

# Informal Address Practices among University Students in Sri Lanka: A Case Study

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## Abstract

The use of address terms within communication settings across divergent cultures is a core determinant of understanding the essential correspondence between language and society. Informed by Brown and Gilman's prominent seminal study on the pronouns of power and solidarity (1960), various research studies have been conducted to explore the sociolinguistic dimensions as observed in the address practices employed by specific communities belonging to different cultures. However, there is a notable dearth of sociolinguistic research on the significance of the terms of address used within the Sri Lankan context, and while addressing this research gap, the present study attempts to investigate the informal address strategies used among Sri Lankan university undergraduates, specifically with regards to their interactions governed by solidarity behaviours. Primary data required for the study were collected from a survey questionnaire directed to a sample of 35 undergraduates (response rate: 74%) studying in a specific faculty of a state university in Sri Lanka and the research methodology involves the grounded theory of qualitative approach and thematic analysis. The reported key findings of the study encompass the following address categories: prosoponyms, appellatives, 'campus cards', kinship terms, honorifics, and compound phrases. These informal address terms governed by solidarity are further characterized by the individuality, variety and creativity of university cultures, and exhibit a wide range of unique uses that are highly receptive to multicultural, intercultural, and sub-cultural variations. As such, they reflect the sociocultural specificities and attitudinal viewpoints of the interlocutors, showcasing the adaptability and fluidity of address strategies in communication within Sri Lankan university contexts.

**Keywords:** Sociocultural Dynamics, Solidarity Governed Interactions, Sri Lankan Context, Terms of Address, University Culture

## INTRODUCTION

It is a widely recognised fact that language and society possess an essentially fundamental and reciprocal connection, for language shapes society and social interactions forge linguistic phenomena in a multitude of distinctive ways. The use of address strategies, in this regard, can be considered as a vital and systematic feature in universal language behaviour, where the relationships among the speakers in different sociocultural settings are defined and negotiated in significant circumstances. As Philipsen and Huspek (1985) observe, "Personal address is a sociolinguistic subject par excellence" (p. 94), and within formal or informal interactions, the choices made by people in addressing each other are greatly indicative of their identities, attitudes, feelings and the nature of the relationship they share (Spolsky, 2003). Besides, when taking a specific community and culture such as that of a South Asian university into consideration, the ample use of informal terms of address, either consciously or unconsciously, provides greater insights into the pragmatic aspects of the situational contexts and sociocultural factors that operate within these contexts including familiarity, intimacy, gender, ethnicity, religion, politics as well as regional variations. It is noteworthy to mention that in the

Sri Lankan university culture, the employment of informal address terms is amply expressive of the goals of communication that bridge the speaker and the listener in terms of their unique identity constructions, culturally rooted ideological underpinnings as well as like-minded behaviours that define them as a specific community sharing the same interests who work together to achieve a common goal. In this regard, the students' usage of a complicated system of address strategies extensively involves rich and innovative connotations drawn from varied linguistic and cultural resources, where their wisdom, active imagination and enthusiasm to be initiated into a new environment invariably contribute to the construction of an ideal university culture for them.

A university, which can be viewed as a site of a particular form of culture, is a manifestation of the common values, spirits and behaviour norms of people who are pursuing academic goals through the development of study and research. The Sri Lankan university system, in particular, has its own system of communicating with social culture and a unique form of evolution characterised by innovativeness and heterogeneity of speakers. As students living in different

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regions of the country belonging to a diversity of religions, ethnicities, and social communities are enrolled yearly in universities, they reflect a remarkably heterogeneous culture in terms of the ideologies, values, behaviour, mentality, and aesthetic consciousness shared in a common and distinctive system. On the other hand, Sri Lankan universities also demonstrate strong and remarkable sub-cultures, where the undergraduates follow specific customary practices and social processes unique to university communities during their academic period of study. This results in an aspect of 'interculturality' defined on the basis of the relations that exist between culturally diverse groups in the same multicultural university setting triggered by the multilingual environment within larger Sri Lankan culture, where the terms of address drawn from two or more languages necessarily demonstrate intercultural communication among undergraduates. Under these circumstances, distinct identities and traditions shaped by cultural and sub-cultural facets constructed within university contexts are all-pervasive in every single aspect of the interplay between language and society, as perceived in the employment of various terms of address in communication among the speakers. Considering the solidarity governed interactions within communities of Sri Lankan university students, the employment of innovative and exclusive forms of address especially encompasses elements drawn from a broad diversity of customs and traditions emerging from multiple cultural spheres. Hence, undoubtedly, there is scope for extensive sociolinguistic research to examine the nuanced use of informal address strategies and their role in reflecting and shaping social dynamics and communication within Sri Lankan university culture.

