Exploring istighfar as an emotive and religious interjection in Indonesian

Menelusuri istigfar sebagai interjeksi emotif dan religius dalam bahasa Indonesia

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Abstract

Istighfar is an interjection in the Indonesian language, borrowed from Arabic and widely used in various social situations, both in personal and public spheres. As a religious interjection that holds a significant position in the linguistic practices of Muslim communities, *istighfar* reflects both emotional responses and moral awareness toward events perceived as negative or sinful. This study aims to identify the characteristics of *istighfar* as an interjection and to analyze its meaning using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach. Employing a qualitative-descriptive method, the primary data were drawn from fifteen Indonesian novels by prominent authors, while supplementary data were taken from online news headlines and everyday communicative experiences, including spontaneous conversations and selected social media comments within the researcher's observation. The analysis proceeded in two stages: categorizing *istighfar* within interjection typology and constructing semantic explications using NSM. The results show that *istighfar* fulfills nearly all prototypical features of interjections and carries complex spiritual content. Its use not only reflects emotional expression but also constructs and represents the speaker's religious identity. This research affirms that language can reflect levels of religiosity, as demonstrated by the frequent use of religious interjections in Indonesian society, which is known for its high level of religious devotion.

Abstrak

Istigfar merupakan interjeksi dalam bahasa Indonesia yang diserap dari bahasa Arab dan digunakan secara luas dalam berbagai situasi sosial, baik di ranah personal maupun publik. Sebagai interjeksi religius yang memiliki posisi penting dalam praktik kebahasaan komunitas Muslim, istigfar mencerminkan respons emosional sekaligus kesadaran moral terhadap peristiwa yang dipandang negatif atau berdosa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi karakteristik istigfar sebagai interjeksi dan menganalisis maknanya melalui pendekatan *Natural Semantic Metalanguage* (NSM). Dengan menerapkan metode deskriptif-kualitatif, data utama diperoleh dari lima belas novel Indonesia karya pengarang terkenal, sedangkan data pelengkap diambil dari judul berita daring dan pengalaman komunikatif sehari-hari, termasuk percakapan spontan serta komentar media sosial tertentu dalam pengamatan peneliti. Analisis dilakukan dalam dua tahap: mengategorikan istigfar dalam tipologi interjeksi dan menyusun eksplikasi semantik menggunakan NSM. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa istigfar memenuhi hampir semua ciri prototipikal interjeksi sekaligus memuat makna spiritual yang kompleks. Penggunaannya tidak hanya merefleksikan ekspresi emosional, tetapi juga membangun dan merepresentasikan identitas religius penuturnya. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa bahasa dapat mencerminkan tingkat religiositas, sebagaimana ditunjukkan oleh frekuensi penggunaan interjeksi religius dalam masyarakat Indonesia yang dikenal memiliki tingkat religiositas tinggi.

A. Introduction

The utterance *astagfirullah* is a form of *dhikr*, a central ritual in Islamic worship. According to Hafidz & Rusydi, (2019), *dhikr* linguistically refers to remembering something either mentally or verbally. The *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI) defines *zikir*—also spelled *dzikir*—as repetitive praise to Allah in the form of prayers (*doa*), devotional recitations (*wirid*), or spontaneous expressions in daily life. Phrases like *subhanallah*, *alhamdulillah*, and *allahu akbar* are typically repeated 33 times each after the five daily prayers. *Astagfirullah*, meaning "I seek forgiveness from Allah," is often used to express repentance or awareness of personal wrongdoing. Beyond ritual use, it frequently appears spontaneously in daily situations to convey shock, concern, or regret. This integration of Arabic into the Indonesian language is natural, given Indonesia's position as the most populous Muslim-majority country. The frequent use of religious expressions aligns with Tamir et al. (2020) in *The Global God Divide*, which identifies Indonesia as the most religious country in the world: 96% of Indonesians believe that faith in God is necessary for morality, and 98% affirm the importance of religion in their lives.

Istighfar and other forms of *dhikr* are classified by many linguistic studies as interjections—language units that express spontaneous emotional reactions and stand outside of typical syntactic structures. Ameka (1992) defines interjections as pragmatically rich expressions that convey surprise, pain, or disgust. Although often excluded from formal linguistic analysis due to their grammatical independence, interjections reflect the sociocultural values of their speakers, making them a worthy area of study. In the Indonesian context, this area remains underexplored. Interjections like *aduh* and *istighfar* offer insight into both linguistic form and cultural function, with *istighfar* especially notable for its dual semantic dimensions—sacred and secular—which show how religious expressions can evolve into everyday pragmatic tools.

