Austronesian: Journal of Language Science & Literature

P-ISSN: 2963-1548 E-ISSN 2961-9947

Journal Homepage:

https://www.ojs.wahanapublikasi.com/index.php/austronesian



Analysis of Gema's Style-shifting through Bell's Audience Design Theory in *Tinggal Meninggal (2025)*

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:
13 September 2026

Accepted:
12 November 2026

Published:
01 December 2026

Keywords:

Style-shifting,
Audience Design Theory,
Self-presentation,
Film Discourse

ABSTRACT

Style shifting is a sociolinguistic phenomenon in which speakers adjust their speech to their audience and the identity they want to project. In fiction, it shows how characters handle social relationships and shape the impressions others have of them. This study examines the style shifting of Gema, the protagonist of the dark comedy film *Tinggal Meninggal* (2025), who fakes a series of tragedies to gain attention from his coworkers. Using Bell's (1984) Audience Design framework, it aims to identify the types of style shifts Gema uses and to explain how they serve his efforts to build impressions and keep social attention. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the study manually transcribed Gema's utterances and classified them as responsive or initiative shifts. Of 294 utterances, 51 were identified as style shifting: 31 initiative and 20 responsive. Initiative shifts were not triggered by the addressee and departed from Gema's baseline in pronoun choice, narrative structure, tone, and humor, projecting identities such as the sociable group member and the grieving twin Bima. Responsive shifts were triggered by the addressee and realized mainly through changes in forms of address. These findings show that Gema's style shifting is not only a matter of linguistic adaptation but also a strategy for managing self-presentation and seeking attention. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research by showing how Bell's framework can explain the social motives behind stylistic variation in film discourse.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.59011/austronesian.5.3.2026.996-1010

1. Introduction

Language is the most fundamental instrument humans possess for building social relationships. It is recognized as a central mechanism through which humans build, negotiate, and sustain social ties (Kinzler, 2021; Komilovna, 2025). Through language, a person not only conveys information but also manages impressions and seeks acceptance in their social surroundings (Whitehead & Lerner, 2022). The process of managing one's image was first systematically developed through the dramaturgical model of social interaction, according to which everyday situations are seen as a kind of performance where individuals continuously adjust how they present themselves depending on their audience (Goffman, 1959). The need to belong and to be accepted is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021). However, some individuals may struggle to fulfill this need through everyday communication and social interaction, limiting their opportunities to establish meaningful connections with others. Experiences of social exclusion can threaten four fundamental psychological needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). Individuals may respond to threatened meaningful existence by seeking recognition from others, as this need is closely related to feeling acknowledged and worthy of attention (Williams, 2007). In this regard, individuals may attempt to attract or maintain others' attention through their social interactions. This attempts to gain attention may also be reflected in how individuals use language during social interactions. Speakers may adjust their speech styles depending on the situation and the people they are speaking to. This variation in speech style is known as style-shifting.

In the field of sociolinguistics, this situation-dependent change in speech style is referred to as style-shifting. Style-shifting is a crucial tool for controlling ongoing social meaning rather than just a passive response to external circumstances (Wulandari & Arvian, 2026). The concept was initially systematically defined as depending on the amount of attention a speaker directs to their own speech (Labov, 1972). Another commonly used method divides speech style into five levels of formality: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate (Joos, 1967). A related area of research has looked at how speakers switch between address forms and speech norms in accordance with co-occurrence rules associated with social roles and relationships (Grimshaw, 1980). A further development emerged through Audience Design theory, first proposed in a psycholinguistic account of how speakers design utterances for specific listeners (Clark & Murphy, 1982), and substantially elaborated in sociolinguistic terms through a study of radio newsreaders in New Zealand, which found that a speaker's style is shaped primarily by who the audience is, not merely by the situation's level of formality (Bell, 1984). Four categories of listeners are distinguished based on their closeness of role to the speaker: addressee, auditor, overhearer, and eavesdropper, along with two types of style-shifts: responsive style-shift and initiative style-shift. A responsive style-shift refers to a change in speech style that occurs in response to a change in the immediate communicative situation, such as a change in addressee, audience, or interactional context. An initiative style-shift, associated with referee design, refers to a proactive shift in which a speaker adopts a style associated with a particular identity or reference group rather than simply accommodating the immediate audience (Bell, 1984).