In light of this context, this research aims at exploring the informal address practices used among students in a Sri Lankan university, particularly with a focus on the various patterns of address as observed within non-academic interactional settings characterised by solidarity-driven behaviour. By analysing data from a community of undergraduates at a state university in Sri Lanka, this study specifically seeks to identify the sociolinguistic factors that determine and influence their choice of terms of address when addressing and describing each other. It further attempts to use these findings to understand the specific contexts in which Sri Lankan undergraduates tend to change their usual address forms when communicating with each other, and the ways in which their use of different address terms suggest the degree of solidarity governed behaviours. Lastly, the study aims to address the gap in existing research pertaining to the understanding of the terms of address used in Sri Lankan universities by providing deeper insights into how informal address practices function as markers of social dynamics within various contexts of communication among the members of this specific academic community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, the theories of terms of address focus on the study of a speaker's linguistic reference to someone else in initiating contact along with the elements of deixis and signifies a fundamentally important variable in sociolinguistic phenomena. The extensive empirical literature that has developed based on the terms of address described in Brown and Gilman's pioneering study (1960) sheds light on the differentiation of pronominal address in

terms of power and solidarity semantics and introduces the symbols T and V to represent familiar and polite pronouns used in conversations. The solidarity semantic in social interactions is characterised by factors such as frequency of contact, degree of power equivalence and similar behavioural dispositions or like-mindedness of the interlocutors (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Ollier et al., 2022). Thus, solidarity is mainly demonstrated within informal interactions among individuals belonging to the same linguistic and cultural community or across different languages and cultures, who share similar interests and pursue a set of common purposes. The choice of informal address terms can also vary according to many social factors related to age, respectability and the dimension of social relationships between the speakers. Within the Sri Lankan context, the choice of a particular term of address is more dependent on the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee, which denotes psychologically governed preferences rather than socially pre-conditioned facts (Braun, 1988; Karunatilake & Suseendrarajah, 1975).

Moreover, several other subsequent researchers have shown the existence of diversified modes of address that reflect distinctive social identities and cultural beliefs of a particular community. According to Fitch (1998), generally, address forms can be categorised as second-person pronouns, proper names, kinship terms, titles, and nicknames and adjectival terms, where people are usually inclined to shift among various ways of addressing each other depending on the specific situations of communication. The elements and aspects that comprise personal address forms along with their use and interpretation are considered universal and systematic (Philipsen & Huspek, 1985), mainly due to the reason that the choices made by the interlocutors on how they will address, name, and designate each other within each and every conversational background essentially differ across contexts. In this regard, concerning the informal interactional settings associated with solidarity, like-mindedness, intimacy and familiarity, which are the focus of the current study, address terms entail a broader scope in reflecting the manners in which interpersonal relationships are societally and strategically established in a variety of cultural domains. As such, it should be indicated that the patterns and meanings of the uses of different address forms are culture-specific and context-based, for even the means of addressing one person can be subjected to multiple changes depending on the nature of a particular interactional setting and its attendant factors.

Considering the academic settings such as educational institutions and universities, Shen and Tian's (2012) study on academic and campus culture of universities, McIntire's (1972) research on the terms of address used in an American academic setting and Afful's (2006) study on the emerging trends of address forms used among university students in Ghana further demonstrate that the speakers' employment of a vitality of address terms by applying individualistic and non-literal meanings upon them generally creates a space for conferring in cultural systems. In addition, within Western European domains and British academic settings, address strategies diverge from traditional forms and display an unmarked pattern of asymmetrical distribution between the parties involved in intercultural communication, thereby showing the extent to which an

enormous potential of cultural values, behavioural dispositions and sociopolitical change can influence the usage of formal and informal address practices (Clyne et al., 2003; Formentelli, 2009). Hence, the speakers use address terms as a tool of negotiating cultural systems (Fitch, 1998) that demonstrate respect, establish rapport, and navigate the complexities of multicultural interactions, contributing to harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships within diverse cultural settings.