The uniqueness of *istighfar* as an interjection lies in its ability to transcend its strictly religious function. According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI)*, *astagfirullah* originates from the Arabic expression—أَسْتَغْفِرُ (*astagfir*, "I seek forgiveness") and اللّٰه (*Allāh*, "The One to be Worshipped")—and carries multiple meanings: (1) a request for Allah's forgiveness, (2) an exclamation expressing astonishment mixed with sorrow, (3) an utterance of resignation and remorse to Allah, and (4) a devotional phrase to express regret for sins and mistakes. The second meaning in particular shows that *istighfar* is not always used in explicitly religious contexts. For example, in the title of a news article about corruption, a journalist writes:

Example (1)

Astaghfirullah, Kode 'Uang Zakat' Jadi Modus Korupsi Direksi LPEI ke Debitur!

Astaghfirullah, the 'Zakat Money' Code Used as a Corruption Modus by LPEI Directors Toward Debtors!

(https://disway.id/read/859269)

This expression conveys more of a sense of outrage than a plea for forgiveness. Such semantic shifts are consistent with the findings of Nübling (2001) who observed similar desanctification in the use of religious interjections like *Jesus!* in German and English. However, unlike interjections such as *aduh*—which are religiously neutral—*istighfar* retains a complex religio-cultural resonance, making it a more multidimensional linguistic phenomenon.

A comparison with other interjections like *aduh* and *alhamdulillah* (to be discussed later) further highlights the distinctiveness of *istighfar*. While *aduh* is secular and devoid of religious ties, *alhamdulillah* ("praise be to Allah") tends to preserve its spiritual meaning even in casual conversation. *Istighfar*, on the other hand, displays greater flexibility: it can function both as a purely spiritual expression in prayer or *dhikr*, and as a form of social critique in public discourse. This

flexibility reflects a process of pragmaticalization, in which the lexical meaning of a word undergoes shifts and contextual adjustments (Wierzbicka, 2003).

Studies that specifically examine interjections in Indonesian—such as those by Azwar & Agustina (2019), Efendi et al. (2022), Hardiah (2012), Pertiwi & Nusarini (2018), Widiatmoko & Waslam (2017)—have noted that *istighfar* and other *dhikr* expressions are also categorized as interjections in the Indonesian language. This classification aligns with (Kridalaksana, 2005) view, who was among the first to define certain *dhikr* utterances as secondary or derived interjections originating from Arabic. A critical review of these studies reveals four key observations. First, existing research has primarily addressed interjections in general, without focusing specifically on *dhikr* utterances as interjections in Indonesian. Second, most studies assume that each *dhikr* expression conveys only a single pragmatic meaning. In reality, however, interjections such as *astagfirullah* can express a wide range of emotions—including disgust, disappointment, pain, or shock—depending on the context. Third, the categorization systems used in these studies remain underdeveloped, lacking a systematic application of interjectivity parameters. Fourth, many rely heavily on direct observation or introspective data, overlooking the potential of textual sources such as literary works or mass media. However, a text-based approach is essential for uncovering pragmatic meanings within authentic contexts. These findings suggest that dhikr expressions used as interjections remain an underexplored domain in Indonesian linguistics.

Moreover, the relevance of this research lies in its effort to bridge the gap between the study of religious interjections and semantic-cultural analysis in Indonesian linguistics. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, introduced by Wierzbicka (1996), allows for the deconstruction of *istighfar*'s meaning into basic emotional and cognitive components—such as "I feel something bad about this" or "I don't want this to happen." To date, this approach has not been applied to religious interjections in Indonesian, despite its potential to reveal layers of meaning often overlooked in conventional studies.

This study focuses on identifying the linguistic features of *istighfar* as an interjection and analyzing its meaning through the NSM framework. The research questions are formulated as follows: (1) What are the linguistic characteristics of *istighfar* as an interjection? and (2) How can its meaning be analyzed using the NSM approach? The objectives of this study are, first, to identify *istighfar* as an interjection and determine its degree of interjectivity; and second, to analyze the universal semantic components that shape its meaning. In doing so, this study aims not only to describe surface-level linguistic phenomena but also to explore how cultural and religious values are reflected in language use.

Interjections are widely recognized in linguistics as a grammatical category used to express emotions. Kridalaksana (2005) and Moeliono et al. (2017) define them as syntactically independent function words conveying feelings such as sadness or surprise, a view echoed by Ameka (1992), Crystal (2006), and Biber & Quirk (2012). Ponsonnet (2025) further emphasizes their cross-linguistic ubiquity and centrality in communication, while Sipayung et al. (2025) highlight their functional diversity in Indonesian, classifying them into expressive, conative, and phatic types. Yet, most definitions assume the presence of an interlocutor. In fact, interjections may also occur without one, as in *aduh*! ('ouch!'). To address this, Nübling (2004) introduced interjectivity parameters, accommodating both addressed and unaddressed uses.