Several previous studies have analyzed this phenomenon of style shifting. Siboro & Ritonga (2026) examined shifts in Pascol's trash-talking style during a live Mobile Legends stream on the Top Global Miya YouTube channel using Labov's theoretical framework. Their findings indicate that these linguistic shifts were caused by pressure and frustration during the game or were intended to return to a casual and humorous tone of interaction. Another

study by Oxbury & de Leeuw (2020), which analyzed style shifting in Multicultural London English (MLE) within an all-girls homework club, investigated how five 11-year-old girls in Hackney, London, altered their pronunciation of three MLE vowels (FACE, PRICE, and GOAT) while speaking on the playground, during interviews, and while reading a list of words. The study found that the participants shifted their styles on all three vowels as they adjusted their pronunciation to fit the conversational context.

In addition to the analysis of real-world conversations, studies on style shifting in fictional discourse, including films, have also been widely conducted in sociolinguistic research. Zulhelmi & Oktoviandry (2024) examined the stylistic features and shifts in style in Peter Parker's dialogue in two films directed by Jon Watts, namely Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017) and Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021), using Joos' and Giles' theory. Christian & Khasanah (2026) examined the types of style shifting used by the character Conan Edogawa in the film Detective Conan: Countdown to Heaven. Their analysis was based on the theories of Labov (1972), Halliday (1978), and Gumperz (1982). Similarly, the style-shifting of a single character, Roz, throughout the narrative of the animated film The Wild Robot has been analyzed using a combination of Joos' and Ervin-Tripp's theories (Lestari et al., 2026).

Although these studies indicate that style-shifting is a valid framework for analyzing discourse in both real life and fiction, the concept tends to remain limited to explanations of formality levels. Research that examines speech style as a deliberate social strategy, for example to attract the attention or sympathy of an interlocutor, is scarce, and to the authors' knowledge, no study has analyzed style-shifting as an attention-seeking strategy through Bell's (1984) Audience Design: a Google Scholar search conducted in November, 2026 for studies published since 2022, using the keywords "audience design" AND "style-shifting" AND "attention-seeking", returned no relevant results. This is a notable omission because the framework explicitly accounts for speakers who shift style actively to project a particular impression to a specific audience, through the concept of initiative style-shift. Moreover, to the extent of the authors' search, no study of style-shifting in Indonesian dark comedy film has yet been found, despite the genre's distinctive narrative characteristic of intermingling serious and comic elements to produce a bitter yet more impactful narrative (Goswami & Shruthi, 2024), mode that has itself been shown to carry expressive and dramatic weight when employed in film and television drama specifically (Hassan Alwan & Mohammed Hasan, 2024).

To address this gap, this study examines the film Tinggal Meninggal (2025), directed by Kristo Immanuel, as its subject. This Tinggal Meninggal film is classified as a dark comedy with strong dramatic elements (Pranaja & Kusuma, 2026). It tells the story of Gema, a protagonist who struggles to communicate and socialize with those around him and rarely receives attention from them. When his father dies, Gema unexpectedly receives attention and sympathy from his coworkers. Instead of maintaining that attention through effective communication and social interaction, he creates new lies related to the death in order to retain the attention he has gained. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is on how a character who struggles to build social relationships through conventional communication strategically uses language, by altering his style, to gain and maintain the attention of others, drawing on Bell's (1984) Audience Design framework.

The choice of Bell (1984) theory as the analytical framework for this study is grounded in its conceptual fit with this phenomenon. Unlike frameworks that explain style-shifting primarily as a function of the speaker's degree of self-monitoring (Labov, 1972), or that classify style by level of formality without addressing the underlying motive (Joos, 1967), audience

design theory explicitly accommodates the possibility that a speaker uses style actively and strategically to construct a particular impression before a specific audience, through the concept of initiative style-shift (Bell, 1984). This concept aligns with what Gema does: deliberately sustaining a particular speech style to project the impression of a grieving individual before his co-workers, with the aim of preserving the social attention he has gained.

The distinctive contribution of this study involves examining audience-oriented style shifting as part of a fictional character's strategies to attract attention and build social relationships. Specifically, this study explores the relationship between Gema's stylistic choices, the interlocutors he engages with, and his attempts to gain attention and sympathy. By linking these dimensions, this study contributes to research on style shifting by examining how speech styles change and how these changes function in efforts to initiate or maintain interpersonal engagement. Furthermore, this study extends the application of Bell's Audience Design framework to Indonesian dark comedies. By examining Gema's interactions in the film Tinggal Meninggal, this study adds a genre-specific perspective to existing research on audience design in film discourse, focusing on how stylistic variations are expressed in a narrative that blends grief, humor, and attempts to build social connections.