In essence, all the studies, as mentioned earlier, emphasise that the use of terms of address consciously or unconsciously provides insights into sociolinguistic information about interactants and pragmatic aspects of the situations (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2002) constructed within various sociocultural backgrounds shaped by multilingual and intercultural facets. However, academic environments like universities, particularly related to South Asian cultures, have drawn less attention for the study of terms of address. As spaces of diversity, uniqueness and productivity, such university cultures are closely associated with utilising rich and heterogeneous systems of address, predominantly observable in informal communication. In multilingual and multicultural entities such as Sri Lankan university settings, the utilization of rich and complex systems of address underscores the importance of embracing inclusivity and diversity within the sites of language practices (Clayman, 2013), fostering an environment where individuals from various backgrounds thrive together and contribute to the vibrant tapestry of university life. Within these circumstances, this research intends to discover and understand the choices of address practices employed by Sri Lankan university students within solidarity governed informal interactions; an area of focus that addresses a gap in the previous empirical findings related to the theory of address terms studied in sociolinguistics.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted at the University of Colombo, a public university in Sri Lanka that conducts its academic programmes in trilingual medium spanning nine (9) faculties. The Faculty of Arts, which is the largest in the University of Colombo in terms of student enrolment, with nine academic departments and several teaching units offering courses in the Humanities and Social Sciences, was selected as the research setting from where the sample population was drawn. The research was conducted as a case study on the informal address behaviours used by the undergraduates of the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, and the sample size of 35 was selected based on the requirement for participants with, at the very least, a basic understanding of terms of address and the ability to respond to the questionnaire accordingly in English, yielding a response rate of 74%. All the research subjects belonged to the age group of between 20-27 years and thus demonstrate the linguistic repertoire used by students representing each of the First, Second, Third and Fourth academic years in the Faculty of Arts.

To discover the complex and engaging forms of informal address practices used among university students in maintaining and enhancing interactions outside the academic and pedagogical sphere, a survey based on the ethnographic approach was carried out as a part of this research to gather first-hand information from the selected

population. Given the health and travel restrictions prevailing in the country at the time, the survey was conducted in virtual mode and utilised a self-administered questionnaire distributed among the sample population as the research instrument. To ensure that research ethics were duly followed in the collection of data, the research subjects were provided with an informed consent form including a brief description of the research objectives along with the survey questionnaire to indicate their confirmation to proceed. The questionnaire was further accompanied by the ethical considerations pertaining to ensuring the confidentiality of the responses and the anonymous and voluntary participation of the respondents, before obtaining their consent. The questionnaire expected the participants to answer a set of quantitative and qualitative questions regarding their preferences on using certain address terms in particular situations, the factors they would take into consideration when deciding how informally they would communicate with each other, their views about using specific address terms such as endearment terms and 'campus cards', the occasions where they would usually tend to change their preferred terms of addressing their batchmates within informal contexts, and their overall opinions about multicultural, intercultural and sub-cultural communication at university. These questions involved multiple choice, checkbox type, and short-text answers which required detailed explanations to understand their views and opinions regarding the use of a particular term or terms of address.

This research is grounded in the philosophical approaches underpinning solidarity semantic and terms of address, along with the dynamics of intercultural, multicultural, and sub-cultural communication, recognising the complexity of sociolinguistic practices and the need for a flexible approach to fully capture the nuances of informal address practices among Sri Lankan university students. Drawing on theoretical frameworks involving pragmatism, social identity, and pronouns of power and solidarity, it integrates an exploratory and explanatory examination of the intricate correlation among language, society, and culture within the selected community. Accordingly, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the study specifically focuses on theories for terms of address and politeness behaviour (in Linguistics) posited by Brown and Gilman (1960) along with Karunatilake and Suseendrarajah (1975) in the Sri Lankan context. Besides, the selection of an ethnographic approach as the research method and the survey questionnaire as the tool of data collection was based on the need to gather richer and in-depth information associated with the informal address practices used among university students. Additionally, opting for a survey questionnaire could enable the study to gather responses from a broader audience of university students, thereby capturing a vivid range of perspectives and experiences related to the informal address practices they use. It was also expected to get analytical insights regarding the address usage of the target population by yielding explanatory and straightforward information that would allow for precise comparisons between the respondents' answers. Moreover, the open-ended nature of several questions envisaged an informative and flexible discussion pertaining to the scope of the topic, where the respondents' own points of view, thoughts, and knowledge regarding verbal behaviour in the use of informal address terms could be directly elicited.

