



COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN INDIGENOUS RITUAL NEGOTIATION: EVIDENCE FROM NIAS BRIDEWEALTH DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines bridewealth negotiation; Nias discourse; ethnography of communication; indigenous speech community; ritual language; Li Niha Island, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Despite its linguistic richness, no previous study has analyzed böwö through communicative competence or ethnographic communication theory, leaving a significant gap in applied linguistics. This study employs a qualitative ethnographic design grounded in Hymes' (1974) Ethnography of Communication and Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence framework. Data were collected through participant observation across five ritual ceremonies, eight hours of Li Niha discourse recordings, and semi-structured interviews with twenty community members, including ere (ritual spokespersons), family heads, and customary elders. Analysis proceeded through three layers: the SPEAKING model to map speech event structure, the Canale-Swain four-component framework to identify competence manifestations, and thematic analysis to interpret cultural patterns. Findings reveal that amadola (Nias proverbs) function as primary strategic tools encoding collective solidarity, conflict avoidance, and social hierarchy. All four competence components — grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic — are manifested in böwö, with sociolinguistic and strategic competence emerging as most salient. Crucially, the analysis identifies a fifth dimension absent from existing models: ritual-cultural competence, defined as the capacity to deploy genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register, and adat norms as communicative resources. This study extends communicative competence theory into indigenous ritual contexts, contributes primary data from an understudied Austronesian community, and supports documentation and revitalization of Li Niha as living cultural heritage.

Keywords: *communicative competence; bridewealth negotiation; Nias discourse; ethnography of communication; indigenous speech community; ritual language; Li Niha*

INTRODUCTION

Among the Ono Niha people of Nias Island, North Sumatra, Indonesia, the negotiation of bridewealth, locally known as *böwö* is not merely an economic transaction between two families. It is a highly choreographed verbal performance through which social alliances are constructed, hierarchies are affirmed, and cultural values are transmitted across generations. At the heart of this performance lies a sophisticated communicative system: one in which ritual spokespersons, known as *ere*, must navigate genealogical knowledge, ceremonial registers, and layers of implicit *adat* (customary law) norms, all while managing the face needs of both parties through the strategic deployment of *amaedola*, or Nias proverbs. The communicative demands of this ritual are extraordinary, yet they have remained virtually invisible to applied linguistics scholarship.

The Ono Niha constitute one of the largest indigenous groups in western Indonesia, with a population of approximately 900,000 concentrated primarily on Nias Island and the Batu Islands, off the western coast of North Sumatra. Their language, Li Niha, is an Austronesian language spoken by approximately 700,000 people and classified as vulnerable on the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Despite its relatively large speaker base, Li Niha remains severely under-documented in linguistic scholarship, with existing studies largely confined to phonological and morphological description (Brown, 2005; Sundermann, 1905). The pragmatic, discursive, and sociolinguistic dimensions of Li Niha, particularly in its most culturally salient contexts, have received almost no systematic scholarly attention.

Central to Nias social life is the *böwö* ceremony, a multi-phase ritual negotiation in which representatives of the groom's family formally offer bridewealth to the bride's family. The ceremony unfolds across several distinct phases, from the opening declaration of intent and initial negotiation of terms, through deliberation of value, to the climactic phase of ratification, in which both parties affirm their newly formed alliance. Each phase is governed by strict communicative norms: only the designated *ere* (ritual spokesperson) may speak on behalf of each family; utterances are expected to follow established genre conventions; and the deployment of *amadola* serves as the primary instrument for managing negotiation, expressing social values, and navigating



the delicate terrain of face-work between the two parties. Far from being a peripheral folk practice, the *böwö* ceremony functions as the central mechanism through which kinship networks are constructed and social capital is circulated within Nias society (Beatty, 1992; Hammerle, 1999; Schröder, 1917).

The concept of communicative competence (CC), broadly understood as the knowledge of not only the linguistic code but also what to say, to whom, and in what manner and circumstances, has been a foundational construct in applied linguistics since Hymes' (1972) seminal critique of Chomsky's (1965) competence-performance dichotomy. The subsequent operationalization of CC by Canale and Swain (1980) into four components grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence has generated an extensive body of research across educational, institutional, and professional settings. However, despite decades of theoretical refinement (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 2007), applications of the CC framework remain overwhelmingly concentrated in formal educational contexts, particularly second and foreign language teaching and assessment. The application of CC theory to indigenous, non-Western ritual settings where communicative success depends not on mastery of a taught curriculum but on the internalization of culturally embedded norms inaccessible to the uninitiated remains a significant and underexplored theoretical frontier.

Research on language in ritual contexts in Southeast Asia has made important contributions, particularly on Javanese speech levels (Errington, 1988), Balinese ceremonial language (Zurbuchen, 1987), and the verbal art of Malay adat discourse (Grijns, 1991). Studies of bridewealth negotiation discourse more broadly, including work in sub-Saharan Africa (Irvine, 1989), Papua New Guinea (Merlan & Rumsey, 1991), and the Pacific (Duranti, 1994) have demonstrated that such rituals constitute rich communicative events in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), with identifiable structures, participant roles, and genre conventions. Nevertheless, the Nias bridewealth ceremony has not been examined as a communicative event in this tradition, and Li Niha ritual speech has not been analysed from the perspective of communicative competence.

Despite the linguistic richness and social significance of the *böwö* ceremony, no study to date has systematically examined how communicative competence is manifested in Nias bridewealth negotiation discourse, nor has any research applied the framework of ethnographic communication to Li Niha ritual language. This lacuna is doubly significant: it represents both an empirical gap the absence of any discourse-level documentation of Li Niha in its most culturally elaborate form and a theoretical gap the failure to test and potentially extend the CC framework beyond the Euro-American educational contexts in which it was developed.

Research Questions and Objectives

Guided by the foregoing problem statement, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What components of communicative competence are manifested in the bridewealth negotiation discourse of the Ono Niha people?

RQ2: How do participants deploy linguistic and cultural resources particularly *amadola* to achieve communicative goals within the ritual negotiation?

RQ3: In what ways does the *böwö* negotiation function as a speech event that reproduces and reinforces Nias cultural values and social hierarchies?

Correspondingly, this study aims to: (1) identify and describe the components of communicative competence exhibited in Nias bridewealth negotiation; (2) analyse the pragmatic and sociolinguistic functions of *amaedola* as primary strategic instruments in the negotiation process; (3) interpret the cultural meanings encoded in negotiation discourse through the analytical lens of Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model; and (4) extend the theoretical scope of communicative competence to encompass non-Western, indigenous ritual speech communities.