2. Theoretical Framework

To examine style-shifting, this study draws on Bell (1984) Audience Design Theory, which explains how speakers adjust their language styles in response to their audiences and how some shifts are initiated by the speakers themselves. Bell (1984) proposes that a speaker's style variation is shaped primarily by the audience, and that this audience effect is more fundamental than the formality of the situation or the speaker's attention to their own speech. Speakers design their style for the people they are talking to, and style therefore varies according to who the audience is. Audience members are classified by three criteria: whether they are known to the speaker, whether they are ratified as participants in the interaction, and whether they are directly addressed. These criteria yield four audience roles. The addressee is known, ratified, and addressed. The auditor is known and ratified but not addressed. The overhearer is known but not ratified, and the eavesdropper is neither known nor ratified. Meyerhoff (2018) add that audience design predicts that the speaker will attune their speech most to an addressee, next to an auditor, and then to any overhearers who the speaker thinks might be lurking around. Bell proposes that the influence of these roles on the speaker's style decreases in this order, so that the addressee has the strongest influence and the eavesdropper the weakest.

Within this framework, Bell (1984) distinguishes two types of style-shifting. In a responsive style-shift, the speaker's style changes because the audience or the situation has changed, for example when a new addressee enters the interaction or when the relationship between participants shifts. The situation drives the style. In an initiative style-shift, the relationship is reversed: the style itself is used to initiate a change in the situation instead of resulting from one. Initiative shifts are associated with referee design, in which the speaker orients to a reference group or identity that is salient to them, even when its members are not the immediate audience (Bell, 1984). The speaker thus uses style to project an identity or to shape how the audience perceives them, and not merely to converge with the audience's way of speaking.

Furthermore, Bell (1984) defines responsive and initiative style-shifts conceptually but does not provide a coding scheme for scripted dialogue. This study therefore operationalizes Bell's definitions for analyzing scripted dialogue. For each scene, the audience present is first

identified as addressee, auditor, overhearer, or eavesdropper, so that it is clear whom Gema's style is directed to. The shift is then classified against the criteria below, in comparison with Gema's baseline speech, which refers to his everyday style with coworkers and friends, characterized in the film by the casual pronoun "gue" and fragmented, spontaneous phrasing.

A shift is classified as responsive when (1) it is triggered by an explicit request from the addressee, (2) there is a clear before-and-after contrast in Gema's form of address toward the same interlocutor, and (3) the shift is directed toward the addressee's preferred speech style rather than toward an identity independent of the interaction. Theoretically, this corresponds to Bell's view that the situation drives the style, so that the speaker converges toward the addressee. In the film, when Cokro asks Gema to stop calling him "Pak" and use "Bro," Gema adopts "Bro" afterwards, and when Adriana asks to be called "Adri," Gema immediately changes his address term from "Adriana." In both cases the trigger comes from the addressee, the contrast in address form is clear, and the shift follows the addressee's preference.

Conversely, a shift is classified as initiative when (1) it is not triggered by a change in the addressees' speech style or an explicit request from them, and it diverges from their casual register, (2) it deviates clearly and systematically from Gema's baseline in pronoun choice, structure, and tone, and (3) it is directed toward a specific social identity. Theoretically, this corresponds to Bell's initiative shift and referee design, in which the speaker orients to a reference group or identity (the referee) and uses style to redefine the situation. For example, in the film, Gema, presenting himself as his fictional twin Bima, replaces the casual pronoun gue with the formal saya, delivers a measured and chronologically structured account instead of his usual fragmented phrasing, and keeps this solemn tone before coworkers who speak casually and know him well. The referee in this case is the identity of Bima, the grieving twin brother. The same style is maintained at the funeral. No request or change in the audience explains these shifts.

These criteria provide the basis for distinguishing responsive and initiative style-shifts in Gema's dialogue. They also allow the analysis to consider not only the changes in his linguistic choices but also the relationship between those changes, the audience, and the social identity being projected.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the style-shifting of Gema, the main character in *Tinggal Meninggal* (2025), directed by Kristo Immanuel. The study applied Bell's (1984) Audience Design Theory to identify responsive and initiative style-shifts and interpret their linguistic features and communicative functions within the film's narrative context. The primary data consisted of Gema's spoken dialogue and internal monologues throughout the film, while the surrounding interactions and communicative situations provided contextual information for the analysis. The researchers served as the primary research instruments, using the manually prepared transcript as the main analytical document. The unit of analysis was Gema's individual speaking turn, with each turn treated as a single unit regardless of the number of sentences or linguistic features it contained. Internal monologues were segmented into continuous stretches of Gema's speech and examined in relation to their narrative context.

The researchers collected the data by repeatedly watching the film and manually transcribing all of Gema's dialogue and internal monologues from the original Indonesian audio available on Netflix. The transcription preserved relevant linguistic features, including pronouns, forms of address, register, and repetition, while recording timestamps,

interlocutors, audience roles, and interactional contexts. The researchers verified the entire transcript against the original audio and Indonesian subtitles, prioritizing the spoken dialogue whenever discrepancies occurred.

