



EXAMINING SPEECH ACTS AS LINGUISTIC SIGNS OF COERCION IN MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE ON LANGUAGE POLICY

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Abstract:

In a political discourse like a parliamentary debate, speech acts are used to convince or persuade others to believe in parliamentarians' course of actions. The speech acts are used as part of coercive strategies when the third level, i.e., the perlocutionary acts, are manipulated for the purpose of getting an immediate effect through a speaker's words. The acts include persuading, convincing, scaring, insulting, and getting the addressee to do something. This study examined the Malaysian Parliamentarians' (MPs) discursive statements on a debatable language issue; the use of English in the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics. Debate transcripts (hansards) that consist of speeches of the government-alliance MPs were analysed to see how the speech acts were adopted as coercive strategies in positioning themselves and the policy at the parliamentary level. Adopting a semiotic approach, this research investigates the use of linguistic features of coercion in a large pool of data collected from verbatim written transcripts of the *Dewan Rakyat*, which were available online. The results of the study indicated that a high number of coercive signs were adopted by the MPs when deliberating support for the policy implementation. Moreover, inferences made on the manipulations of the coercive signs illustrated that the MPs would opt for the signs that helped show their credibility and accountability in relation to the policy implementation. This study is significant in revealing the Malaysian parliamentarians' political stances in dealing with a debatable language policy by using speech acts as coercive linguistic signs.

Keywords:

Coercion, Linguistics, Parliament, Policy, Semiotics, Signs

Introduction

Parliaments are among the most diverse political institutions in democratic societies, and they have long served as a forum for free, confrontational debate among citizens' elected representatives (Ilie, 2015). It is a place where not only political deliberation, problem-solving, and decision-making are done, but also cross-rhetorically, discursively and cross-culturally shape political, social and cultural formations (Ilie, 2015). In order to understand the parliamentary debate practices, recurring linguistic trends and rhetorical techniques used by Members of parliament (MPs), is crucially needed to uncover their ideological commitments, agendas, and methods (Ilie, 2015).

Studies show how linguistic devices are used to explain the parliamentarians' rhetoric during their debate sessions. For example, a relatively high presence of strong epistemic modalities like "of course", "actually" and "certainly" that convey certainty and commitment are often utilised in British parliamentary legislative debate and provide insight into their context (Vukovic, 2014). Certain linguistic devices are also manipulated to achieve specific goals such as reducing commitment in British and Russian parliamentary debates (Sivenkova, 2008), enhancing interpersonal relationship among British parliamentarians (De Ayala, 2001), and committing avoidance in Australian Parliament (Thomson, 2020). A critical discourse analysis by Thomson (2020) on the parliamentarians' use of speech acts during the discussion on Victoria's up skirting criminalisation issue in 2007 discovered a misdirection of communicative techniques to avoid the issue. Following Thompson (2020), the rhetoric of Malaysian government MPs was also investigated through the use of speech acts in this study.

This study adopts a semiotic analysis as a point of departure to understand how the MPs accommodate their speeches with linguistic devices of coercion when debating a hotly debatable Malaysian language policy, namely the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in English (Malay acronym, PPSMI) which was implemented in all Malaysian schools from 2003 to 2012. The policy has become a contentious issue in the country due to conflicting cultural interests, role of Malay as national language and the right of using own mother tongue in the teaching of Science and Mathematics (Osman, 2022). Studies on government linguistic strategies and controversial language issues at the parliamentary level are lacking, highlighting the importance of understanding how MPs convey messages to diverse political and social backgrounds. By examining the usage of linguistic devices of coercion in the PPSMI language policy deliberations by the MPs, the study was conducted to answer these research objectives:

1. The types and frequencies of coercive devices used by the MPs in the parliamentary debate on PPSMI.
2. The way the linguistic devices of coercion used by the MPs in the PPSMI policy deliberations.

The study will reveal the language strategies of those in power and their inclinations towards certain issues, attitudes, or preferences. It will also contribute to the growing understanding of the parliament as an institution. It will also add research on the linguistic tools used in parliamentary debate, as claimed by Ilie (2010) to be lacking and under-researched.