Significance of the Study

This study makes contributions at three levels. Theoretically, it challenges the implicit Eurocentric assumptions embedded in existing CC models by demonstrating that competent participation in the Nias *böwö* ritual requires a dimension of communicative knowledge encompassing genealogical expertise, ceremonial register mastery, and adat norm internalization that is not captured by any of the four components in the Canale-Swain model. We propose this as ritual-cultural competence, a fifth dimension that extends CC theory into indigenous ritual contexts. Empirically, this study provides the



first systematic discourse-level analysis of Li Niha in its ritual form, contributing primary linguistic data from an understudied Austronesian speech community to the international record. Practically, the findings support ongoing efforts to document and revitalize Li Niha as a living cultural heritage, and offer a model for similar studies of indigenous ritual discourse across the Indonesian archipelago and the broader Austronesian-speaking world.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of communicative competence and ethnographic communication, situates the study within the literature on ritual negotiation discourse, and presents the conceptual framework guiding the analysis. Section 3 outlines the qualitative ethnographic methodology employed, including data collection procedures, analytical layers, and reflexivity considerations. Section 4 presents the findings organized around the five identified components of communicative competence. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for CC theory and for the ethnographic study of indigenous ritual language. Section 6 concludes the paper by summarizing contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Competence: Theoretical Evolution

The concept of communicative competence emerged as a direct response to the limitations of Chomsk's (1965) notion of linguistic competence, which posited an idealized, context-free knowledge of grammatical rules as the primary object of linguistic inquiry. Hymes (1972) challenged this abstraction, arguing that a speaker's knowledge of language necessarily includes knowledge of its social and cultural conditions of use—that is, knowing not only what is grammatically possible, but also what is socially appropriate, contextually feasible, and communicatively performed. This reorientation placed language firmly within its social context and laid the groundwork for a sociolinguistic theory of communicative ability.

The most influential operationalization of CC in applied linguistics was proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), who identified four distinct but interrelated components: (1) grammatical competence knowledge of the linguistic code, including

phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexis; (2) sociolinguistic competence knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules governing language use in relation to context, participants, and purpose; (3) discourse competence the ability to produce and interpret coherent stretches of language through cohesive and coherent organization; and (4) strategic competence the verbal and non-verbal strategies speakers employ to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance communicative effectiveness. This four-component model has been enormously productive in language teaching and assessment research, generating decades of empirical investigation and theoretical refinement.

Bachman (1990) later proposed a revised framework that distinguishes between organizational competence (grammatical and textual) and pragmatic competence (illocutionary and sociolinguistic), emphasizing the functional and interactional dimensions of language use. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) further restructured the model, foregrounding discourse competence as the central organizing component around which grammatical, sociolinguistic, actional, and strategic competences orbit. More recently, scholars working within multilingual and plurilingual frameworks (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009; Canagarajah, 2013) have argued that CC models developed within monolingual, Western, formal educational assumptions are inadequate for capturing the full range of communicative repertoires available to speakers in multilingual and culturally diverse communities.

Despite these critiques and extensions, the application of CC theory to indigenous ritual contexts where communicative appropriateness is determined not by institutional curricula but by embodied cultural knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship and socialization remains largely unexplored. The present study addresses this gap by applying the Canale-Swain framework to a non-Western, non-educational communicative event, and by proposing a fifth component, ritual-cultural competence, grounded in empirical data from the Nias böwö ceremony.

Ethnography of Communication and the SPEAKING Model

The ethnography of communication, developed principally by Hymes (1974) and elaborated by Saviile-Troike (2003), provides the methodological and theoretical framework for analyzing language as embedded in social and cultural life. Rather than treating language as an autonomous formal system, the ethnographic approach studies



communicative behavior as it occurs naturally within speech communities — that is, groups of people who share norms and conventions for the interpretation and production of speech (Hymes, 1974).

Central to this framework is the distinction between speech situations, speech events, and speech acts. A speech event is a socially recognized, rule-governed activity constituted by speech such as a sermon, a courtroom hearing, or, in the present case, a bridewealth negotiation. Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model provides a systematic framework for analyzing the components of any speech event: Setting and Scene (the physical and psychological context), Participants (speaker roles and relationships), Ends (goals and outcomes), Act sequence (message form and content), Key (the tone or manner of communication), Instrumentalities (channel and code), Norms of interaction and interpretation, and Genre (the type of communicative event). This framework has been productively applied to ritual speech across diverse cultural contexts, including Wolof praise poetry (Irvine, 1989), Samoan political oratory (Duranti, 1994), and Javanese ceremonial registers (Errington, 1988).

Saville-Troike (2003) emphasizes that the ethnography of communication requires sustained immersion in the community under study, attention to the emic — that is, insider perspective on communicative norms, and rigorous documentation of naturally occurring speech. This methodological orientation is particularly appropriate for studying the Nias *bōwō* ceremony, where communicative norms are largely implicit, transmitted through socialization rather than explicit instruction, and inaccessible to outside observers without extended community engagement.

Complementary theoretical resources drawn upon in this study include speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which provides tools for analyzing the illocutionary force of ritual utterances, and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which illuminates the face-work strategies through which participants manage social relationships in the negotiation. The concept of verbal art as performance (Bauman, 1977) is also relevant, as it frames *amaedola* deployment as a communicative act that indexes the speaker's cultural competence and social identity within the ritual frame.

Ritual Language and Negotiation Discourse

Ritual speech has been the subject of sustained anthropological and linguistic attention since Bloch's (1975) foundational observation that formalized, constrained speech characterized by restricted syntactic options, obligatory conventional content, and elevated register serves as a mechanism for the exercise and reproduction of social authority. In contrast to everyday conversation, ritual speech is typically non-negotiable in form: speakers are expected to reproduce established formulae rather than generate novel utterances, and departure from convention constitutes a communicative failure with significant social consequences.

Negotiation discourse, by contrast, has been analyzed primarily in organizational and institutional contexts (Putnam & Roloff, 1992), with attention to argument structure, persuasion strategies, and managing competing interests. The intersection of ritual and negotiation, as in bridewealth ceremonies, creates a distinctive communicative space in which the constraints of ritual formality must be reconciled with the interactional demands of achieving a material outcome. Studies of bridewealth negotiation in Papua New Guinea (Merlan & Rumsey, 1991), sub-Saharan Africa (Irvine, 1989), and highland Southeast Asia (Rosaldo, 1973) have identified the central role of indirect speech, proverbial language, and formulaic expression in managing the tension between ritual convention and negotiated flexibility.

Proverbs and proverbial speech analogous to the *amaedola* examined in the present study have been identified across many cultures as key instruments of indirect communication in high-stakes social interactions (Yankah, 1995; Schipper, 2008). Their use allows speakers to articulate sensitive positions, assert social values, and perform cultural identity without the directness that might threaten face or violate ritual decorum. The pragmatic functions of proverbial speech in negotiation contexts—including solidarity-building, conflict mitigation, hierarchy ratification, and consensus-seeking—constitute a form of strategic competence deeply embedded in cultural knowledge.