The researchers identified potential instances of style-shifting by comparing Gema's utterances with his baseline speech, characterized by the informal pronoun *gue* and fragmented, spontaneous phrasing. They examined linguistic changes and audience roles (addressee, auditor, overhearer, and eavesdropper) based on Bell's (1984) framework. Responsive shifts were classified according to audience-driven adjustments, particularly changes in forms of address and accommodation to interlocutor preferences, whereas initiative shifts involved deviations from Gema's baseline speech to project a particular social identity or reference group. The coding process involved five steps. First, the researchers segmented the transcript into Gema's individual speaking turns. Second, they identified relevant linguistic features and potential deviations from his baseline speech. Third, they examined audience roles and interactional contexts to determine the circumstances surrounding each potential shift. Fourth, they classified the identified shifts as responsive or initiative according to Bell (1984) operational criteria. Finally, all authors collectively reviewed the coding results, reexamined the supporting linguistic and contextual evidence, and reached agreement on the final classifications. The researchers then interpreted the identified patterns in relation to Gema's self-presentation and pursuit of social attention. The findings were presented through a classification table, selected dialogue excerpts, and contextual interpretations.

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the researchers employed transcription verification, collaborative review, and expert consultation. Transcription verification ensured that the analysis reflected Gema's original spoken dialogue, while collaborative review allowed the authors to evaluate coding decisions against the established classification criteria based on Bell (1984) Audience Design Theory. Before finalizing the manuscript, the researchers also consulted a lecturer specializing in sociolinguistics who taught the Sociolinguistics course to obtain additional academic feedback on the analysis and its application of Bell (1984) Audience Design Theory. These procedures aimed to minimize transcription inaccuracies, maintain consistency in data classification, and strengthen the transparency and credibility of the findings.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of style shifting in Gema's utterances from the movie *Tinggal Meninggal* based on Bell's (1984) Audience Design Theory and its style dimension. The style dimension was subsequently divided into two types: Responsive Style and Initiative Style. In order to obtain these results, the researchers identified Gema's utterances throughout the transcript, then determined the type of style shift by referring to contextual clues (such as the identity of the interlocutor, the register, and linguistic indicators like the choice of pronouns, sentence structure, and orientation towards the addressee), classifying each utterance into one of Bell's categories. Following this procedure, from the 294 total utterances produced by Gema, 51 utterances were identified as containing style-shifting. These findings indicate that style-shifting occurred in approximately 17.35% of Gema's total utterances. Of the 51 identified instances, 31 (60.8%) were classified as Initiative Style, while the remaining 20 (39.2%) were categorized as Responsive Style. Each category is further examined through selected dialogue excerpts to illustrate the linguistic features, contextual triggers, and communicative purposes underlying the identified shifts.

Table 1. Type of Style-shifting Found in Gema's Utterances

No	Style-shift Type	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
1	Initiative	1. Deviates from Gema's baseline style in a specific, identifiable feature. 2. Not triggered by a change in the audience, the addressee's speech, or a request. 3. Directed toward a desired social identity.	31	60,8%
2	Responsive	1. Differs from Gema's baseline style toward the same addressee. 2. Follows a change in the addressee speech, behavior, or relationship with Gema: an explicit request, correction, or a sequence of relational moves by the addressee that increases closeness. 3. Converges toward the addressee's preferred or established style.	20	39,2%
Total			51	100%

Based on the analysis that has been done, there are total Gema's utterances that can be classified as style-shifting. Among these utterances, 31 utterances were identified as initiative style-shifts, while 20 utterances were classified as responsive style-shifts according to Bell's Audience Design Theory. To illustrate the classification, selected utterances are provided as examples of each style dimension

a. Initiative Style-shifting

In this research, the authors discovered that Initiative style is the most used style dimension type. Gema used initiative style to adopt a group's speech style, project a particular identity, and create an impression on an audience. For example:

1) GEMA: "Hati-hati dijebak, Nay, dijebak makan babi!"

This utterance was spoken by Gema in minute 01:04:03, when his friends visited his house to cheer him up from the news which he fabricated himself about his mother's plane accident. In Bell's terms, Naya is the addressee, and Cokro, Danu, Adriana, and Ilham are auditors, with no overhearer or eavesdropper. The group remains the same throughout the scene, so no change in addressee or audience occurs at this moment that could explain the shift.

