonesian participants expressed sentiments such as ‘aku tau dia orang baik, yang tabah ya.’.

#### Situation 4: the Death of Grandfather

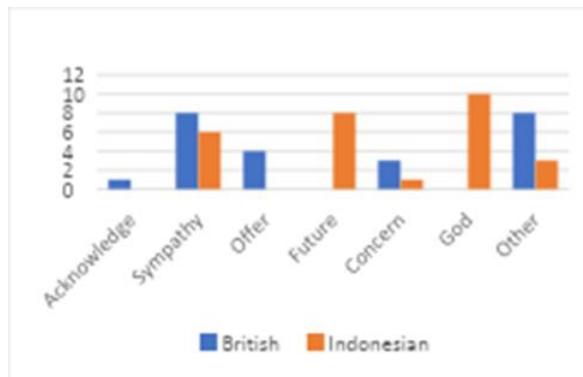


Figure 4. Situation 4: The Death of Grandfather

##### a. Acknowledgement of Death

In scenario 4, one British participant acknowledged the event with the exclamation, ‘Oh God.’

##### b. Expression of Sympathy

In the realm of expressions of sympathy, eight British participants conveyed their condolences using phrases such as ‘I am sorry to hear that’ and ‘I am sorry for your loss.’ In contrast, six Indonesian participants conveyed similar sentiments using the phrase ‘turut berduka cita’.

##### c. Offer Assistance

In the context of offering assistance, none of the Indonesian participants made such an offer. Meanwhile, four British participants offered assistance to their friends, using phrases such as, ‘If you need to talk, please call me’ and ‘If you need a shoulder to cry on, just call me.’

##### d. Future-Oriented Remarks

Regarding future-oriented remarks, eight Indonesian participants stated, ‘Semoga khusnul khotimah’ and ‘semoga amal ibadahnya diterima.’ The British participants did not use this specific formulation.

##### e. Expression of Concern

Three British participants used this strategy when expressing condolences. In contrast, only one Indonesian participant used this semantic formulation.

##### f. Seeking Absolution from God

Consistent with the previous trend, all Indonesian participants in this context used seeking absolution from God as their strategy for expressing condolences. In contrast, no British participants adopted this approach.

##### g. Others

In other contexts, eight British participants used strategies such as asking about the individual's closeness to their late grandfather and emphasising the memories shared by the bereaved family, exemplified by questions such as, ‘How close were you to him?’ and statements such as, ‘I know you have so many memories with him.’ In contrast, Indonesian participants showed curiosity about the cause of death by asking, ‘Meninggal kenapa?’

### Discussion

#### Differences and similarities of British and Indonesian on expressing condolences

The data analysis shows that there are differences and similarities between the two cultures in terms of “articulating condolences”. However, the most striking difference is that British usually use the phrase “expression of sympathy” to convey condolences. At the same time, in Indonesian culture, in almost all

contexts, they consist of “seeking forgiveness from God” by articulating, “Innalillahi wa inna ilaihi rajiun” (to Allah we belong and to Allah we return). This expression is an Islamic phrase that is conventionally said when Muslims face a bereavement experience. Examination of the findings indicated that condolences expression in Indonesia was significantly influence by religion, while British condolences in British indicated a lack of influence by religion. These findings are consistent with the conclusions by Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) and Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2019), who observed Persian and Indonesian cultures that use the expression of “seeking forgiveness from God” because of the influence of their religion. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Indonesians do use sympathy expressions in their condolences, even though the frequency is more less than the phrase that use in seeking forgiveness from God. Condolence expressions that Indonesians usually use are “turut berduka cita,” that have the same meaning as, “my deepest condolences”

The most significant differences between these two cultures are the fact that British individuals often extend offers of help during the mourning period with an articulation phrase like, “Is there anything I can do?” or “If you need support, I am available,” or “Is there anything I can help with?” In contrast, none of the Indonesian participants involved in this survey offers help to the families who are in a state of mourning. The lack of mental support from the Indonesian participants in this context is in contrast with the findings presented by Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2019), who documented that the participants in this survey are offered help for the families that are in mourning to help them alleviate their grief.