Nias Language and Cultural Studies: The State of the Field

Li Niha belongs to the Austronesian language family, specifically to the Barrier Islands branch of the Malayo-Polynesian subgroup (Blust, 2013). Approximately 700,000 people speak it on Nias Island, the Batu Islands, and in diaspora communities across



Indonesia. Typologically, Li Niha is notable for its verb-initial word order (VSO), its complex system of morphophonological alternations, and its elaborate system of speech levels that index social rank and ritual context (Brown, 2005).

Existing linguistic documentation of Li Niha is sparse and, with the exception of Brown's (2005) comprehensive grammar, largely confined to nineteenth and early twentieth-century missionary scholarship (Sundermann, 1905; Lagemann, 1893). Cultural studies of Nias society have provided valuable ethnographic context for understanding the social functions of the *böwö* ceremony (Schröder, 1917; Beatty, 1992; Hammerle, 1999; Telaumbanua, 1997), including detailed accounts of its social structure, the role of the ere, and the significance of *böwö* in constructing and maintaining kinship networks. However, none of these studies engages with the linguistic form of *böwö* discourse, and no study has analyzed the communicative norms, speech genres, or pragmatic strategies operative in the ceremony from an applied linguistics or ethnographic communication perspective.

This absence is particularly striking given the richness of the communicative resources deployed in the *böwö* ceremony, as the data analyzed in the present study show. The strategic deployment of *amaedola* across multiple phases of the ritual from solidarity-building expressions in the opening phase to genealogical references and face-ratifying metaphors in the closing phase constitutes a communicative system of considerable complexity that merits sustained linguistic analysis.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks — the Canale-Swain (1980) model of communicative competence and Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model of ethnographic communication as mutually reinforcing analytical lenses for examining the *böwö* ceremony as a speech event. The SPEAKING model provides the macro-level structural framework for identifying and describing the components of the speech event its setting, participant roles, communicative ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. The CC framework then operates at the micro-level, providing the analytical categories for examining how participants' linguistic behavior within the event manifests and requires different dimensions of communicative knowledge.

The relationship between the two frameworks is not merely additive but synergistic: the SPEAKING model reveals what kind of communicative event *böwö* is and what norms govern participation in it; the CC framework reveals what kinds of knowledge a competent participant must possess in order to fulfill their communicative role within that event. Together, they generate the analytical space in which the proposed fifth component, ritual-cultural competence, becomes visible as a necessary and distinct dimension of communicative knowledge that is not reducible to the four components of the Canale-Swain model.

This study defines ritual-cultural competence as the capacity to deploy genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register, and adat norms as communicative resources within a ritual frame. It encompasses three sub-dimensions: (a) genealogical knowledge, the ability to invoke and interpret references to family history, relational history, and kinship obligations; (b) ceremonial register mastery, the ability to produce and recognize the prosodic, lexical, and syntactic features of Li Niha ritual speech; and (c) adat norm internalization, the tacit knowledge of when to speak, what to say, and how to interpret the speech of others in accordance with the implicit rules of the *böwö* ceremony. This framework guides the analysis presented in Section 4.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic design situated within the tradition of the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2003). The ethnographic approach is epistemologically motivated: communicative competence in an indigenous ritual context cannot be adequately understood through decontextualized elicitation, survey instruments, or experimental methods. It requires sustained engagement with the community under study, observation of naturally occurring communicative behavior, and interpretation grounded in community members' insider perspective. The study is accordingly positioned within an interpretivist and constructivist epistemological framework, treating meaning as socially constructed and communicative norms as emergent from and reproduced through interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).



The researcher acknowledges positionality as a significant factor in the research process. As a researcher engaging with a speech community whose communicative norms are deeply embedded in tradition, the researcher occupies an outsider position with respect to the ritual knowledge required for competent participation in the *böwö* ceremony. This positionality necessitates particular methodological care including extended community engagement, reliance on community insiders as interpretive collaborators, and sustained reflexivity throughout the research process. The potential for misinterpretation arising from this position is addressed through the triangulation strategies and trustworthiness procedures described in Section 3.4.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in a community on Nias Island, North Sumatra, Indonesia, where the *böwö* ceremony continues to be practiced in its traditional multi-phase form. The site was selected through purposive sampling on the basis of the community's active maintenance of *böwö* practices and the availability of experienced *ere* willing to participate in the research. The relevant institutional research ethics committee approved the study, and all participants provided informed consent before data collection. In line with the principle of reciprocal benefit, the research team shared findings with the community upon completion.

The primary participants in the study are two ritual spokespersons — *Sowatō*, the *ketua adat* (customary chief) representing the bride's family, and Tome, the *ketua adat* representing the groom's family whose negotiation discourse constitutes the primary data corpus for this study. Both participants are experienced *ere* who have officiated at numerous *böwö* ceremonies and are recognized within the community as authoritative practitioners of ritual *Li Niha* speech. Additional data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with twenty community members, including family heads, customary elders, and female participants in the ceremony, providing contextual and interpretive perspectives on the communicative norms observed in the ritual discourse.

Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary methods in accordance with the triangulation principles of qualitative ethnographic research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). First, I conducted participant observation across five böwö ceremonies, during which I recorded detailed field notes using the SPEAKING model as a structured observation template. This allowed for systematic documentation of the setting, participant configurations, communicative ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres operative in each ceremony.

Second, I recorded negotiation discourse during the ceremonies with the explicit consent of all participants, yielding approximately eight hours of naturally occurring Li Niha ritual speech. These recordings capture discourse from multiple phases of the ceremony, including the opening declaration phase, the deliberation phase, and the climactic ratification phase the last of which is represented in the primary data analyzed in this study. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty community members to elicit emic perspectives on the communicative norms of the böwö ceremony, the role and training of the ere, the significance of *amaedola*, and the criteria for communicative competence recognized within the community. Fourth, relevant documentary sources including written accounts of böwö conventions (fonambö), missionary records of Li Niha speech, and community-produced materials on adat practice, were analyzed to provide historical and institutional context for the negotiation discourse.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through three sequential but iterative analytical layers. In the first layer, the SPEAKING model was applied to the full corpus of field notes and recordings to produce a structural description of the böwö ceremony as a speech event, identifying its constitutive components and the norms governing each. In the second layer, the Canale-Swain CC framework was applied to the transcribed negotiation discourse to identify instances of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, as well as communicative behaviors that these four categories could not adequately account for. In the third layer, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the full corpus — including interview data and field notes to identify recurrent cultural patterns and meanings in the negotiation discourse, with particular attention to the functions of *amaedola* across different phases of the ceremony.