While Naya is talking about her cross-religion relationship, Gema interjects with a joke. In his everyday interactions with his coworkers, Gema is portrayed as awkward and hesitant, and he rarely uses humor. His typical speech is casual, marked by "gue", but fragmented and hesitant. Against this baseline, the utterance stands out. It is a teasing joke delivered fluently

and confidently while Naya is talking about her cross-religion relationship. In both register and communicative function, it departs from the hesitant, minimal responses that normally characterize him, since its purpose is to amuse rather than simply to respond. The utterance does follow an earlier scene in which a similar joke from Gema was met with laughter. This laughter acts as positive feedback that encourages the style, but the decision to joke again comes from Gema himself, consistent with his aim of building closeness and sustaining the attention he has gained.

Therefore, this utterance can be classified as initiative style-shifting due to three reasons, which are there is no change in addressee or audience triggers the shift, the utterance deviates clearly from Gema's baseline style, and the style is directed toward a desired social identity, that of a funny and sociable member of the group, rather than toward the interlocutor's speech. It is therefore classified as an initiative style-shift. Gema is not converging toward Naya's speech but taking the initiative to project an identity he had not previously displayed.

2) GEMA: "Saya tinggal di luar kota. Jadi, Gema harus mengurus kasus Mama sendirian. Dia sering sekali pulang pagi karena itu. Selepas mengurus kasus Mama, kurang lebih dini hari, Gema tertabrak truk."

This utterance occurs from minute 01:17:15 to 01:17:37, when Gema, having disguised himself as his fictional twin brother Bima, first arrives at his office and speaks to his friends, giving them a made-up version of the circumstances surrounding Gema's death. The addressee is Ilham, and Kerin, Naya, Adriana, and Danu are the auditors with no overhearer or eavesdropper. This audience consists of people who know Gema well, so the scene is the first time the Bima persona has to hold up in front of them.

In his previous everyday interactions with his coworkers, Gema speaks in a casual register marked by the pronoun "gue". His speech is typically hesitant, fragmented, and spontaneous, and he rarely produces extended, well-organized turns. However, while pretending to be Bima, he uses the formal pronoun "saya" instead of "gue", refers to himself in the third person as "Gema" while talking about "Mama", and delivers the account calmly and in chronological order rather than in his usual fragmented phrasing. The content is also carefully structured, with details about where he lives, who handled the case, and the sequence of events that led to Gema's death. These details give the account credibility. Taken together, they show that Gema is not just speaking more formally but is performing a different speaker, departing from his usual baseline.

The trigger for the shift does not come from the audience's speech. The coworkers are the same people Gema usually talks to, and they speak in the casual style typical of the office, so a formal, composed style diverges from the addressees' speech instead of converging toward it. The situation does call for an explanation, but it does not specify the style in which that explanation should be given. The choice of "saya", the narrative structure, and the third-person reference to Gema all originate from Gema's own decision to present himself as a different person. His motive, consistent with the film's storyline, is to make the fabricated identity believable and to keep the sympathy and attention that the apparent tragedy has brought him.

Therefore, this utterance can be classified as an example of initiative style-shifting due to three reasons, which are the shift is not triggered by a change in the addressees' speech style or an explicit request from them, it deviates clearly and systematically from Gema's baseline in pronoun choice, structure, and tone, and it is directed toward a specific social identity, the grieving twin Bima, rather than toward the interlocutors. The utterance is therefore classified

as an initiative style-shift.

3) GEMA: “Terima kasih, ya, semuanya, sudah datang. Gema…sangat baik orangnya. Seandainya saya bantu-bantu soal urusan Mama, mungkin Gema ngga akan…”

This utterance occurs in minute 01:25:37, during the funeral scene, in which Gema, disguised as his fictitious twin brother Bima, addresses his friends who have come to grieve his pretended death. The addressee is the gathered group addressed by “semuanya”, which consist of Gema’s co-workers Kerin, Adriana, Naya, Ilham, and Cokro, with no overhearer or eavesdropper. These people know Gema in his everyday identity.

This utterance departs from Gema’s usual speech baseline in several consistent ways. He uses the formal pronoun “saya” instead of “gue”, refers to himself in the third person as “Gema”, and speaks in a solemn, restrained tone. The self-blaming statement “seandainya saya bantu-bantu soal urusan Mama, mungkin Gema ngga akan…” adds an emotional layer to the thanks. The trailing-off at the end of the sentence also show a controlled pause that signals grief. These features match the style already established in the previous example, which suggests continuity in the performed identity.