With regards to the methods of data analysis, the grounded theory of qualitative analysis was applied in the procedure of systematically coding and cleaning the collected data, followed by synthesising qualitative information through fragmentation of data, defining key processes, and drawing comparisons between data<sup>1</sup>. The thematic analysis approach was further employed to identify recurring patterns and themes, ensuring a comprehensive synthesis of qualitative information that highlights the major sociolinguistic factors influencing the usage of informal address practices in the target population. The codes, themes, and categories for qualitative analysis were developed through the theoretical construct of solidarity, which underpins the selection and use of address terms. The responses from participants, particularly their choices and opinions regarding which address forms they would use in specific situations, were grouped and categorised according to the specific sociolinguistic variables such as friendship, intimacy, seniority, familiarity, gender, and respectability. To offer interpretive and analytical comprehension of the participants' preferences for specific address strategies, some data sets were presented as frequencies in quantitative form as well, thus adopting a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative forms of data analysis. This approach guided the identification of pronouns related to solidarity and key themes associated with informal address strategies, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving the choice of address terms in various social contexts. The findings of this research were validated through expert reviews obtained from a senior researcher in the field of Sociolinguistics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Once the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the survey were coded and tabulated, the survey as a whole identified six key categories of terms of address employed by the respondents in various interactional encounters relevant to non-academic orientation (i.e., informal), which included prosoponyms, appellatives, 'campus cards', kinship terms, honorifics and compound phrases. Prosoponyms are personal names, and can be categorised as first names, initials and nicknames; the appellatives or common nouns can further be classified as solidarity terms, endearment terms and descriptive phrases. The 'campus cards' are unique imaginative terms constructed within the university sub-cultural context, in place of the given name of a student, and by which a student is supposed to be addressed throughout his/her university life. Kinship terms are address forms that denote specific relatives or family members and honorifics are words or titles used to convey deference or respect. Most of these address practices are predominantly influenced by Sri Lankan sociocultural contextual factors and reflect the linguistic repertoire of the two major official languages in the country, Sinhala and Tamil.

Table 1 below indicates the major categories of terms of address identified, with the statistics pertaining to the participants' most preferred way/s of addressing each other during informal interactions.

Table 1: The preference of addressing each other during informal interactions

Prosoponyms	Appellatives	' Campus cards'	Kinship terms	Honorifics	Compound phrases
76.9 %	73 %	69 %	46 %	26.9 %	56.7 %

Source: Developed by author, survey statistics, 2022

### **Prosoponyms**

The prosoponyms (derived from Ancient Greek; Keats-Rohan, 2007) are generally regarded as the full names or permanent names acquired by an individual at birth, or the set of names by which an individual is known legally. Prosoponyms are the most widely used category of address terms among university students according to the research findings, and are operationalized as first names, initials and nicknames.

#### **i. First Names (FNs)**

FN is the name that stands first in one's full name, and is given at birth and precedes the surname. The names such as Dilini, Kasun, Abilash, and Fathima can be mentioned as some examples of FNs in the Sri Lankan context. FNs were the most preferred term of address within informal interactions among the undergraduates at the University of Colombo, Faculty of Arts (hereafter UOC FOA) and they involve a rich diversity of terms that signify multilingualism, multiculturalism as well as interculturality (i.e., FNs exhibit heterogeneity in terms of their origins from a variety of ethnicities in the country such as Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay etc.). Particularly when considering Sinhalese and Tamil backdrops in the country, people generally use first names as the most prominent means of addressing each other owing to the reason that they are considered real or permanent names acquired at birth and that they inherently give someone a unique identity. Even though first names might be perceived as quite formal when compared with other informal address terms used in solidarity governed interactions, the speakers' linguistic and cultural background along with his/her attitudinal acquisition of social norms characterise them as most commonly employed address practice within informal communication in universities.

#### **ii. Initials**

Initials as another category of informally addressing each other within university culture, typically refer to the abbreviated terms of address formed by combining the first letters of an individual's personal name (AK for Aruni Kankanamge, for instance). Addressing by initials signifies a high degree of solidarity among the interlocutors when they are engaging in informal interactions, as the initials are not very commonly used in formal academic conversations inside the university. Social factors such as friendship and intimacy as well as the scale of familiarity (Ollier et al., 2022) and closeness between the students can be regarded as the key takeaways of such usage.

<sup>1</sup>For easier identification of information submitted by each respondent, the participants' responses were coded according to their gender. Female participants were coded as F1, F2, F3 etc. and male participants as M1, M2, M3 etc.

### iii. Nicknames

Nicknames, in the context of a sub-category of prosoponyms, can either be the clipped forms of an individual's given name or of his/her middle name or surname. Some examples for nicknames in this regard would be Tharū for the first name Tharushi and Rāmā for the surname Ramanayake. An interesting usage of nicknames that essentially possesses special connotations within university culture such as nicknames abbreviated from someone's first, middle or last name, has further been identified among the respondents. Individuals may use these alternative monikers to refer to one another, often based on personal characteristics, interests, or memorable experiences, thus, fostering a sense of belonging within the university community and enhancing the overall collegiate experience. For an example, the term Batū (a shortened form of the surname Batuwatta) functions as a nickname of solidarity and closeness, while also suggesting the trait of smaller body figure (*batu* is used as a Colloquial Sinhalese non-literal term that denotes smallness in size). As Holmes (2013) mentions, nicknames are often used in backstage interactions characterised by more informal and colloquial stylistic features and are fundamentally suggestive of a greater degree of closeness and intimacy. Thus, as an informal term of address added to or substituted for the prosoponym of a person, the use of nicknames in university cultures can reflect a multitude of attitudinal viewpoints and sociocultural conventions associated with the expression of affection, familiarity, amusement and even humour.