Nübling's model evaluates interjections along a continuum using four key criteria: (1) emotive function, (2) exclamatory form, (3) lack of a required addressee, and (4) semi-automatic production. Highly emotive and spontaneous expressions like *ow!* or *ugh!* are considered prototypical, while interjections like *hmm* show lower interjectivity. This framework is valuable for examining interjections such as *astagfirullah*, which may appear syntactically isolated but convey layered emotive and religious meanings. Interjections can also be classified based on formal linguistic features, including phonology, morphology, and etymology (Stange, 2016), as well as by origin (primary vs. secondary, native vs. borrowed) and function (neutral, taboo, religious).

To further analyze meaning, this study adopts the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach developed by Wierzbicka and colleagues. NSM relies on semantic primes—

approximately 65 cognitively universal concepts found in all languages—that allow for culturally neutral semantic explication (Gladkova & Larina, 2018). NSM has been applied in the study of interjections precisely because of their emotional and culturally specific nature, which resists direct translation. It has been validated across more than 30 languages and offers a culturally sensitive alternative to traditional lexicography (Drobnak, 2009).

NSM's relevance to interjection research is well-documented. Goddard (2014) provided systematic semantic explications of religious interjections like *Jesus!* and *Christ!* in Australian English. Wierzbicka (2010) extended the method to emotional concepts across cultures, while other studies (e.g., Gladkova et al., 2016) confirmed the explanatory power of NSM even for non-lexical interjections like *wow!* and *yuck!*. He also proposed a structural model for NSM explication of interjections, consisting of five components: trigger, reaction, expressive impulse, word utterance, and metalexical awareness. This framework enables a structured analysis of interjections like *astagfirullah*, which combine emotive, cultural, and religious meanings in Indonesian discourse.

B. Method

Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). The primary data consist of fifteen Indonesian novels by prominent authors such as Andrea Hirata, Ayu Utami, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, along with Islamic-themed works like *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* and *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy. Novels were selected because, as Goddard (2014) notes, literary texts provide rich context that enables nuanced analysis of interjections, including the portrayal of inner speech. From these novels, 21 occurrences of the *istighfar* interjection were identified, most of them in Islamic novels where *zikir* frequently appears Azhari et al. (2022). Supplementary data were drawn from Google News headlines to illustrate the prominence of *istighfar* in reports of tragic events, though with limited variation. In addition, everyday communicative experiences—including spontaneous conversations and selected social media comments within the researcher's observation—were considered to validate the natural occurrence of interjections. Social media comments were chosen because of their rapid circulation and widespread use, making them an important site of linguistic practice (Putri & Ermanto, 2022). Thus, novels serve as the main data source, while news texts and everyday interactions, including limited social media data, provide complementary evidence.

The research began with informal observations and the researcher's intuitive awareness of the emergence of *istighfar* as an interjection in everyday discourse. The data collection and analysis process followed several sequential stages. First, the researcher systematically gathered and filtered data from the three aforementioned sources. Second, various forms of *istighfar* interjections were identified, including variants such as *astaghfirullah*, *astagfirullahaladzim*, and abbreviated forms like *astagfrllh*, which are frequently found in social media comments—an occurrence considered common, as noted by Ariesta et al. (2021). Third, the data were analyzed using two frameworks: (1) the theory of interjectivity to examine the category, function, and status of the interjection; and (2) the NSM framework to construct semantic explications based on five elements: trigger, reaction, expressive impulse, word utterance, and metalexical awareness. This process involved iterative revisions of the draft explications in response to new data and to ensure internal coherence of meaning.

To further clarify the meaning and function of the *istighfar* interjection, it was compared with *aduh* and *alhamdulillah*. *Aduh* represents a productive primary interjection, while *alhamdulillah* serves as its pragmatic antonym expressing gratitude. This comparison positions *istighfar* within the broader spectrum of Indonesian interjections in terms of frequency, emotional intensity, and social perception. As Unuabonah & Daniel (2020) note in their study of Nigerian English, cross-interjective comparison is essential for revealing cultural values and emotional nuances; similarly, analyzing *istighfar* alongside *aduh* and *alhamdulillah* highlights its specific pragmatic role in Indonesian discourse.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Formal properties of the *istighfar* interjection

The formal properties of interjections, as outlined by Stange (2016), encompass a range of linguistic dimensions including phonology, etymology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and gesture. Meinard (2015) similarly emphasizes that interjections constitute a heterogeneous class whose formal and functional properties cut across multiple levels of linguistic description, thereby resisting a uniform definition. In terms of phonology, the interjection *astaghfirullah* does not exhibit significant phonetic variation, and thus does not warrant further elaboration in this respect. The remaining aspects are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Etymologically, *astaghfirullah* is a loanword from Arabic, as previously discussed in the introduction. It is a shortened form of *astaghfirullahalazim*, similar to how *subhanallah* is derived from *subhanallahilazim*, and *innalillah* from *innalillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un*. Although both *astaghfirullah* and *astaghfirullahalazim* are used as interjections, their semantic explications differ subtly. However, this distinction is not elaborated upon here due to the extremely limited occurrence of *astaghfirullahalazim* in our dataset—appearing only once across the novels examined. This scarcity of data renders it difficult to conduct a reliable analysis, provide empirical justification, or draw definitive conclusions. Therefore, any claim of difference between the two forms remains intuitive and provisional.