Therefore, this utterance can be classified as an example of initiative style-shifting due to three reasons, which are the shift is not triggered by a change in by a change in the audience’s speech style or an explicit request from them, it deviates clearly and systematically from Gema’s baseline in pronoun choice, tone, and self-presentation, and remains consistent with the Bima style established earlier, and it is directed toward a specific social identity, the grieving twin Bima, rather than toward the particular listeners.

b. Responsive Style

Besides Initiative style, the authors also discovered cases of Responsive style in the film. Different from Initiative style, which is employed to project a particular identity or to invoke a reference group, Responsive style is used by Gema to adjust his speech according to the addressee or audience he is addressing, changing his language choices (for example in terms of formality, vocabulary, or code-switching) in response to who he is speaking to. This reflects Bell’s idea of accommodation, where the speaker converges toward or diverges from the interlocutor’s speech style depending on the social relationship or the context of the conversation. For example:

1) GEMA: "Udah, Pak."
COKRO: "Yeu, pake 'Pak', 'Bro' aja keles, yang lain juga begitu."
GEMA: “Bro?”
COKRO: “Bro, bre, cuy, terserah lu, yang penting mah kita akrab. Ya, ngga? Yee, kurang funky dia nih.”

This exchange occurs from minute 21:21 to 21:41, when Cokro unexpectedly joins Gema and his other co-workers to eat lunch at a fried chicken restaurant. Gema is talking to Cokro directly, so Cokro is the addressee, with Ilham, Naya, Kerin, and Adriana as auditors. They are present and can hear the exchange but are not directly addressed, and there is no overhearer or eavesdropper.

In his interactions with Cokro, Gema’s baseline is to use “Pak”, a conventional Indonesian form of address that indexes respect and acknowledges Cokro’s higher position in the workplace. This choice is consistent with the formal distance expected between an employee and a superior. The utterance “Udah, Pak.” therefore represents his starting style. The trigger for the shift comes from the addressee. Cokro explicitly rejects “Pak” and proposes “Bro”,

then reinforces the request with further informal alternatives ("bre", "cuy") and states the relational goal, "yang penting kita mah akrab". Gema's tentative "Bro?" immediately after this request indicates uptake of a form that someone else supplied rather than a form he chose for himself. From this shift, it can be concluded that Gema did not introduce the informal form himself, and in the absence of Cokro's request, he would likely have continued with "Pak". His later use of "Bro" is also directed to the same addressee, which shows sustained convergence rather than a shift toward an absent reference identity.

Therefore, this utterance can be classified as a responsive style-shifting due to several reason, which are the shift is triggered by an explicit request from the addressee, there is a clear before-and-after contrast in Gema's form of address toward the same interlocutor, and he shift is directed toward the addressee's preferred speech style rather than toward an identity independent of the interaction.

2) GEMA: "Makasih ya, Mbak Kerin" (in the beginning of the movie)
GEMA: "Makasih ya Ker… makasih buat perhatiannya. Eh, Ker, itu ada yg ngebell pintu gue (in the middle of the movie)

The shift from "Mbak Kerin" to "Ker" in Gema's interaction with Kerin illustrates responsive style in Bell's Audience Design framework. In these exchanges, Kerin is the addressee and there is no auditor, overhearer, or eavesdropper. The audience therefore does not change between the two data points, since both are directed at Kerin alone, and the shift cannot be attributed to the presence of other listeners. Gema's baseline form of address toward Kerin is "Mbak Kerin", a respectful term that indexes seniority and social distance. This is evident in minute 16:49, when Kerin offers her condolences following the death of Gema's father, to which Gema responds, "Makasih ya, Mbak Kerin." The address term reflects the relatively greater social distance between Gema and Kerin, who have not yet established a close relationship and also supported by Kerin following remark "gue tau kita jarang ngobrol".

The style-shifting trigger comes from Kerin's behavior, not from an explicit request. Between the two data points, Kerin builds closeness in several visible steps. She repeatedly invites Gema to lunch and offers support (minute 18:52), reprimands Ilham on Gema's behalf (minute 21:47) and when Gema faked his cat's death, she shares that she lost her own cat, Lion, shows him its photo, and apologizes for asking too directly (minute 32:22-33:07). As their interactions become more familiar, Gema shifts to the shortened and more informal form to address Kerin. This change is particularly evident in his later exchange with Kerin, when he says, "Makasih ya, Ker… makasih buat perhatiannya. Eh, Ker, itu ada yg ngebell pintu gue," using "Ker" twice while directly addressing her. The speech act (thanking) is the same, what changes is the address term, which drops the honorific and shortens the name.

Therefore, these examples can be classified as responsive style-shifting due to several reason, which are the shift follows relational moves by the addressee, there is a clear before-and-after contrast in the address term toward the same interlocutor within the same speech act, and the shift moves toward the closeness that the addressee has established, not toward an identity unrelated to the interaction.