### Appellatives

As the second major source of informal address patterns among the undergraduates, appellatives function as the common nouns or identifying terms (Keats-Rohan, 2007) by which an individual is distinguished from others in terms of the way he/she is related to the speaker. As identified in the survey responses, they mainly involved solidarity terms, endearment terms and descriptive phrases.

#### i. Solidarity Terms

The solidarity terms used among the undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts are mainly characterised by the union or fellowship arising from common interests and feelings sustained by them as a university community. For instance, the forms of address such as buddy ('close friend'), dude ('fellow': now widely used as a unisex term), *machang* ('brother-in-law' in Tamil and 'friend' in Colloquial Sinhalese), and *machī* (feminine form of *machang* mostly used in conversational Sinhalese) greatly signify the affinity, connection and oneness among the interlocutors, the qualities that they are normatively expected to develop throughout the university life. As such, this category of address terms immensely portrays the sociocultural aspects rooted in Sri Lankan context, thereby demonstrating the manners in which solidarity governed behaviours are constructed.

#### ii. Endearment Terms

Endearment terms refer to the casual forms of address that the speakers use to express sentimental feelings and affection. To illustrate, the major endearment terms perceived to be used among Sri Lankan university students from the survey are love, dear, hun and babe. Besides, when the participants were asked about their views on the use of endearment terms, the majority of the respondents stated

that it is natural and normal in private conversations among individuals who share strong intimate relationships, but not in the interactions within public domains. Several other responses indicated the fact that endearment terms positively affect in strengthening bonds and creating comfortable environments, thus avoiding communication barriers among colleagues. It has also been revealed that females tend to overuse endearments even beyond private domains (Dickey, 1997), whereas male students generally apprehend them as extremely awkward and peculiar. On the other hand, as it was evident from the participant responses, it is typically believed within the Sri Lankan context that the use of such terms might sound inappropriate and unprofessional specifically among those who perceive them stereotypically and conventionally, based on the belief that endearment terms are unduly informal and impolite to be used in public domains. This greatly provides insights on the fact that endearment terms are culture-based and gender-specific (Bruns & Kranich, 2021).

Illustrated below are some of the ideas regarding endearment terms extracted from the survey responses:

**F 5:** *I think they show affectionate relationships among students so they can be used to improve connections between each other. But in some occasions they can be indecent and inappropriate.*

**F 3:** *For those who share intimate relationships with each other, that's fine and those terms strengthen their bond too I think. But in the presence of fellow colleagues in public domains, they might sound too informal.*

**M 2:** *Very popular among girls!*

### iii. Descriptive Phrases

The descriptive phrases are basically intended at attributing a particular quality or characteristic specific to the person being addressed (most commonly third person reference). To exemplify, the terms of address *repā* (batch representative), *roomā* (male room-mate), *roomilā* (female room-mates), and *girlie* (girl or young woman) are some of the descriptive phrases used in the informal interactions between undergraduates. Afful (2006) finds that descriptive phrases fundamentally serve as either attention-getters or identifiers, thus can be considered as effective pragmatic tools to be used when the addressee's personal name is unknown. Additionally, considering the university students as a distinct community, this type of address terms exhibit their common characteristics, opinions and interests, specifically within the contexts where such names are used and are attributed different traits according to someone's disposition. In this sense, descriptive terms point to a higher level of solidarity among the interlocutors, since their usage mirrors an achievement of a sense of belonging and like-minded demeanours.

### Campus Cards

'Campus cards' generally refer to the culturally derived address terms or nicknames created with the purpose of exposing students to the socialization process within the university sub-culture. The origin of 'campus cards' dates back to the Black July riots (anti-Tamil pogroms and ethnic violence that occurred in Sri Lanka during July 1983) where the university undergraduates used identifying terms called 'cards' to conceal their real names and identities, in order to avoid discrimination and threats of exclusion. This practice, subjected to different modifications over time, is now

regarded as an important aspect of university communities in the country, and acquiring a 'campus card' signifies a student's acquiescence to university sub-culture. Usually a junior student receives a 'card' from a senior, and once the process is completed, he/she is considered to have embraced the university sub-culture along with the acquisition of its norms and adherence to its traditions. The person receiving a 'card' is required to use it in all informal communicative encounters within the university in place of their real name, and that particular term of address necessarily functions as an agent of socialization that makes him/her feel a sense of belonging to a real university community.