Transcription of Li Niha discourse followed the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie, Haspelmath & Bickel, 2015), producing three-line interlinear representations comprising the original Li Niha utterance, morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, and a free English translation. All translations were produced in collaboration with a native-speaker research assistant and verified through back-translation to ensure semantic accuracy. The trustworthiness of the analysis was established through member checking, returning preliminary interpretations to key community informants for verification; peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with Austronesian linguistics; and the provision of thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) throughout the findings presentation.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexive engagement with the researcher's positionality is a methodological and ethical requirement of contemporary ethnographic research (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Milner, 2007). As noted above, the researcher occupies an outsider position with respect to Nias adat and the communicative norms of the böwö ceremony. This position carries both limitations and advantages. On the one hand, the researcher lacks the embodied, socialized knowledge of Li Niha ritual speech that characterizes competent community participants — a limitation that necessarily shapes the interpretive horizon of the analysis. On the other hand, the outsider position enables the researcher to make explicit what community insiders may take for granted, rendering visible the communicative norms and competences that are tacit and unremarkable to participants themselves.

To minimize interpretive bias arising from this positionality, the researcher engaged in sustained community immersion during data collection, maintained a reflexive research journal documenting interpretive decisions and their rationale, collaborated closely with native-speaker informants in all phases of transcription and translation, and submitted preliminary findings to community review. These procedures do not eliminate the researcher's interpretive role, but they ensure the analysis is grounded in the data and accountable to the community whose practices it represents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings organized around the five components of communicative competence identified in the *böwö* negotiation discourse: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and the newly proposed ritual-cultural competence. The findings are grounded in naturally occurring Li Niha discourse drawn from two primary data sources: (1) a corpus of *amaedola* recorded across the opening and deliberation phases of the ceremony, and (2) the transcribed negotiation discourse between *Sowatō* (ketua adat representing the bride's family) and *Tome* (ketua adat representing the groom's family) during the climactic ratification phase. Findings are presented with interlinear glosses following the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie, Haspelmath & Bickel, 2015).

The Böwö Ceremony as Speech Event: Setting and Participants

Analyzed through the SPEAKING model (Hymes, 1974), the *böwö* ceremony is a highly structured speech event with clearly defined components that govern all aspects of communicative participation. The Setting is the bride's family home, arranged to receive the groom's delegation in a formal spatial configuration: the bride's family occupies the interior of the house, while the groom's family enters as guests. The Scene is one of ceremonial seriousness tempered by expressions of goodwill—the Key of the event oscillates between the solemn (during declarations of intent and value) and the warmly affiliative (during proverb exchanges and alliance ratification).

The Participants' structure of *böwö* is among its most distinctive communicative features. Direct speech between the two families is strictly mediated: only the designated ere may speak for each party. Family heads, elders, and other attendees remain communicatively silent even when they are the subjects of the negotiation. This participant architecture reflects a communicative norm of extraordinary rigidity — one that immediately distinguishes *böwö* from everyday negotiation and marks it as a specialized speech event requiring specific communicative competence.

Table 1. Participant Roles and Communicative Functions in the Böwö Ceremony



Participant	Social Role	Communicative Role	Speaking Rights
Sowatō	Ketua adat — bride's family	Primary spokesperson (ere)	Full — initiates and responds
Tome	Ketua adat — groom's family	Primary spokesperson (ere)	Full — responds and proposes
Family heads	Heads of both families	Ritual witnesses	None — silent observers
Customary elders	Community authorities	Legitimizing presence	Limited — only if ere defers
Female participants	Women of both families	Ceremonial attendants	None in negotiation phase

The Ends of the ceremony are both transactional (the agreement on a *bōwō* value and its transfer) and relational (the construction of a durable alliance between two kinship networks). The Instrumentalities are exclusively verbal and oral — Li Niha in its formal, ceremonial register with no written documents produced during the negotiation itself. The Norms of interaction are strictly implicit: they are not stated at the outset but are known to competent participants through prior socialization in adat practice. The Genre of *bōwō* negotiation is a composite form combining elements of formal oratory, proverbial exchange, and ceremonial declaration.

Grammatical and Discourse Competence in Li Niha Ritual Speech

The negotiation discourse exhibits grammatical competence in its deployment of a specialized ritual register of Li Niha that differs systematically from everyday speech. The most salient features of this register include: the use of archaic lexical items not found in contemporary colloquial Li Niha; a preference for parallel syntactic structures that create rhythmic patterning across utterances; and the use of verb-initial constructions that foreground the action being performed rather than the agent performing it. These features are exemplified in the opening utterance of *Sowatō*:

(1a)

Andrō ya'ia le Balugu, ena'ō na tenga oroisa ba ena'ō na tenga bōwō

true 1SG PART chief.of.adat NEG.COND not exist decree and NEG.COND not exist
bridewealth

“That is correct, head of adat — were it not for the decree and were it not for
the bridewealth”

The utterance opens with the affirmative particle *andrō* (that is correct/true'), a discourse-initial marker that functions to ratify the preceding turn while simultaneously claiming the floor for an extended contribution. The conditional construction *ena'ō na tenga... ba ena'ō na tenga* ('were it not for... and were it not for...') employs a syntactically parallel, rhetorical structure characteristic of formal Li Niha oratory. This parallelism is not incidental: it is a productive grammatical resource in *bōwō* discourse, organizing content into paired units that are perceptually foregrounded and mnemonically stable.

Discourse competence is evidenced in the coherent organization of extended speaking turns across the negotiation. Each turn by *Sowatō* follows a recognizable three-part structure: (1) an affirmative opening that acknowledges the interlocutor's prior contribution; (2) a substantive elaboration deploying *amaedola* or historical reference; and (3) a relational closing that projects the ongoing nature of the alliance. Tome's turns, by contrast, are consistently shorter and follow a two-part pattern: (1) affirmative ratification; (2) a single, densely metaphorical *amaedola*. This asymmetry in discourse organization reflects the parties' different communicative roles of the two parties — *Sowatō* as the authoritative host-negotiator and Tome as the respectful petitioner.

Turn-taking in *bōwō* is governed by implicit norms that do not involve explicit floor-allocation signals such as direct questions or gaze direction. Instead, turns are demarcated by the completion of a recognizable structural unit — typically the delivery of an *amaedola* or the arrival at a formulaic closing phrase. Interruption is absent from the corpus, and each speaker waits for the clear completion of the prior turn before taking the floor. This orderly turn-taking constitutes evidence of shared discourse competence: both participants possess and exercise the knowledge required to manage the sequential organization of talk in this ritual context.