3) GEMA: "Amin, makasih ya, Adriana."
ADRIANA: "Adri aja, nggak apa-apa."
GEMA: "Makasih ya, Adri."

This exchange occurs from minute 19:54 to 20:00, when Gema and his co-workers eat

lunch together for the firsts time at a fried chicken restaurant. Adriana expresses her condolences on the death of Gema's father. In Bell's (1984) terms, Adriana is the addressee because she is the only person Gema speaks to and she replies directly to him. No auditor is identifiable in the scene, and there is no overhearer or eavesdropper.

Before this exchange, Gema's baseline form of address toward Adriana is her full name, "Adriana", as seen in the first line. It is neither an intimate nickname nor a title of respect, and it matches the limited familiarity between the two at this point in the film. The utterance "Amin, makasih ya, Adriana." therefore represents his starting style. The shift occurs in his next turn, "Makasih ya, Adri.", where the same speech act (thanking) is performed with the same addressee but with a shortened, more familiar form of address, Adriana's nickname. The trigger comes directly from the addressee. Adriana explicitly states a preference with "Adri aja, nggak apa-apa", and Gema adopts that form in the very next turn. The sequence request, then adjustment, leaves little room for an alternative explanation. Gema does not introduce the shortened form himself, and without Adriana's request, he will still call her Adriana.

Therefore, these utterances can be classified as responsive style shifting because Gema's style-shift is triggered by an explicit request from the addressee, there is a clear before-and-after contrast in the form of address toward the same interlocutor within the same speech act, and the shift is directed toward the addressee's preferred form rather than toward an identity independent of the interaction. Gema converges toward Adriana's preferred way of being addressed, which reduces the social distance between them and reflects the accommodation to the addressee described by (Bell, 1984).

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals that among 51 Gema's utterances identified as style-shifting, initiative style-shifting is more frequent with 31 total utterances and the percentage of 60,78% whereas responsive style has 20 utterances and the percentage of 39,22%. Bell (1984) treats responsive shifting as the basic mechanism of audience design theory, a larger share of initiative shifts is noteworthy in Gema's case. The dominance of initiative style-shifting shows that Gema is not merely adjusting to his interlocutors but actively directing his own speech toward a constructed identity regardless of who is listening.

Across all of the illustrated examples, the feature that most clearly separate the two types of style-shifting is the trigger. Responsive style-shifting is triggered by the addressee. This can be seen in how Cokro and Adriana make explicit requests ("bro", "Adri aja"), and Kerin builds closeness through a series of relational moves before Gema drops finally drop the honorific "mbak". In each case Gema converges toward a form that someone else supplied. However, the initiative shifts have no such a trigger. In the joke to Naya, the audience is unchanged and no one asks for humor. In the Bima scenes, the coworkers keep speaking casually while Gema turns formal, so his style diverges from the addressees' speech instead of converging toward it. The orientation criterion points the same way. Responsive shifts are directed toward the addressee's preferred style, whereas initiative shifts are directed toward an identity such as the funny, sociable group member, or the grieving twin Bima.

Furthermore, Gema's initiative shifts are consistent with impression management (Goffman, 1959; Whitehead & Lerner, 2022), and they show how stylistic choice can serve as a means of seeking attention through deception. The attention Gema receives begins with his father's death, but he then sustains it through fabrications, each accompanied by a style that makes it believable. The Bima persona is the clearest case. By replacing "gue" with "saya",

referring to himself in the third person, and delivering a calm, chronologically ordered account of Gema's death, Gema gives the lie the credibility it needs before coworkers who know him well. At the funeral, the same style is maintained and extended with a self-blaming statement ("seandainya saya bantu-bantu soal urusan Mama...") and a trailing-off pause that signals grief, features that are consistent with his aim of keeping the sympathy and attention the apparent tragedy has brought. The persona goes beyond selective self-presentation, which suggest that a strong need for approval can move impression management toward active fabrication (Mun & Kim, 2021).

Additionally, the form is not limited to fabricated identity only. In another example, Gema reproduces unprompted second joke to Naya, following an earlier one that was met with laughter. This shows that Gema reproducing a style that has been rewarded, in line with the idea that people sustain a "front" once an audience responds favorably. This also shows that the boundary between the two types is not absolute: audience feedback can encourage an initiative shift without triggering it, and in Bell's framework both types remain forms of audience design. In both cases the decision to shift comes from Gema and not from the addressee, so style functions as a tool for managing how he is perceived and not merely as accommodation to others. This is why Bell's (1984) initiative style-shift fits his case: his speech is oriented to an identity that serves his goal of keeping attention, not to the speech of the people in front of him.