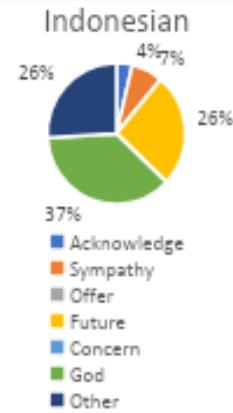
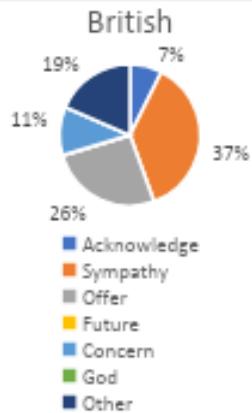
Furthermore, while no British people use the expression that is oriented to the future context, Indonesian people use this communicative expression strategy in almost all contexts that articulate the phrase like “Semoga husnul khotimah” (I hope s/he has a good end), “Semoga amalannya diterima oleh Allah” (I hope his/her deeds are accepted by Allah), or “Semoga keluarga diberi ketabahan” (I hope you will have patience to pass this). This observation reinforces the findings presented by Nurlianingsih and Imperiani (2019), who concluded that Indonesian people use these expressions to boost the morale of the grieving family members. In addition, the data shows that the comments are mostly oriented to the deceased, not the grieving family members. The phrase “Semoga husnul khotimah” (I hope s/he has a good end) functions as a prayer from Muslims to deceased people. In this case, this phenomenon reveals the other aspects of religion influenced. Indonesian people used the phrase “Kamu yang tabah ya” or “Sabar ya,” which literally translates as “Be patient.” Contrast with the British people who do not use this phrase in context of dealing with bereaved family members.

For the similarities, both British and Indonesian show almost identical semantic characteristics, especially with the expression that shows the lack of words to articulate feelings. While British people might articulate the phrase like “no words to explain my regrets” or “I don’t know what to say”, Indonesian people would express the sentiment through expressions such as “Aku gak tahu harus ngomong apa”, which translates as “I don’t know what to say”. In addition, some participants from British and Indonesian were in this survey related to contextual situations, exemplified by the question “What happened?” that can translate into Indonesia as “Ada apa?” or “Apa yang terjadi?”. Another characteristic of these two cultures relates to expressions of empathy. Some British participants would articulate the sentiment like “I cannot begin to understand how you feel”, “I know it is hard”, or “I know I can’t take away your pain,” meanwhile the Indonesian participants say the same feelings with phrases like, “Aku tahu ini tidak mudah” or “Aku tahu ini berat,” which translates as “I know this is not easy” and “I know it is tough” respectively.

### Strategies used in each situation when facing bereavement

#### Situation 1:

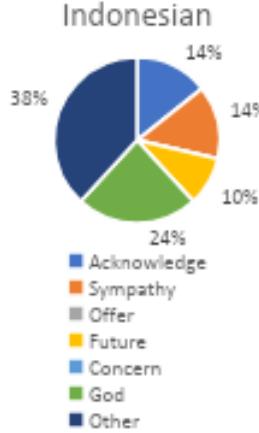
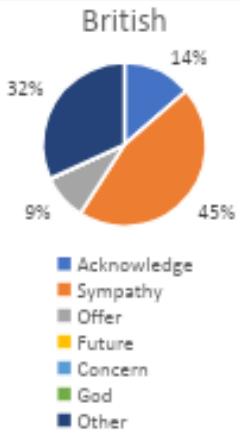
*Your friend told you that her father passed away last week.*



Situation 1 presented participants with a scenario involving a person who had recently lost their father. The data illustrated in the pie chart shows that British people usually used expressions of sympathy by articulating condolences and offering help. Meanwhile, the Indonesian people, after hearing the news of someone's passing away, often sought forgiveness from God and made future-oriented statements. The expression of sympathy used by the British people includes "I'm sorry to hear that" and "Is there something I can help with?" which have another meaning as a strategy to offer support. In contrast, in Islam phrases such as "Innalillahi wa innalilahi raijin," which means "Indeed, to Allah we belong and to Allah we shall return" and "Semoga husnul hotimah" which is translated into "I hope (the death) has a good end" represents two common strategies that are used in the context where people about the recent that of a friend's father.