Morphologically, *astaghfirullah* functions as a monomorphemic word in Indonesian, despite being a complete phrase in its source language, Arabic. In the Indonesian context, it is considered a "frozen form," meaning it does not undergo morphological processes such as derivation or inflection. That is, *astaghfirullah* cannot be affixed or reduplicated. This stands in contrast to interjections such as *aduh*, which can undergo prefixation—e.g., *mengaduh*, meaning "to utter '*aduh*'." Theoretically, interjections—particularly primary ones—are generally characterized as frozen forms, although a minority are derivable and can participate in morphological processes.

Syntactically, *istighfar* exhibits core features commonly associated with interjections, namely its ability to stand alone in an utterance and its lack of integration into the syntactic structure of a sentence. As noted by Biber et al. (2016), interjections are "stand-alone" elements or loosely attached insertions within clauses or non-clausal structures. Similarly, Andrason (2022) demonstrates that emotive interjections in Polish, while often functioning independently, may also display predicate-like behavior by requiring arguments such as an experiencer or a causer. In the same vein, Mikel (2017) shows that the Ancient Greek interjection $\tilde{ά}$ can even operate autonomously as a directive act equivalent to "Stop doing that!", thereby challenging the assumption that interjections are structurally and pragmatically marginal. Taken together, these studies suggest that interjections, including *astaghfirullah*, can range from minimal, self-contained utterances to more contextually embedded elements with complex grammatical behavior. In spoken discourse, *astaghfirullah* is frequently uttered spontaneously, without needing to be embedded within a more complex grammatical construction. The following four utterances illustrate emotional responses to a preceding statement:

Example (2)

(a) "*Astagfirullah! Kok kamu bisa berpikir begitu?*"
Astaghfirullah! How could you think that way?
(b) "*Kok kamu bisa berpikir begitu? Astagfirullah!*"
How could you think that way? Astaghfirullah!"
(c) "*Astagfirullah!*"
Astaghfirullah!

(d) "*Kok kamu bisa berpikir begitu?*"
How could you think that way?

Fundamentally, these four responses convey the same core meaning, though they differ in nuance. Example (a) represents a full form functioning as an emotive interjection, while (b) serves as a phatic interjection, helping to maintain conversational flow. Example (c) is a minor utterance that implicitly reflects the intent of (a) or (b), requiring contextual interpretation to uncover its full meaning. In contrast, example (d), which lacks any interjection, demonstrates that *astaghfirullah* is not a syntactic requirement such as a subject or predicate, and its omission does not hinder the comprehensibility of the utterance. However, in (c), the interjection stands alone and still effectively conveys the communicative essence found in (a) and (b), though the interlocutor must infer the speaker's intent from the situational context. Examples (a) and (b) also illustrate that interjections can be transposed within the utterance structure, although such positional shifts may reduce the degree of perceived interjectiveness.

Interjections generally lack a fixed lexical meaning; instead, they function pragmatically, relying heavily on context to convey the speaker's emotional reaction or attitude. As Tesnière (1976, cited in Stange, 2016) explains, interjections like *astagfirullah!* condense complex meanings, which would otherwise require lengthy paraphrases—for example, "I am shocked because I stumbled"—into a brief and economical verbal expression, namely just "*astagfirullah!*". However, this meaning is not inherently tied to the lexical structure of the interjection itself but depends largely on extralinguistic context, including the speech situation, intonation, and the social relationship between speaker and listener (Wilkins, 1992). For instance, in the context of someone stumbling, the interjection *astagfirullah!* can be interpreted as "I feel pain because I stumbled" or "I am shocked and hurt due to stumbling." In another context, such as hearing bad news, the same expression may be understood as "I am shocked upon hearing the unfortunate event."

Semantic analyses of interjections by (Wierzbicka, 1992) and (Goddard, 2014) affirm that the meaning of interjections is deictic—that is, intrinsically tied to the speaker's immediate experience. For instance, the interjection *ouch!* conveys the meaning 'I am feeling pain right now,' without referencing a general or abstract notion of pain. Additionally, interjections are often polysemous or homophonic, indicating that they lack a single, stable lexical meaning. Therefore, the primary significance of interjections lies in their pragmatic function—to express emotion, assert an attitude, or deliver spontaneous responses to specific situations—rather than in any fixed denotative meaning. As discussed previously, interjections are best understood as 'linguistic acts' that can only be fully interpreted within the discourse and cultural context of the speaker."