Sociolinguistic Competence: Register, Honorifics, and Face-Work



Sociolinguistic competence, the knowledge of sociolinguistic rules governing appropriate language use in relation to context, participants, and purpose (Canale & Swain, 1980), is pervasively manifest in the *bōwō* negotiation corpus. Three features are particularly salient: the consistent use of honorific address terms, the maintenance of formal register throughout the ceremony, and the deployment of indirect speech strategies to manage face-threatening acts.

Both Sowatō and Tome use the honorific address term Balugu (‘head of adat’ or ‘chief of customary law’) as a vocative throughout their turns. Its use is not merely referential but performative: each deployment of Balugu constitutes an act of public status ratification, acknowledging the interlocutor’s authority and positioning the speaker as a respectful participant in the exchange. This is illustrated in Tome's second turn:

(2)

Duhu ae da'ō ba Balugu, hiza sinali sisambua sa bu'ubu'u

indeed EMPH DEM.PROX PART chief.of.adat DEM.DIST rope one.that has.knot

"Indeed, that is so, head of adat — that is indeed the rope that has a knot"

The utterance opens with the emphatic affirmative *duhu ae da'ō*, a stronger ratification marker than the *andrō* used by Sowatō, calibrated to signal wholehearted agreement rather than measured acknowledgment. Balugu's immediate address before delivering the *amaedola* positions the proverb as an offering to a superior rather than an assertion among equals—a sociolinguistic calibration that manages the asymmetrical status relationship between the two parties.

The ceremony's formal register is maintained through the consistent avoidance of colloquial Li Niha features, the use of complete syntactic structures rather than elliptical constructions, and the systematic deployment of ceremonial formulae at turn openings and closings. Sowatō's third turn, the longest in the corpus, exemplifies this: it sustains a formal register across an extended multi-clause utterance, moving from relational affirmation through historical reference to prospective alliance-building, without once lapsing into the reduced syntactic forms characteristic of informal speech. Face-work constitutes a central dimension of sociolinguistic competence in the *bōwō* ceremony. Negotiating bridewealth value involves an inherent face threat: the groom's

family must agree to a payment that publicly quantifies the bride's social worth, while the bride's family must accept an offer without appearing either greedy or insufficiently valuing of their daughter. Both parties manage this tension through systematic indirectness — never stating demands or concessions explicitly, but encoding them in *amaedola* whose proverbial form provides plausible deniability and shared interpretive latitude.

Strategic Competence: The Pragmatic Functions of Amadola

Strategic competence, the deployment of verbal strategies to achieve communicative goals, manage communication breakdowns, and enhance message effectiveness (Canale & Swain, 1980), is the most extensively evidenced component of communicative competence in the *böwö* corpus. Its primary vehicle is the *amaedola*, the proverbial expressions that constitute the dominant speech genre of the ceremony. Corpus analysis identifies six distinct pragmatic functions of *amaedola* deployment across the two ritual phases.

The first function is solidarity encoding. In the opening and deliberation phases, *amaedola* are deployed to construct a frame of collective responsibility that conditions the negotiation as a cooperative rather than adversarial endeavor:

(3)

Aoha noro nilului waeha, aoha noro nilului waoso alisi tefadaya-daya hulu tafawolo-wolo

burden if carried.together water burden if carried.together soil lighter-REDUP become lighter-REDUP

“A burden carried together in water, a burden carried together in soil becomes far lighter”

This *amaedola*, deployed in the deliberation phase, reframes the *böwö* payment as a shared burden rather than an extraction — a strategic repositioning that reduces the face threat to the groom's family while implicitly invoking a norm of mutual obligation. Its deployment at this juncture demonstrates sophisticated strategic timing: the proverb is introduced precisely when the negotiation might otherwise become adversarial, functioning as a cooperative intervention that resets the interactional frame.



The second function is conflict avoidance. When positions risk hardening into incompatible stances, *amaedola* provide an indirect mechanism for calling for flexibility without directly criticizing the interlocutor:

(4)

Böi fadöli ya 'aetu lulu fa'agombuyu

NEG.IMP stubborn 2SG.alone path become.obstinate

“Do not be the only one to be stubborn on the path”

This *amadola* functions as an indirect directive — a request for compromise encoded in a culturally sanctioned impersonal form that avoids direct face threat. The use of the second-person singular *ya'aetu* (‘you alone’) is strategically ambiguous: it applies equally to either party and thus cannot be received as a personal accusation. This is a paradigmatic example of indirect speech as strategic competence: the communicative goal (requesting flexibility) is achieved through a form that protects both parties’ face. The third function is hierarchy ratification. Several *amadola* in the corpus encode and reinforce the social hierarchies that structure the ceremony and, by extension, Nias society:

(5)

Imane amaedola zatua amuata nifaigi, bua-bua nitönöni

even.though noble elder born high.status slave-REDUP what.is.seen

{“Even though one is born of noble lineage and another of slave stock — what is seen is character”

This *amaedola* performs a subtle but socially significant function: it acknowledges the reality of social hierarchy (the distinction between noble and commoner lineages is structurally embedded in Nias society) while simultaneously invoking a norm of character-based evaluation that transcends it. Its deployment in the negotiation context serves to establish a moral framework within which the *böwö* agreement will be evaluated — not merely in terms of material value, but in terms of the character and integrity demonstrated by both parties in the process.

The fourth function is consensus-building. As the negotiation approaches agreement, *amadola* shift in function from managing tension to consolidating shared ground:

(6)

Awukha namö nasi ebua namö gomo sua-sua zinado

whether eat rice or drink water eventually-REDUP full

“Whether one eats rice or drinks water — eventually, all are satisfied”

This *amadola* signals the approaching end of the deliberation phase by invoking a norm of inevitable sufficiency: whatever the precise terms of the agreement, both parties will ultimately be satisfied. Its deployment at this juncture marks a pragmatic shift from negotiation to ratification, signaling that the speaker is ready to move toward closure. The fifth and sixth functions emerge specifically in the climactic phase represented in the transcribed discourse between *Sowatō* and *Tome*. The fifth function is alliance construction through metaphor. Tome's deployment of maritime and spatial metaphors constitutes a sustained strategic act of identity positioning:

(7)

Owo sandrari sa nowoma, ba mōiga mbōbōgō ba dali zao ni'ogasō

boat pelepah.kelapa POSS 1PL.EXCL and 1PL.EXCL only become part rope anchor
ship big-2SG

“Our boat is of pelepah kelapa, and we are only the rope that anchors your great ship”

This *amaedola* accomplishes multiple communicative acts simultaneously. At the propositional level, it acknowledges the bride's family's superior social position. At the pragmatic level, it performs a face-saving act for the groom's family: by voluntarily adopting the position of the lesser party, Tome preempts any explicit assertion of dominance by *Sowatō*, thus managing the face threat inherent in the status asymmetry. At the relational level, it invokes the metaphor of complementary interdependence — the rope is indispensable to the ship, regardless of the difference in their scale — constructing a positive identity for the groom's family within the asymmetrical relationship.