Furthermore, it is important to note that in Sri Lankan university domains, 'campus cards' can represent intercultural dynamics based on factors such as the socio-economic background of a student, specific character traits related to their cultural upbringing, their active participation in community activities etc. upon which the derivation of a particular term is determined. Some examples for 'campus cards' would be Jupiter (the one who is very interested in astronomy) and Otara (the one who loves animals; the term basically refers to a Sri Lankan animal welfare advocate who has the same name). The mode of acquiring a 'card' can vary from one university to another as well as between different faculties of the same university and according to the sociocultural setting of the particular university. In this regard, most of the UOC FOA students who responded to the survey stated that 'campus cards' give someone a unique identity associated with his/her behavioural dispositions and performances while facilitating friendly and long-lasting relationships, and therefore strengthen the fellowship and inclusive bonds among each other. Since the university itself is a multicultural entity, the 'campus cards', in this context, extensively contribute to enrich and widen the repertoire of address terms with the employment of creative, innovative, humorous and sarcastic terms as well.

The following extracts show the respondents' attitudinal viewpoints concerning 'campus cards':

**F 5:** *I'm okay with them but in my opinion, those terms should not be inappropriate (or sense like slang). The person who bears the card should feel comfortable calling with it.*

**F 10:** *As university students they have to follow the sub-culture, and should undergo the socialization process to use cards. Personally, I believe it's an acceptable practice because it gives you a real university experience as an undergraduate.*

**M 3:** *For less interactive and introvert people, having a card would be a good thing to get along with others because it helps to build up friendly, informal interactions with others and makes you feel attached to a social group.*

**M 7:** *Pretty cool as long as the students are not forced to use them and if they can be used with the other person's consent.*

### Kinship Terms

Kinship terms involve the system of names applied to represent familial relationships, which are however primarily utilised within Sri Lankan university cultures as non-relational address terms. The use of this category of address terms among the undergraduates at UOC FOA includes either addressing by one particular kinship term

such as *akka* (elder sister) or by combining one of the prosoponyms, appellatives or 'campus cards' with a kinship term such as Taniya *akka* (elder sister Taniya). As evident in the Table 2 below, when participants were asked how they would address the students in senior and junior batches as well as their own batchmates who are older in age, the use of either the first names or nicknames or 'campus cards' along with a kinship term was the majority's preference. It is noticeable that although university students frequently use Sinhalese kinship terms such as *ayya* (elder brother) or *akka* (elder sister) when referring to a student older in age along with a prosoponym, an appellative or a 'campus card', when addressing those who are younger in age, kinship terms such as *malli* (younger brother) or *nangi* (younger sister) are not very predominantly used; younger addressees are usually called only by the specific term of address (i.e. their first name or nickname etc.) without a kinship term. Besides, the most preferred terms of addressing an elder or a younger batchmate (i.e., a student of the same year or cohort) are either a prosoponym or an appellative or a 'campus card' only, without a kinship term. The quantitative data therefore suggest that institutional seniority is a more powerful variable than age in the choice of a kinship term as a form of non-relational or non-familial address within the university setting. Hence, the level of solidarity maintained within informal interactions among the undergraduates is essentially grounded in the degrees of respect and recognition attributed to senior or junior status in university culture.

Table 2: The use of kinship terms

The addressee	Term of address		
	A kinship term referring to younger/ older in age	A prosoponym / an appellative/ A ' Campus card'	A Prosoponym / an appellative / a ' Campus card' along with a kinship term
A student in a senior batch	69.2%	19.2%	84.6%
A student in a junior batch	76.9%	88.4%	65.3%
An elder or younger batchmate	7.6%	80.7%	69.2%

Source: Developed by author, survey statistics, 2022

### Honorifics

Honorifics, the titles or words that imply respect, are mostly utilised by UOC FOA students when addressing Buddhist clergy in solidarity governed interactions in the university. Even though the interactional setting is informal, the students typically employ formal honorifics like reverend, thero, *swāmin wahanse* or *hāmaduruwane* to address Buddhist monks. The term *sādu*, which is a relatively more informal honorific, is also used. According to Karunatilake &

Suseendrarajah (1975), these address terms depict a considerable regional variation in their usage where each term is used among groups of people belonging to a distinct community of a particular geographical region in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the aforesaid address practices remarkably signal the conformity towards broader social standards deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan culture, pertaining to the deference and politeness shown towards religion (Zainal et al., 2022) and members of the clergy.