Interjections and gestures share a close relationship in communication, where interjections are frequently accompanied by facial expressions or body movements that reinforce their meaning. (Nübling, 2004) observes that reflexive interjections in English, such as *Brr!* accompanied by shivering or *Ugh!* accompanied by tongue protrusion, illustrate how gestures and interjections work simultaneously to convey emotions. Similarly, *astagfirullah* as a religious interjection is often uttered with certain gestures reflecting disbelief, regret, or disapproval. Typically, this interjection is accompanied by head shaking as a form of rejection or disagreement toward something considered wrong or inappropriate. Conversely, uttering *astagfirullah* while nodding the head sounds unnatural because nodding usually signals agreement, whereas this interjection expresses a negative reaction.

2. Categorization and parameters of interjectiveness

As previously mentioned, *istighfar* is categorized as a secondary interjection because it originates from a word with an independent lexical meaning that has undergone semantic shift. Besides being a secondary interjection, *istighfar* is also classified as a loan interjection, as it is borrowed from Arabic and adopted into Indonesian with an expanded meaning. Similar to *Bravo!* from Italian or *Gesundheit!* from German, which have undergone functional shifts in English

(Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2016), *istighfar* has experienced a change in function in Indonesian—from a religious expression to a broader emotional exclamation. However, in Arabic itself, *istighfar* is not used as an interjection; Arabic speakers more commonly use phrases like *Wa-'izzat Allah* ("By the honor of Allah") and *Wi-Hyaat Allah* ("By the life of Allah") as near-equivalent exclamations to express surprise or disapproval (Ljung, 2011). This demonstrates that although loanwords may retain their original form, their pragmatic meanings and usage can shift in the target language to suit the communicative needs of its speakers.

Based on the functional analysis of interjections proposed by (Ameka, 1992), *istighfar* in Indonesian is best categorized as an emotive interjection and is not appropriate to classify it as a phatic or conative interjection. Emotive interjections serve to mark spontaneous emotional reactions to an event or stimulus, and the general use of *istighfar* reflects this function. An example is as follows:

Example (3)

Zumrah langsung diusir Pak Masykur. Seketika itulah Pak Masykur jatuh kena serangan jantung. "Astaghfirullah!" Desis Husna.

Zumrah was immediately expelled by Mr. Masykur. At that moment, Mr. Masykur suffered a heart attack.
"*Astaghfirullah*!" Husna hissed.

(*Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 2*, p. 48)

This expression reflects the speaker's shock and disbelief at the sudden and tragic event. In this context, *astagfirullah* is not used to initiate or maintain communication channels (the phatic function typical of greetings like *hello* or *excuse me*), nor to directly influence the behavior or response of the interlocutor (the conative function seen in utterances like *ssst!* or *hey!*). Therefore, although sometimes it may resemble a reprimand, the primary function of *istighfar* remains within the domain of spontaneous, personal emotional expression rather than serving as a directive or interpersonal communicative tool.

Istighfar in Indonesian can be classified as an expletive interjection when used spontaneously to express negative emotions such as shock, anger, or annoyance, without the literal intention of seeking forgiveness. According to Ljung (2011), expletive interjections serve as outlets for negative emotions, are often taboo, and stand-alone syntactically. *Astagfirullah* fits these characteristics, similar to the English interjection *Jesus*, which, despite its religious origin, functions as an emotional reaction rather than a religious invocation. Both interjections share a similarity as reactive expressions that have shifted from their original meanings. Comparatively, *Jesus* is considered a taboo expletive due to its potential to violate Christian norms, whereas *astagfirullah* is a euphemistic expletive because it retains its religious meaning and softens the emotional outburst. This distinction highlights the influence of culture and religion on the classification of expletive interjections.

Based on the parameters of interjectiveness proposed by Nübling (2004), *astagfirullah* in Indonesian demonstrates a relatively high degree of interjectiveness as it fulfills most features of prototypical interjections. First, *astagfirullah* is primarily emotive, used to express pain, disgust, and negative surprise. Second, it functions as a call or exclamation, often uttered with a high intonation in response to emotional stimuli. Third, this interjection does not require a direct addressee, unlike phatic interjections such as *hello* or *excuse me* that seek a response from the interlocutor. Fourth, *astagfirullah* is produced semi-automatically, meaning its usage is often spontaneous, instantaneous, or fleeting, as illustrated in the following example:

Example (4)

Ia tersenyum sendiri. Entah kenapa tiba-tiba berkelebat pikiran, andai yang berjalan itu adalah dirinya dan Eliana. Alangkah indahnya.
"*Astaghfirullah!*"
la beristighfar. Ia merasa apa yang berkelebat dalam pikirannya itu sudah tidak dianggap benar.

He smiled to himself. Suddenly, a thought flashed—what if the one walking was him and Eliana? How beautiful that would be.
"*Astaghfirullah!*"
He sought forgiveness. He felt that what flashed through his mind was no longer considered true.