The sixth function is relational prospection. In the final *amaedola* sequences of the ceremony, both speakers deploy expressions that orient toward the future of the newly constituted alliance:

(8)

Wa tumbu zahatō ba lala we hedehe, wa tumbu zahatō ba lala daroma li



PROG grow closeness PREP way speaking-manner PROG grow closeness PREP way style speech

“Closeness grows from the manner of speaking; closeness grows from the style of speech”

This *amaedola*, deployed by *Sowatō* in the closing phase of the negotiation, performs a retrospective and prospective function simultaneously: it attributes the closeness that has developed between the two families to the quality of their communicative exchange during the ceremony, and it implies that the continuation of this communicative quality will sustain the alliance into the future. In doing so, it elevates the *bōwō* negotiation from a transactional event to a constitutive communicative act — one that does not merely reflect an existing alliance but actively produces it through language.

Ritual-Cultural Competence: A Proposed Fifth Component

The analysis of the *bōwō* corpus reveals a dimension of communicative competence that none of the four components of the Canale-Swain (1980) model can adequately account for. This dimension — which we term ritual-cultural competence — is defined as the capacity to deploy genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register, and adat norms as communicative resources within a ritual frame. Its presence in the corpus is evidenced by three categories of communicative behavior that exceed the explanatory scope of existing CC models.

The first category is genealogical invocation. In her second turn, *Sowatō* deploys a reference that carries extraordinary communicative weight but is entirely opaque to any observer lacking specific knowledge of the relational history between the two families:

(9)

Ba tenga ha ma'ōkhō, ba tenga awena, mbōwō si mezi wa tetou

and not only today and not only recently bridewealth REL given nine times

“And not only today, and not only recently — this is the bridewealth given for the ninth time”

The reference to ‘the ninth time’ (*wa tetou*) is not a poetic exaggeration but a factual genealogical claim: it asserts that the two families have been joined in marriage alliances nine times across their histories. This claim is communicatively potent — it

simultaneously establishes the deep roots of the relationship, creates an obligation of continuity, and positions the current *bōwō* as part of an ongoing historical compact rather than an isolated transaction. Crucially, this communicative act is possible only for a speaker who has detailed genealogical knowledge of both families' histories. No amount of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, or strategic competence in Li Niha would equip an outsider to produce or interpret this utterance appropriately.

The second category is ceremonial register mastery. The corpus contains numerous lexical items and formulaic expressions — including *bola ni'otarawa* ('a place for betel nut in the shape of a basin'), *fonambō*, and *Balugu* — that constitute a specialized ceremonial vocabulary inaccessible to speakers who have not been socialized into adat practice. The ability to deploy these items at appropriate junctures, with appropriate prosody and accompanying gesture, constitutes a dimension of competence that is transmitted through apprenticeship and long-term community participation, not through formal language learning. This is illustrated in Sowatō's reference to:

(10)

Ba zisōkhi makhaita mba mbatō, ba zi so sumange bola ni'otarawa

and REL.bind good.thing ACC family and REL exist honor place.for.betel.basininform

"That which binds good things among family, and where there is honour — the place of the betel basin"

The *bola ni'otarawa* is a ceremonial object of specific cultural significance in Nias adat: it is the vessel in which betel nut is offered to honored guests and marks the formal recognition of a guest's status. Its invocation here is not merely descriptive but performative — it enacts the recognition of Tome's family as honored guests within Sowatō's household and within the adat system. A speaker without knowledge of this object's ceremonial significance could not produce or interpret this utterance as the act of relational recognition it constitutes.

The third category is adat norm internalization. Throughout the corpus, both Sowatō and Tome demonstrate a precise, shared knowledge of the implicit rules governing participation in the ceremony: who speaks when, what topics are appropriate at each phase, how disagreement may be expressed indirectly, and what constitutes an adequate response to an *amaedola*. These norms are nowhere stated explicitly in the interaction; they operate as a shared background knowledge that enables the negotiation to proceed



in an orderly, face-preserving manner. Their existence and operation constitute evidence of a communicative competence that is cultural in its basis and ritual in its application — a competence that is neither reducible to, nor derivable from, the four components of the Canale-Swain model.

Taken together, these three categories of evidence support the proposal of ritual-cultural competence as a fifth, distinct component of communicative competence in indigenous ritual contexts. This component is not a replacement for the Canale-Swain framework but an extension of it: it accounts for the communicative knowledge that is specific to ritual participation in culturally embedded speech communities and that existing models, developed in formal educational contexts, are not designed to capture.

Discussion

The findings in Section 4 provide empirical evidence that speaks directly to both the theoretical framework guiding the analysis and broader debates in applied linguistics about the scope and cultural situatedness of communicative competence. This section interprets the findings in relation to the Canale-Swain (1980) CC model and Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING framework, proposes ritual-cultural competence as a formal theoretical extension, examines the implications of *bōwō* discourse for understanding language, power, and social reproduction in indigenous communities, and positions the study within the comparative literature on ritual negotiation discourse. The section concludes with a frank acknowledgment of the study's limitations.

Communicative Competence in Non-Western Ritual Contexts

The analysis demonstrates unambiguously that all four components of the Canale-Swain (1980) model are operative in Nias *bōwō* discourse. Grammatical competence is manifest in the mastery of Li Niha ritual register — a specialized linguistic code characterized by archaic vocabulary, parallel syntactic structures, and verb-initial constructions that differ markedly from everyday colloquial Li Niha. Sociolinguistic competence is evidenced in the precise calibration of honorific forms, the maintenance of formal register across extended speaking turns, and the deployment of systematic indirectness to manage face-threatening acts inherent in bridewealth negotiation. Discourse competence is reflected in the coherent three-part organization of Sowatō's

turns and the ordered, non-overlapping turn-taking that governs the entire ceremony. Strategic competence, the most extensively evidenced component, operates primarily through the deployment of *amaedola*, aligning with cross-cultural research on the role of proverbial speech in managing communicative complexity in high-stakes ritual interactions (Yankah, 1995; Schipper, 2008).

These findings confirm the cross-cultural applicability of the Canale-Swain model while simultaneously exposing its limitations when applied to indigenous ritual contexts. The model was developed in, and for, formal educational settings, specifically second language acquisition and language teaching, and its four components reflect the communicative demands of those contexts. In the *böwö* ceremony, however, communicative competence is not primarily a matter of mastering a taught curriculum; it is a matter of having internalized, through years of community participation and socialization, a system of cultural knowledge that is nowhere explicitly taught and that cannot be acquired through formal instruction alone. As currently constituted, the model has no category for this dimension of communicative knowledge.