### **Situation 2:**

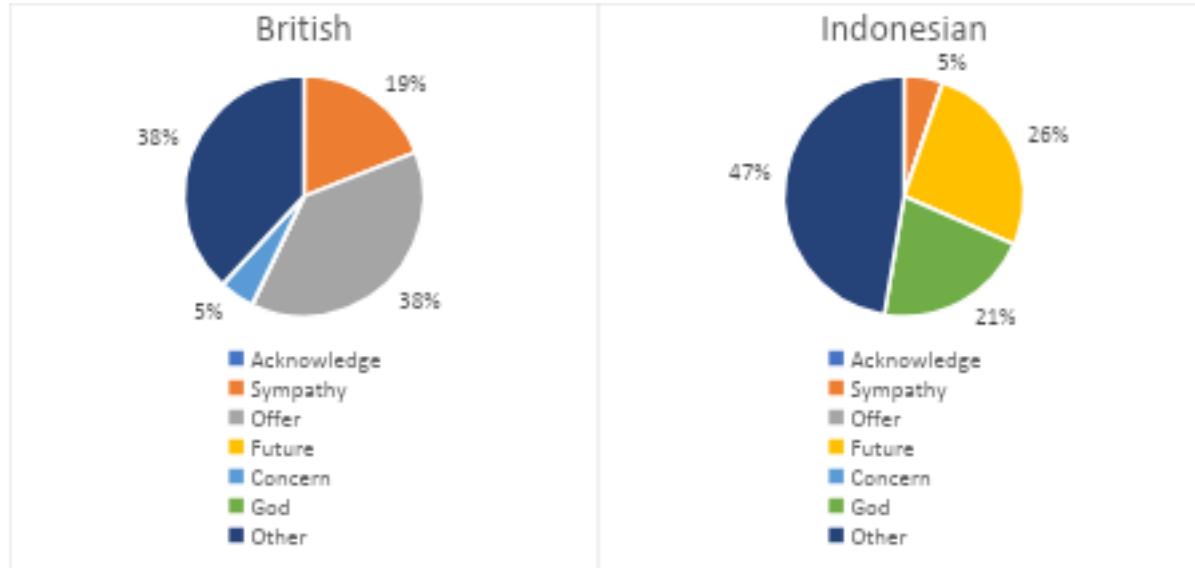
*Your friend's dog was hit by car and died.*



Situation 2 is about the death of pets, especially in this scenario, a dog. In this context, the British people express condolences by saying phrases like, "I'm sorry for your loss" followed by questions like "What happened?" and articulate sympathy like "I know how much your dog meant to you". Moreover, a participant shared their experience after losing their dog, saying, "We suffer the loss of our dog and putting our photos (in this case with their pets) could heal us for our loss," as one of their strategies to get up after the loss and as an articulate condolences to friends who lost their pets. This strategy is similar to the strategy found in Elwood's (2004). In contrast, Indonesian people showed an urge to ask questions about the death of the dogs, followed by the Muslim phrases that seek forgiveness from God. That's why, in this special context, Indonesian people show curiosity about the caused of the unfortunate incident.