(*Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 1*, p. 5)

Nonetheless, compared to primary interjections such as *aduh!* or *ih!* which are more reflexive and syntactically autonomous, *astagfirullah* still maintains a connection with more complex linguistic structures and can be used within longer sentence constructions. Therefore, *astagfirullah* occupies a relatively high position on the interjectiveness continuum but remains less flexible than primary interjections that are fully spontaneous and syntactically independent.

3. NSM Analysis of The Istighfar Interjection

The explication of the interjection *astagfirullah* within the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework was developed through a methodology that is both analytically rigorous and interpretatively reflective. This approach draws not only on systematic linguistic data but also incorporates empirical observations from everyday language use and introspective insights into the social and emotional contexts in which this interjection is employed. The formulation process was dialogic in nature, shaped through discussions and deliberations both among researchers and with lay respondents. These exchanges helped to refine the semantic dimensions, pragmatic functions, and motivational underpinnings of *istighfar* in contemporary Indonesian discourse.

As a comparative step, *istighfar* was analyzed alongside other interjections such as *aduh*—a neutral and general exclamation—and *alhamdulillah*, which intuitively functions as its spiritual antonym. This triangulation aims to highlight the unique expressive and moral function of *astagfirullah* within the broader landscape of Indonesian interjections. Based on our analysis, the following NSM explication of *astagfirullah* is proposed:

[A] Astagfirullah!
1. **Trigger: (a)** I know: something just happened in one moment; (b) I think like this: "this thing is bad, people shouldn't do this"; (c) I can also think like this: "I did something bad, I shouldn't have done it."
2. **Reaction: (**a) I feel something bad because of this; (b) I feel like this: "this is wrong, this is a sin."; (c) I feel afraid that this is not good according to God's will.
3. **Expressive Impulse:** (a) I want to say something now because I feel like this; (b) I want to say something to God and to other people; (c) I want to say it in one moment.
4. **Word Utterance: (**a) Because I feel like this, I say this word: {astagfirullah}
5. **Metalexical Awareness**: (a) I think about this word like this: "this word means: I want God to forgive me.", (b) I know many people say this word when they feel they or someone else did something bad; (c) Many people think like this: "it is good if someone says this word when they feel they did a sin or saw something sinful."; (d) I also know: some people say this word because they want to show that they are good according to God's will.

The use of *istighfar* reflects not only a spontaneous emotional reaction to events perceived as sinful or morally wrong but also a performative act that publicly signals one's religious and moral identity. In both daily conversations and media texts, this interjection often serves as a moral and spiritual marker, expressing shared values and affiliations. Its pragmatic use reveals how it functions as a tool of moral judgment and a mechanism of self-positioning within a religiously-influenced speech community.

Example (5)

Astagfirullah, Pemuda di Madura Aniaya Ibu Kandung karena Tak Dikasih Uang Rp200 Ribu
Astagfirullah, Young Man in Madura Assaults His Biological Mother for Being Denied Rp200,000

(https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/5936268)

In the headline above, *astagfirullah* appears as an initial response to shocking information laden with moral gravity. From an NSM perspective, the speaker (in this case, the editorial voice) anticipates that readers will experience an immediate cognitive reaction: "this thing is bad, people should not do this." The act of physically assaulting one's own mother for money activates deeply embedded moral and religious schemas. The emotional response is framed by feelings of wrongness and fear of sin, as captured in the reaction component of the NSM explication. The interjection also serves as a spontaneous expressive impulse directed both toward God and as a moral evaluation of the perpetrator's behavior.

Example (6)

"Hati-hati Kak."
"Itu tukang becak nyawanya rangkap kali. Nylonong sembarangan. Dasar!" Umpat Azzam spontan.
"Nak, kalau ngomong jangan kasar begitulah. Tidak enak didengar." Tegur Bu Nafis.
"Astaghfirullah. Iya Bu. Kadang setan memang ada di mulut juga."

Be careful, Kak."
"That rickshaw driver must have nine lives. Barging through like that. Idiot!" Azzam cursed spontaneously.
"Son, don't speak like that. It's unpleasant to hear," said Bu Nafis.
"*Astagfirullah*. You're right, Bu. Sometimes the devil is in the tongue too."

(*Ketika Cinta Bertasbih 2*, p. 223)

In the above dialogue, *astagfirullah* is uttered as a reflective response following a reprimand for inappropriate language. It illustrates the speaker Azzam's moral awareness and internal sense of guilt. According to the NSM framework, this represents an internal trigger: "I did something bad, I should not have done it." The interjection emerges from an emotional mix of shame and fear of sin, immediately followed by a self-reflective comment that reinforces the moral motivation behind the utterance. This example underscores how *astagfirullah* functions as an entry point for moral recognition, confession, and rationalization—bridging inner emotional states and religious verbal expression in Indonesian communicative culture.