The responsive shifts are all realized through address terms, which mark social roles and relationships (Grimshaw, 1980). The closer form always comes from the addressee's lead. This is compatible with a cautious character who accepts closeness offered by others but does not claim it himself, and with the concern about how others evaluate (Williams, 2007). This is an interpretation of the character, not a test of that link. In the Kerin example, closeness builds in a context where Gema is receiving sympathy, including after he fakes his cat's death. This suggests a possible connection between the two types: attention sustained through initiative moves may create the relational conditions that later elicit responsive accommodation.

Furthermore, the findings of this study deviate from prior applications of audience design theory and other style-shifts related theory. Earlier studies of style-shifting in real and fictional discourse have focused on formality levels or contextual adjustment, whether in a streamer's trash-talking (Siboro & Ritonga, 2026), in vowel pronunciation across settings (Oxbury & de Leeuw, 2020), or in the speech of film characters (Zulhelmi & Oktoviandry, 2024; Christian & Khasanah, 2026; Lestari et al., 2026). The present study shows that, within one character, accommodation to addressees and speaker-initiated identity performance can coexist and can be told apart by explicit criteria. It also links the type of shift to a social function, namely gaining and sustaining attention. To the authors' knowledge, this function has not been examined through Bell's Audience Design.

However, the findings of this study should be read with several limitations in mind. As a single-case study of one character in one film, the results are not generalizable beyond this text, and it is unclear whether the attention-seeking pattern identified here would hold for other characters or other Indonesian dark comedies. Future research could explore style-shifting strategies across characters or films within the Indonesian dark comedy genre, or combine discourse analysis of fictional narratives with research on real-life individuals with social anxiety, drawing on interviews to investigate whether the attention-seeking pattern observed here has parallels outside fictional representation.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the style-shifting of Gema, the protagonist of Tinggal Meninggal (2025), through Bell (1984) Audience Design Theory. Of the 51 utterances identified as style-shifting, 31 (60,8%) were classified as initiative and 20 (39,2%) as responsive. Initiative shifts were identified when the shift was not triggered by a change in the addressees' speech style or an explicit request from them, and even diverged from their casual register, when it deviated clearly and systematically from Gema's baseline in pronoun choice, structure, and tone, and when it was directed toward a specific social identity. Responsive shifts were identified when the shift was triggered by an explicit request from the addressee, when there was a clear before-and-after contrast in Gema's form of address toward the same interlocutor, and when the shift was directed toward the addressee's preferred speech style rather than toward an identity independent of the interaction.

The discussion shows that the two types differ most clearly in their trigger and orientation. Responsive shifts, realized through address terms, follow the lead of addressees such as Cokro, Adriana, and Kerin, so Gema converges toward a form that someone else supplied. Initiative shifts come from Gema himself, as in the joke to Naya and the performance of the twin brother Bima, and they are directed toward a constructed identity regardless of who is listening. The predominance of initiative shifts is noteworthy because Bell (1984) treats responsive shifting as the basic mechanism of audience design. These initiative shifts are consistent with impression management, in which style becomes a means of gaining and sustaining attention, including through fabrication. The two types are also not entirely separate: audience feedback can encourage an initiative shift without triggering it, and attention sustained through initiative moves may create the relational conditions for later responsive accommodation.

This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics in three ways. First, it shows that within a single character, accommodation to addressees and speaker-initiated identity performance can coexist and be distinguished by explicit criteria. Second, it links the type of shift to a social function, namely gaining and sustaining attention, a function that, to the authors' knowledge, has not been examined through Bell's Audience Design. Third, it extends the application of the theory to fictional discourse in an Indonesian dark comedy, beyond the focus on formality levels and contextual adjustment in earlier studies.

However, this study has limitations. As a single-case study of one character in one film, its findings cannot be generalized beyond this text, and it remains unclear whether the attention-seeking pattern would hold for other characters or other Indonesian dark comedies. The interpretation of Gema's motives is also an interpretation of a character, not a test of his psychological state. Future research could therefore explore style-shifting strategies across characters or films within the Indonesian dark comedy genre. It could also combine discourse analysis of fictional narratives with research on real-life individuals with social anxiety, drawing on interviews to investigate whether the attention-seeking pattern observed here has parallels outside fictional representation.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

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Statement of the Use of AI

The authors declare that generative AI tools, specifically Grammarly and Quillbot, were used in limited portions of the manuscript to assist with grammar checking, improving readability, and language refinement. The tools were not used to generate research findings, data analysis, or conclusions. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the authors.

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