This finding resonates with the broader critique, advanced by scholars working within multilingual and decolonial frameworks (Canagarajah, 2013; Pennycook, 2017), that dominant models of communicative competence embed Eurocentric and monolingual assumptions that render them inadequate for analyzing the communicative practices of speakers in non-Western, indigenous, and postcolonial contexts. The Nias data provide concrete empirical grounding for this theoretical critique: the ere's competence in *böwö* is not more or less than the competence theorized by Canale and Swain—it is qualitatively different in ways the existing model cannot capture.

Ritual-Cultural Competence: Towards a Theoretical Extension

Based on the foregoing analysis, this study proposes ritual-cultural competence as a fifth, distinct component of communicative competence for indigenous ritual speech communities. Ritual-cultural competence is defined as the capacity to deploy genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register, and adat norms as communicative resources within a ritual frame. It encompasses three sub-dimensions that are clearly evidenced in the *böwö* corpus: genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register mastery, and adat norm internalization.



The first sub-dimension — genealogical knowledge — is most powerfully illustrated by *Sowatō*'s invocation of the families' nine-generation marriage history (wa tetou, example 9). This utterance is communicatively opaque to any participant without detailed knowledge of the relational history between the two families. Its force — establishing the current *bōwō* as part of a centuries-long compact rather than a novel transaction — derives entirely from this genealogical knowledge. No formal training in Li Niha grammar, register, or pragmatics would equip a speaker to produce or interpret this utterance as the relational act it constitutes.

The second sub-dimension — ceremonial register mastery — is evidenced in the deployment of items such as *bola ni'otarawa* (example 10), a ceremonial object whose significance is legible only to speakers socialized in Nias adat. The ability to invoke this object at the appropriate juncture, with the appropriate prosodic framing, constitutes a form of communicative knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship and community participation—not through formal language learning. This sub-dimension is analogous to what Bloch (1975) describes as the formalized register of ritual speech: a code whose mastery signals membership in a community of practice and whose deployment enacts social authority.

The third sub-dimension, adat norm internalization, is perhaps the most pervasive and the least visible. Throughout the corpus, both *Sowatō* and *Tome* demonstrate a shared, precise knowledge of the implicit rules of participation: who speaks when, how disagreement may be encoded indirectly, and what constitutes an adequate response to an *amaedola*. These norms are never stated explicitly; their operation constitutes the invisible infrastructure of the negotiation. Their internalization is not the product of explicit instruction but of long-term community membership — precisely the kind of knowledge that Bourdieu (1991) describes as *habitus*: durable, transposable dispositions that are acquired through practice and that generate practice without being consciously articulated.

Ritual-cultural competence, as proposed here, is not a replacement for the Canale-Swain framework but an extension of it, a fifth component that the existing model cannot generate from its own resources. It is specific to ritual participation in

culturally embedded speech communities, and its addition to the CC framework significantly expands the model's analytical purchase on the communicative practices of indigenous and non-Western speech communities. Future research might test the generalizability of this component across other ritual negotiation contexts in the Indonesian archipelago including Toba Batak adat, Toraja death rituals, and Ngaju Dayak ceremonial discourse and assess the degree to which its sub-dimensions vary across cultural contexts.

Böwö as Speech Event: The SPEAKING Model Revisited

Applying Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model to the böwö ceremony demonstrates both the framework's productivity and its limits. On the productive side, the model provides a systematic and comprehensive account of the ceremony's macro-level structure: it identifies the spatial and temporal setting, clarifies the highly asymmetrical participant structure, specifies the dual (transactional and relational) ends of the negotiation, describes the act sequence across phases, accounts for the oscillation in key between the solemn and the affiliative, identifies Li Niha formal register as the exclusive instrumentality, articulates the implicit norms of interaction, and classifies the genre as a composite form combining oratory, proverbial exchange, and ceremonial declaration. No existing study of Nias communicative practice has achieved this level of systematic structural description.

On the limiting side, the SPEAKING model, as a macro-level descriptive framework, does not provide tools for micro-level analysis of how communicative competence is enacted within the speech event. It describes the event's components but does not explain how participants know what to do within each component, or what knowledge they must possess to participate competently. This is precisely the analytical gap that the CC framework fills and, by extension, the gap that the proposed fifth component, ritual-cultural competence, addresses with respect to indigenous knowledge systems. The combination of the two frameworks, as employed in this study, thus proves more analytically powerful than either framework alone.

Language, Power, and Social Reproduction in Nias Society

The böwö discourse analyzed in this study is not merely a communicative event — it is a mechanism of social reproduction. The strict restriction of speaking rights to the



ere, the systematic enactment of hierarchical relations through honorific address and differential *amaedola* deployment, and the invocation of genealogical history as a communicative resource all function to reproduce the social structure of Nias society — its kinship networks, its status hierarchies, and its norms of adat — through the medium of language. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) account of linguistic markets and the power of authorized language: the ere's utterances derive their force not from grammatical form alone but from the speaker's social position and the ritual's institutional context.

The role of the ere as a language expert and communicative gatekeeper has significant implications for language revitalization efforts in the Nias community. As Li Niha undergoes increasing pressure from Bahasa Indonesia in domains of education, commerce, and mass media, the ritual register of the language, its ceremonial vocabulary, its formulaic expressions, its prosodic conventions — is at particular risk of loss, precisely because it is transmitted exclusively through apprenticeship in ritual practice rather than through formal education. The competences documented in this study thus constitute not merely an academic finding but a record of an endangered linguistic and cultural heritage that merits urgent documentation and community-based revitalization support.

Dialogue with Existing Literature

The findings of this study are consistent with, and extend, comparative research on ritual negotiation discourse in non-Western speech communities. Papua New Guinea (Merlan & Rumsey, 1991), sub-Saharan Africa (Irvine, 1989), and highland Southeast Asia (Rosaldo, 1973) have documented the central role of indirect speech and proverbial language in managing face threats and achieving consensus in bridewealth negotiations. The Nias data confirm this cross-cultural pattern while adding a dimension not systematically theorized in previous studies: the phase-sensitive functionality of proverbial speech. The *amaedola* of the opening and deliberation phases functions primarily as a frame-setting device that establishes the interaction's cooperative orientation, while the *amaedola* of the climactic ratification phase functions as a face-ratifying device that enacts the negotiation's relational outcomes. This

functional differentiation, driven by the event's ritual structure, contributes to the comparative study of proverbial speech in negotiation contexts.