4. NSM-based comparison of the interjections *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah*

If *astagfirullah* marks an awareness of wrongdoing or sin, *alhamdulillah* expresses acceptance or joy in response to something pleasant. In this way, it functions as both a spiritual and pragmatic antonym to *astagfirullah*. In Indonesian, the interjection *alhamdulillah* possesses functional flexibility that makes it difficult to classify under a single category, as its usage spans the boundaries between emotive and phatic interjections. As an emotive interjection, *alhamdulillah* appears when the speaker spontaneously expresses gratitude or personal pleasure—for example, after sipping a warm cup of coffee or receiving good news in daily life. In such contexts, its utterance reflects an individual emotional response to something pleasant. However, *alhamdulillah* also serves as a phatic interjection, especially at the beginning of formal speeches, where it not only conveys personal gratitude but also functions as a polite and religious opening marker—indicating that the speech is beginning in a spirit of thankfulness to God.

In other cases, such as in the headline:

Example (7)

Indonesia Menang Lawan Bahrain, Prabowo: Alhamdulillah, Kita Berhasil
Indonesia Defeats Bahrain, Prabowo: Alhamdulillah, We Succeeded"
(https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2025/03/26/01081211/indonesia-menang-lawan-bahrain-prabowo-alhamdulillah-kita-berhasil)

Alhamdulillah can be read as combining emotive and phatic functions. On one hand, it shows personal joy about a victory; on the other, it is delivered to the public as part of socio-political communication. In this context, we tend to classify it as a phatic interjection, since its primary function is to connect personal emotions with the wider audience while also constructing a religious and communal image—not merely as a spontaneous emotional outburst.

Based on the explanation and examples observed, the following is the NSM explication of the interjection *alhamdulillah*.

[B] Alhamdulillah
1. **Trigger:** (a) I know: something just happened in one moment; (b) I think like this: "something good just happened."; (c) I think like this: "I wanted this to happen, and it is happening now."
2. **Reaction:** (a) I feel something very good because of this; (b) I think like this: "someone who is not me did something good for me."; (c) I think like this: "God did something good for me."
3. **Expressive Impulse:** (a) I want to say something good now because of this; (b) I want to say it in one moment; (c) I want to say it to other people or to God.
4. **Word Utterance:** (a) Because of this, I say this word: {alhamdulillah}
5. **Metalexical Awareness:** (a) I think about this word like this: "Many people use this word to say something to God when they feel something good."; (b) Many people think like this: "this is a good and polite word to say when someone receives something good."; (c)I also know: some people say this word because they want to show that they are good according to God's will.

Although *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah* operate in different emotional and spiritual domains, based on [A] and [B], they share a point of similarity in terms of metalexical awareness. Both speakers of *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah* generally understand that these words carry religious meaning and are used in social contexts to signal a morally or spiritually upright position before

God and others. They are perceived as "good and polite" expressions according to social and religious norms and are often uttered to show that the speaker is a pious or devout person.

Nonetheless, their fundamental difference lies in the trigger for their use (the point of contrast). *Astagfirullah* is uttered when someone becomes aware of something bad, wrong, or sinful—either done by themselves or by others—and is usually accompanied by discomfort and fear of the moral or spiritual consequences of the event. In contrast, *alhamdulillah* is a response to something good, pleasant, or fulfilling, and is accompanied by feelings of joy, gratitude, and acknowledgment of God's kindness.

Thus, while both reflect subconscious spiritual communication, *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah* stand at opposite ends of the meaning spectrum: one responds to wrongdoing with repentance, the other responds to goodness with praise and gratitude.

Importantly, no data was found in which *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah* were used together, indicating that these two interjections mark distinct emotional and moral domains—one to express shock or remorse over something bad, and the other to express thankfulness for something good. Conversely, data show that *astagfirullah* is sometimes used alongside *inna lillahi*, both marking negative situations:

Example (8)

Innalillahi, Astagfirullah, Runner Up Puteri Indonesia Ungkap Kondisi Kebakaran Rumahnya di Kolaka
Inna lillahi, Astagfirullah, Runner-Up of Puteri Indonesia Reveals House Fire Incident in Kolaka
(https://sultra.tribunnews.com/2022/07/31/innalillahi-astagfirullah-runner-up-puteri-indonesia-ungkap-kondisi-kebakaran-rumahnya-di-kolaka?page=2)

This strengthens the interpretation that *astagfirullah* and *alhamdulillah* operate in semantically opposite domains. The former expresses awareness of sin and a plea for forgiveness, while the latter expresses acceptance and gratitude for blessings or happiness. Therefore, from a pragmatic and NSM structural perspective, *alhamdulillah* can be considered the interjective antonym of *astagfirullah*.