Literature Review

Speech Acts

Speech acts are words which are used for specific performed acts. It is based on the work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), and is also known as the "How to Do Things with Words Theory". The theory explains a change in empirical verifiability of signs from a constative to a performative notion, that is, from the truthfulness of signs to what an expression does when it is pronounced. According to Austin (1962), speech acts have three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is when someone says something. It is the act of utterance production. Illocutionary acts are the essentials of speech acts. Unlike locutionary acts, the perlocutionary act is the effect or influence on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the hearers. Illocutionary acts are also known as "performatives" that are used to perform an act instead of explaining it. Thus, performatives can be defined as declarative statements that are made to perform actions. It comes with "felicity conditions," which means when the actions are performed, the felicity (happiness) occurs and vice versa. Austin (1962) posited that performatives are different from constative statements, where the latter are just utterances of fact. However, Austin significantly revised his philosophy, eventually replacing the dichotomy of "performative" vs. "constative" with a more general theory of speech actions that considers every utterance as a type of action due to the fact that, at the syntactic level, both performatives and constatives take the grammatical form of declarative sentences (1962). Austin's new approach to speech acts is later amended by Searle. Searle (1969) divided the illocutionary act into five categories (performatives). The following table demonstrates the categories:

Table 1: Searle's Classification of the Illocutionary Acts (Performatives)

Categories	Characteristics
Representatives/ Assertives	commit the speaker to something being the case, namely to the truth of the uttered proposition. They convey the speaker's belief that a speech act can be evaluated as true or false. Some of the typical verbs used to perform representative speech acts are: suggest, believe, hypothesize, insist, boast, complain, conclude, deduce, claim.
Directives	speech acts by means of which the speaker aims to get the hearer to do something. Some of the typical verbs used to perform directive speech acts are: ask, order, command, request, beg, plead, pray, entreat, invite, permit, advise, dare, defy, challenge.
Expressives	speech acts that convey the speaker's attitude to a certain state of affairs specified in the propositional content of the utterance. Some of the typical verbs used to perform expressive speech acts are: thank, apologize, congratulate.
Commissives	speech acts that commit the speaker to carrying out some future action. Some of the typical verbs used to perform commissive speech acts are: promise, offer, threaten, plan, commit. Commissives are particularly important in institutional discourse, where institutional actors put themselves under a norm-regulated obligation to accomplish an institutional action or to comply with institutional decisions.
Declaratives	speech acts whose purpose is to create a new fact corresponding to the propositional content. In other words, a declarative or declaration describes a fact in the world, and this fact is brought into existence by

the very performance of the declaration. Typical declarative acts are performed in appointing a chairperson, firing a staff member, nominating a candidate, declaring war, marrying a person, and christening.

Adapted from Ilie (2018)

The speech acts are significant in a politician's speech as they are primarily intended to convince or persuade others to believe what they are doing. It introduces and registers some of the most important illocutionary actions that speakers use to communicate their intentions in political speeches (Dylgjerii, 2017).

Coercion

Coercion is associated with the element of power. Power is realised when legitimising takes place. Nevertheless, coercion can also happen when a force is put on something, although there is no indication of legitimisation or delegitimization. Coercion strategies depend strongly on interpretation, and a researcher can identify any verbal acts that are primarily intended to coerce (Chilton, 2004).

One way coercion can occur is when words are deployed to exert power on others. The words are often used to intensify one's power or put someone in power. This normally happens for words used in legal matters such as security, war, and defence. In these areas, the words are exploited to legitimise actions. The arbitrariness of words as verbal signs (signifiers) is intelligently used to represent the concept (signified) that those in power wish to proclaim on others.