### **Situation 3:**

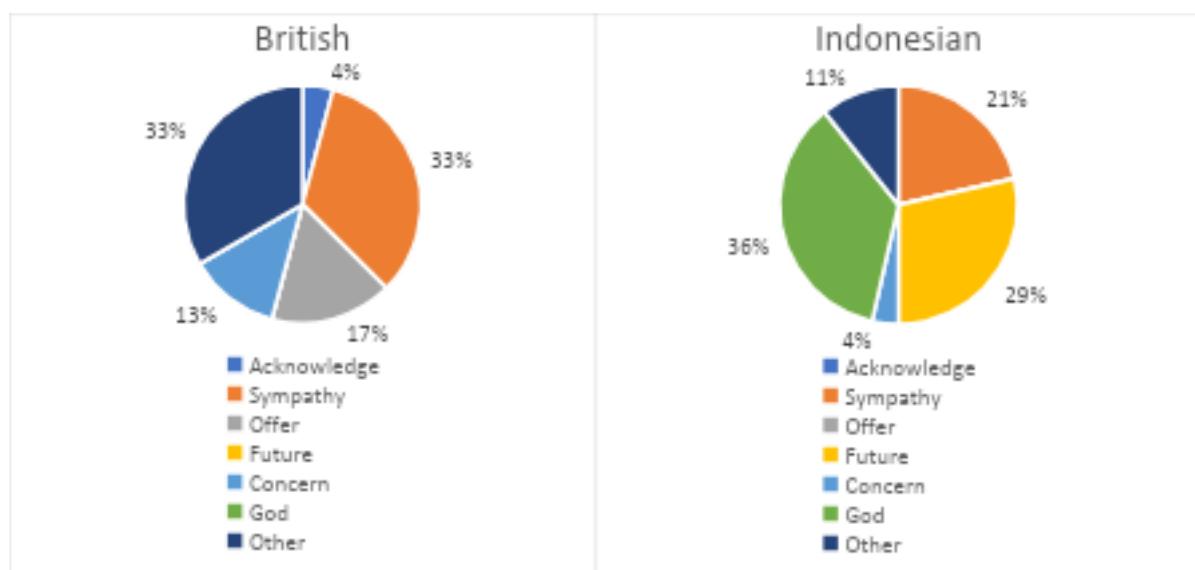
*You receive the death news of your brother's wife. You then visit him.*



In situation 3, the pattern that appears is quite different from the 2 earlier situations. While in British is commonly express through sympathy, and in Indonesia is generally express through seeking God's forgiveness as a form of condolence in the 2 earlier situations, in such situations both British and Indonesian tend to express themselves in a different way by showing empathy and saying that they don't know what to say, Indonesian often use phrase like "yang tabah ya" (Please be patient) as a way of expressing condolences. In addition, in this situation, individuals from the British are also more likely to offer help than in other circumstances. The different pattern emerges in this condolence situation because the deceased is still a family member, so the expression show more familial close relationships.

#### **Situation 4:**

*You haven't seen your friend for several weeks. Then, when you meet him again, you find out that his grandfather passed away, which is why he hasn't been attending school.*



In situation 4, there is a considerable variation in the strategies used by participants. Furthermore, the data presented in the pie chart clearly shows that British are more likely to express sympathy to the bereaved and use the other options

like asking questions about the incident such as “What happened?”, “Did you have some memories with him?” (“Did you have any memorable experiences with him?”), or “had he been ill?”. Lastly, Indonesian prefer to use strategy that involve seeking God’s forgiveness and expressing future oriented remarks.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a clear difference between British and Indonesian cultural practices in the way they express condolences. For example, individuals in British culture generally use expressions of sympathy and offer additional help in their expressions of condolences. In contrast, individuals in Indonesian culture are more likely to seek divine absolution and use future-oriented statements as their main communication strategies. Nevertheless, both cultures show similarities or harmonies in certain strategies, such as in the way they ask questions (about the deceased) or in their efforts to convey empathy.

Turning to the analysis of strategies in each situation, both cultures generally share similar patterns for each situation, except in the event of the death of a brother-in-law (situation 3). In this situation, both cultures use different strategies when compared to other situations. This indicates that the level of closeness to the bereaved family has an influence on the condolence strategies chosen by the speakers.

However, since we did not include the aspect of power distance, it should be noted that power distance relations could be considered in further studies, given that British culture is a low-context culture, while Indonesian culture is a high-context culture. In addition, we realise that the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) used in this study was not very varied, resulting in participants having more limited choices in expressing their condolences.

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