5. NSM-based comparison of the interjections *astagfirullah* and *aduh*

The interjection *aduh* and its variants such as *duh*, *waduh*, or *uh* are highly productive forms in Indonesian. This interjection is often used to express spontaneous reactions to various situations, whether negative or positive. In certain contexts, *aduh* can even appear alongside *astagfirullah*, especially when responding to emotionally or physically painful or shocking events. This dual usage can be seen in the following example:

Example (9)

Aku teringat belum shalat Ashar, Maghrib dan Isya. Aku ingin bangkit tapi seluruh tubuhku terasa lumpuh. Kepalaku tiba-tiba terasa sakit sekali. "Aduuh! Astaghfirullah!" aku menahan sakit tiada terkira.

I suddenly remembered that I had not prayed Ashar, Maghrib, and Isha. I wanted to get up but my whole body felt paralyzed. My head suddenly hurt terribly. "Aduuh! Astaghfirullah!" I endured unbearable pain.

(*Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, p. 128)

In the example above, *aduh* and *astagfirullah* occur simultaneously. *Aduh* expresses general pain or surprise and has a neutral-secular nature, whereas *astagfirullah* adds a religious nuance of acknowledging a mistake or seeking forgiveness. Both complement each other in intensifying the emotional impression of the situation faced.

However, unlike *astagfirullah*, whose use is limited to reactions to bad or sinful matters, *aduh* has a much broader flexibility. It can also be used in pleasant contexts, as seen in the following example.

Example (10)

Sabari makan dari belas kasihan para pemilik warung nasi di seputar pasar. Kalau tak sedang ingin melamun, sesekali dia membantu mencuci piring. Pegawai warung memberinya kopi.
"Terima kase, Kak," langsung diminumnya. "Aduh enaknya teh ini."

Sabari ate from the generosity of food stall owners around the market. When he wasn't lost in thought, he *occasionally* helped wash the dishes. One of the stall workers gave him some tea. "Thank you, Miss," he said, and drank it right away. "Ah, this tea is delicious!"

(*Ayah*, pp. 283–284)

In this example, *aduh* is used to express a strong feeling of pleasure while enjoying a warm drink. This shows that the interjection *aduh* does not only mark discomfort or suffering but also enjoyment and admiration. Thus, *aduh* covers a wider emotional scope than *astagfirullah*, which only appears in negative contexts.

Because of its inclusive nature of various impressions, *aduh* can be categorized as an impressional interjection, emphasizing the strength of the sensation or impact felt rather than moral or spiritual content. Conversely, *astagfirullah* is more emotive as it relates directly to a moral or religious response to an event. Therefore, the explication of the meaning of *aduh* is as follows.

[3] Aduh!
1. **Trigger:** (a) I know: something just happened in a moment. (b) I think like this: "This might feel not good" or "I feel something very good now."
2. **Reaction:** (a) I feel something strong because of this.; (b) I can feel pain, surprise, discomfort, or I can feel very happy, very comfortable, or very impressed.
3. **Expressive Impulse:** (a) I want to say something now because I feel something strong.; (b) I want to say it in a moment.
4. **Word Utterance:** (a) Because of this, I say this word: {aduh}.
5. **Metalexical Awareness:** I think about this word like this: (a) "Many people say this word when they feel pain, surprise, or discomfort."; (b) "Many people also say this word when they feel very comfortable, very happy, or very impressed."; (c) "People think this word can be said spontaneously when something feels strong in the body or mind, whether good or bad."; (d) "This word is not considered bad."

With the flexibility of meaning and function it possesses, *aduh* is one of the most fluid interjections in Indonesian, able to bridge physical and emotional expressions across a broad spectrum of Indonesian experiences—from suffering to enjoyment.

D. Conclusion

This study investigated the linguistic characteristics and semantic meaning of *istighfar* as an interjection in Indonesian, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework. The analysis confirms that *astagfirullah*—as the most commonly used form of *istighfar*—is a secondary borrowed interjection that ranks high on the interjectivity continuum. It meets the core criteria of prototypical interjections: it appears spontaneously, stands independently of syntactic structures, does not require a direct addressee, and primarily functions to express emotional responses. Moreover, *istighfar* is not merely emotive; it embodies strong religious connotations. It is often used in response to personal guilt, witnessing others' wrongdoing, or encountering morally disturbing events, functioning as a linguistic manifestation of ethical reflection and spiritual alertness.

Through NSM analysis, the meaning of *istighfar* is decomposed into universal semantic components that reveal a deep cultural and religious script embedded in its usage. These components include feelings of discomfort, fear of divine judgment, and the impulse to utter a word that simultaneously addresses both God and others. The study shows that *astagfirullah* reflects not only spontaneous emotional expression but also the speaker's moral and religious positioning in social interactions. Additionally, the frequent use of this interjection highlights how language serves as a mirror of religiosity, especially in Indonesian society—recognized globally for its high level of religious devotion. These findings align with Goddard's studies on religious interjections like *Jesus!* and *Christ!* in English yet contrast with the Indonesian case where *istighfar* retains its sacredness rather than undergoing desacralization. In short, *istighfar* exemplifies how interjections can function as both emotive tools and expressions of religious identity in contemporary Indonesian discourse.

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