Similarly, the survey responses show that the other typically formal honorifics such as madam, sir, my lady, your highness are used predominantly in a non-literal and figurative sense to convey sarcasm, strong intimacy and friendship or extreme courtesy in informal settings. In this context, honorific terms become the indicators of intense informality and solidarity established with regards to non-official domains of communication.

### Compound Phrases

Compound phrases refer to rich and creative coinages formed by combining several of the aforementioned forms of address together. In general, compound phrases often take the following major forms:

1. A prosoponym or an appellative joined to a descriptive phrase – Nethu girlie, Pasi boy
2. A prosoponym or an appellative joined to a kinship term – Isuri *nangi*, Mudi *ayya*
3. A 'campus card' joined to a kinship term - Nēha *akki*, Jupiter *mali*
4. A 'campus card' joined to an honorific or endearment term – Lady Otara, Moni love
5. A prosoponym or an appellative joined to an honorific– Seewali *sādu*, Sayuri madam

The employment of compound phrases as mentioned above indicates that university cultures play a key role in expanding the existing linguistic repertoire of address terms with rich and innovative sub-cultural and intercultural elements embedded within informal address practices. A significant number of social variables as illustrated in Table 3 below play a key role in the formation of these address terms. These variables exhibit the distinct cultural and psychosocial dynamics of Sri Lankan society.

### Social Variables that Affect the Choice of Informal Address Terms within University Culture

The social variables that influence the creation and use of the informal terms of address described in the categories above can be determined by the participants' responses. The participants indicated that the factors they would take into consideration in deciding how informally they are to address their batchmates at university, are friendship or intimacy, familiarity, seniority, gender and reverence (Table 3). These data primarily depict the fact that the variables of age gap, gender, respectability, seniority and formality of the social context play a key role in the use of informal address terms within specific contexts in the university. In addition, individual preferences and familiarity levels between interlocutors that contribute to the selection of informal address terms within specific university contexts further personalize communication dynamics, highlighting the nuanced nature of interpersonal interactions within academic environments.

Table 3: Social variables that affect the choice of informal address terms within university culture

Friendship and intimacy	Seniority	Familiarity	Gender	Respectability
88.4 %	69.2 %	76.9 %	53.8 %	73 %

Source: Developed by author, survey statistics, 2022

When asked if there are specific contexts in which university students tend to change the above reported address practices in communication, all the respondents indicated that the way they address someone (and vice versa) is dependent on the context in which they are interacting. The participants had also specified that they usually tend to change their preferences in addressing colleagues within the university when doing academic presentations in classrooms, attending to informal gatherings, club events and collective workshops, and referring to their colleagues in the presence of academic staff, senior students and unknown people etc. It is clear that these particular settings made a change due to the formality of the events and the compliance with lesser solidarity during work-related and academic-oriented interactions. As indicated in Table 4, when they were further asked about their most preferred term by which they should be addressed by colleagues in different interactional settings at university, a majority of the respondents stated that they would prefer one particular term of address due to the unique identity and familiarity it provides. Others, however, were comfortable with being addressed by multiple terms, on one hand, with the consideration of the choices of the interlocutors; and on the other hand, for the avoidance of misunderstandings arising from the identification of people with the same names. Thus, the heterogeneity of address behaviour can avoid crises in communication springing from the efforts to identify people with the same or multiple names, while enabling the speakers to arrive at multiple interpretations based on universal standards (Awoonor-Aziaku, 2021; Braun, 1988).

Table 4: Preference of using informal address terms

With one particular term of address in all settings	Comfortable with being addressed by multiple terms
53.8 %	46.2 %

Source: Developed by author, survey statistics, 2022

To ascertain the extent to which UOC FOA students' use of different address terms suggest the degree of solidarity governed behaviour, the participants were also questioned on how they would possibly address a colleague at the first meeting (assuming that the respondent has not communicated with the addressee before, but knows the

way he/she is being addressed by the others). It is worth noticing that the prosoponyms are the choice of the majority in such a situation, as indicated in Table 5 below. Appellatives and 'campus cards' showed an equal number of preferential responses, whereas several other responses suggested that it depends on the addressee's request and how he/she would seem familiar and friendly to the respondent (Table 5). As a whole, it is observed that the broader cultural and linguistic norms prevalent within the university community shape individuals' perceptions and choices regarding informal address terms where these aspects reflect collective values and beliefs, impacting the social dynamics of communication and interaction among members of the academic community. Therefore, these findings foreground the idea that numerous social and psychological facts including first impressions, attitudes and judgments made upon each interlocutor's speech and disposition influence the selection of a particular address form or forms in a specific conversation or other informal interaction.