The present study also contributes to the growing body of ethnographic communication research on indigenous ritual language in Southeast Asia. While studies of Javanese speech levels (Errington, 1988) and Balinese ceremonial language (Zurbuchen, 1987) have established the richness of ritual language in the Indonesian context, they have not engaged with the CC framework as an analytical tool. Conversely, while CC research has increasingly engaged with multilingual and plurilingual contexts (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009), it has not systematically addressed indigenous ritual speech. This study occupies the intersection of these two bodies of research and demonstrates the analytical productivity of bringing them together.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, the scope of the primary data corpus while rich in quality, is restricted to the negotiation discourse of two experienced ere across one extended ceremonial event. The generalizability of the findings to other *böwö* ceremonies, other ere, or other communities on Nias Island cannot be assumed without further comparative research. The communicative norms and *amaedola* repertoires documented here may vary across the diverse communities that practice *böwö*, and intra-Nias comparative studies would be a valuable direction for future research.

Second, this study draws its data primarily from the deliberation and ratification phases of the ceremony. While these phases are the most communicatively complex and linguistically rich, the opening and closing phases of the ceremony — which may exhibit different communicative norms and genre conventions — are not fully represented in the corpus. A complete account of CC in *böwö* discourse would require data from all phases of the ceremony.

Third, the researcher's outsider position with respect to Nias adat, while addressed through the methodological procedures described in Section 3.5, inevitably shapes the analysis's interpretive horizon. Certain dimensions of the communicative meaning of the *amaedola*, particularly those embedded in genealogical knowledge and adat norm internalization, may be accessible only to community insiders, and the analysis presented here represents an approximation of their significance rather than a



fully emic account. Collaborative research with Nias scholars would significantly enrich future studies in this area.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study investigated the manifestation of communicative competence in the bridewealth negotiation ritual (*böwö*) of the Ono Niha people of Nias Island, North Sumatra, Indonesia, through the twin analytical lenses of the Canale-Swain (1980) CC framework and Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING model. Three research questions guided the inquiry.

In response to RQ1 — what components of communicative competence are manifested in *böwö* discourse — the study identifies all four canonical CC components: grammatical competence (mastery of Li Niha ritual register), sociolinguistic competence (honorific use, register maintenance, and face-work), discourse competence (coherent turn organization and orderly turn-taking), and strategic competence (the deployment of *amaedola* as primary communicative instruments). Beyond these four, the analysis reveals a fifth dimension — ritual-cultural competence encompassing genealogical knowledge, ceremonial register mastery, and adat norm internalization, which proves indispensable for competent participation in the ceremony and is not captured by existing models.

In response to RQ2 — how participants deploy linguistic and cultural resources to achieve communicative goals — the study demonstrates that *amaedola* function as the primary vehicle of strategic competence in *böwö* discourse, performing six distinct pragmatic functions across the ritual phases: solidarity encoding, conflict avoidance, hierarchy ratification, consensus-building, alliance construction through metaphor, and relational prospection. Critically, the functional repertoire of *amaedola* is phase-sensitive: proverbs deployed in the opening and deliberation phases serve primarily to establish cooperative frames, while those deployed in the ratification phase serve primarily to enact relational outcomes.

In response to RQ3 — in what ways does the *böwö* negotiation function as a speech event that reproduces Nias cultural values and social hierarchies — the study shows that the ceremony constitutes a fully articulated speech event in the sense proposed by Hymes (1974), with clearly defined components governing setting, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. Through the medium of this speech event, Nias kinship networks are constructed, status hierarchies are enacted, and the cultural values of the community — including the primacy of adat norms, the importance of collective solidarity, and the social significance of eloquent speech — are reproduced and transmitted.

Theoretical Contribution

This study extends the concept of communicative competence beyond formal educational settings into indigenous ritual negotiation, proposing ritual-cultural competence as an additional dimension of the Canale-Swain model and advancing the ethnographic study of Li Niha as an understudied Austronesian language. This theoretical extension has implications that reach beyond the Nias context: it suggests that CC models applied to indigenous, non-Western, or ritual speech communities will systematically underestimate the communicative knowledge required for competent participation unless they incorporate a dimension that accounts for culturally embedded, socialized, and apprenticeship-transmitted knowledge. The decolonization of CC theory—its extension beyond the Euro-American educational contexts in which it was developed —requires not merely applying existing models to new data, but being willing to let new data generate new theoretical categories. Ritual-cultural competence is proposed in that spirit.

The study also demonstrates the analytical synergy of combining the SPEAKING model with the CC framework. Each framework illuminates dimensions of the *böwö* ceremony that the other cannot access alone: SPEAKING provides a macro-structural description of the event, while CC provides a micro-level analysis of the competences required for participation. Together, they constitute a powerful and replicable methodological toolkit for the ethnographic study of communicative competence in indigenous ritual contexts.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications at three levels. At the level of language documentation, the transcribed corpus of Li Niha ritual speech produced in this study — including ten *amaedola* with interlinear glosses and the full transcription of an extended *böwö* negotiation — constitutes a contribution to the endangered language archive and is available for deposit in international repositories such as ELAR (Endangered Languages Archive) and PARADISEC (Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures).

At the level of cultural policy, the study's documentation of the communicative complexity of *böwö* provides empirical support for advocacy efforts to recognize *böwö* as intangible cultural heritage requiring active preservation. The identification of ritual-cultural competence as a distinct and teachable dimension of communicative knowledge offers a framework for community-based programs aimed at training young *ere* — ensuring that the communicative traditions of the ceremony are transmitted to the next generation.

At the level of applied linguistics, the study offers a model for similar investigations of indigenous ritual discourse across the Indonesian archipelago and the broader Austronesian-speaking world. The methodological framework employed here — combining participant observation, audio recording, Leipzig-glossed transcription, multi-layer analysis, and community-based member checking — is replicable and adaptable to other ritual negotiation contexts, including Toba Batak adat, Toraja death rituals, and Ngaju Dayak ceremonial discourse.

Directions for Future Research

This study suggests several directions for future research. First, intra-Nias comparative research — comparing *böwö* discourse across different communities, districts, and dialect areas of Nias Island would assess the generalizability of the findings and identify local variations in communicative norms and *amaedola* repertoires. Second, diachronic research examining how *böwö* discourse has changed over time in response to urbanization, migration, and the increasing dominance of Bahasa Indonesia would illuminate the dynamics of language shift and ritual change in the Nias community. Third, multimodal extensions of the present analysis incorporating gesture, gaze,

prosody, and spatial arrangement would provide a more complete account of the communicative resources deployed in the ceremony, moving beyond the present study's exclusively verbal focus. Finally, collaborative research with Nias scholars bringing emic and etic perspectives into dialogue would significantly deepen the interpretive richness of future analyses and address the limitations of the outsider position acknowledged in this study.

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