Table 5: Terms used to address a colleague in the first meeting

Prosoponyms	Appellatives	' Campus cards'	Kinship terms	Depends on the addressee and situation
84.6 %	42.3 %	42.3 %	26.9 %	88.4 %

Source: Developed by author, survey statistics, 2022

In summation, the participants' overall ideas on different informal address practices among university students denoted that as long as the addressee is comfortable with the particular terms and is not hurt or disrespected by their usage, such terms can establish a strong sense of affection, friendship, and fraternity among students not only in their academic life but also in their after-university life since they will be good memories to cherish. Presented below are excerpts from the survey which demonstrate some of the respondents' opinions in this regard:

**F 6:** *Some terms which are generally considered as rude/ impolite might be the signs of strong, intimate, long-lasting bonds among close friends. So, it depends on how each person communicates with others in close and familiar manners.*

**F 20:** *It is better to have such ways of informal addressing as they show the level of intimacy and how far the fraternity has developed within such a short period of time spent within the university.*

**M 6:** *I think it's a subjective matter for everyone as each have their own ways to communicate with others according to their preferences and closeness.*

**M 17:** *In interactions with my fellow colleagues, I have largely noticed that using nicknames and cards or a typical*

*term like 'machang' make them engage in more fruitful and friendly conversations as they sense strong intimacy in such terms.*

Lee and Cho (2013) observe that the degree of solidarity, closeness and intimacy is greatly implied by the inherently reciprocal relationships shared among the members belonging to a culturally defined social group. Similarly, as it is evident from the responses above, informal address practices used in UOC FOA culture profoundly reveal the interlocutors' identities, psychological stances and impressions as well as the choices depending on the nature of social relations and conversation-specific circumstances. Furthermore, these practices highlight the adaptability and flexibility of language use, as individuals adjust their address choices based on the nature of social relations and specific conversational circumstances. This adaptability underscores the complex interplay between language, culture, and interpersonal dynamics within the university community, shaping the ways in which individuals navigate social interactions and construct their social identities.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the data gathered from the participants of this study, it is evident that the address practices among university students in interactions governed by solidarity behaviour are primarily characterised by sociocultural specificities and attitudinal viewpoints of the interlocutors. Since communities with like-minded and similar-dispositioned individuals are the core of the reciprocal solidarity semantic, the employment of informal terms of address as a crucial aspect of language use within multicultural settings can be regarded as a means of identifying the dynamics of social mobility and interculturality. In addition, this particular linguistic behaviour, according to Brown and Gilman (1960), further entails the levels of power equivalents and mutual use of familiar forms, which are the decisive factors in determining the degree of solidarity established among the speakers. In this regard, informal address strategies among Sri Lankan university students encode the solidarity-governed relationships and attitudes of interlocutors, in terms of their multitude of distinctive usages being substantially open to multicultural, intercultural, and sub-cultural variations. Therefore, the diversity of patterns of address employed by university students in informal interactions and their context-specific preferences and usages greatly provide insights into the fact that interpersonal and intercultural relationships involving friendship, intimacy, and solidarity are socially and strategically constructed.

The verbal behaviour of UOC FOA students identified in this research about the employment of personal address terms, appellatives, honorifics, 'campus cards', kinship terms, and compound phrases are greatly reflective of their approaches to fostering and negotiating effective communication as members of a specific university community. Owing to the fact that UOC FOA attracts students from all over Sri Lanka belonging to a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural populace, the usage of informal address terms among themselves becomes a prominent indicator of a linguistically enriched culture within the university. The very complexity and variety of address strategies they adopt constantly embody the social reality behind the choices of informal address practices from their own perspectives and



shed light on how language is used and understood in colloquial academic encounters. Furthermore, considering the extent to which the solidarity is maintained in their use of address practices in informal interactions, the examination of personal preferences in conversational shifts foregrounds the notion that the dimensions such as the degree of circumstances, intimacy, familiarity, seniority, deference, and formality constantly bring about the structures of values that shape linguistic forms, social contexts and dynamics of intercultural communication elicited by their specific usages. Consequently, it is worth emphasising that, while exhibiting intimate, amiable, and unified communions shared among interlocutors, the semantic parameters of solidarity as observed in informal address practices employed by university students in Sri Lanka are remarkably emblematic of the realistic social standards and norms embedded within their respective cultural contexts.

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