According to some critical discourse analysts, coercion is one of the linguistic realisations of the meta-strategy of persuasion, and is particularly common in political and mass-mediated discourse (Charteris-Black, 2011; Chilton, 2004; Hart, 2010; Van Dijk, 2006). Both persuasion and coercion are types of influence where the former is usually thought to be ethically justifiable, whereas the latter is thought to be unethical and only morally defensible in a few situations (Powers, 2007). Coercion begins with the institutional communicator's intention to manipulate the aggregate of recipients' information, values, and attitudes by constructing semiotic representations that serve the former's interests (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014). It often depends on the sender's abuse of their place of power or trust, and their privileged access to a variety of symbolic tools that can be used to amplify the impact on the receivers (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014). For this study, the speech acts are investigated for possible devices showing coercion in the speeches of government parliamentarians in the Malaysian *Dewan Rakyat* on the PPSMI policy.

Linguistic Signs and Semiotics

Linguistics and semiotics have common theoretical and methodological units of analysis; they share the same concept, that is, linguistic signs (Tobin, 1990). However, in Saussure's programme for linguistics, there is no provision for the study of the actual contexts in which speakers communicate with one another. Saussure's field of inquiry is relatively homogeneous. Saussure believed that a language system (a *langue*) is invariant in all contexts (Harris, 2005). The supporters of Saussure's theory are known as the autonomous linguists. In

contrast, some other linguists known as the non-autonomous claimed that treating languages as self-contained mental structures with little connection to their speakers' lives or communicational drives to which they are constantly placed makes no sense (Harris, 2005). For autonomists, communication is just a collection of uses to which the available verbal resources can be put; for non-autonomists, language is a means of communication, and the nature of the 'verbal tools' is not accounted for unless we use them to aid communicational ends (Harris, 2005). The functionalists, part of the non-autonomists, feel that linguistic structures are created based on communicational requirements and biomechanical factors (Harris, 2005). This idea is adopted by Columbia School's approach, a radical functionalism, where semiotic study of linguistic signs should take into account communicative goals of the speakers. The invention of linguistic signs is driven by the communicative role of a language. Speakers opt specific and individually meaningful linguistic signs when communicating their messages.

This research incorporates William Diver's (1995) functionalist theory, also known as the Columbia School of Linguistics. The functional approach to language involves using language to convey certain meanings. Linguistic units are chosen and used for communication, not just as a system. This aligns with the study's goal of identifying how MPs use language to gain support and maintain power. Proponents of the Columbia School believe language serves as both a means of communication and a reflection of human activity.

Debate on PPSMI in Malaysian Parliament

In 2003, all Malaysian schools were instructed to use English language as medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics (the PPSMI policy). The three main ethnic groups argued and opposed the policy, with Malay demonstrators claiming the death of the Malay language; Chinese educationalists and a number of Indians accusing PPSMI of taking their right to learn the two subjects in their mother tongue and a threat to their culture (Samuel & Tee, 2013). There are others, particularly, some academicians who positively see the policy as a process towards a better Malaysia as a developing country (David & Govindasamy, 2003; Gill, 2005). Thus, the nation was split in half on this issue. The discussion on the implementation of the language policy became contentious. Although facing delicate concerns about the sanctity of the Malay language as the national language and mother tongue as symbols of preservation of culture and traditions and other related issues, the government at that time was bold enough in defending their stance on implementing the policy. This was evident in the parliamentary debates on the policy which occurred at the Malaysian House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*) from year 2000 until 2002. The *Dewan Rakyat* at that time consisted of members from the former ruling coalition called *Barisan Nasional* (BN) and the opposition alliance called *Barisan Alternatif* (BA). The *Barisan Nasional* or BN includes three major political parties: UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), and other minority groups (like the Gerakan, SUPP, PBS). The opposition alliances were known as *Barisan Alternatif* (BA), had three parties which were PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), PKR (People's Justice Party), and DAP (Democratic Action Party). With a tumultuous socio-cultural background and language sensitivity in the country, it was a challenging task for the government to speak about the policy at the parliamentary level. The government MPs had to deliberate the PPSMI issue properly so that they could convince the Opposition and the people (*rakyat*) of the government's plans. This is because, many believed the policy was done in a haste and they seemed to be forced or coerced into doing it and became victims of a policy which was not

well-planned. As mentioned by Weinstock (2003), “Language policies inevitably involve either coercion or incentive-rigging by the state” (p. 252). Thus, it is appropriate to investigate the linguistic devices of coercion used by the MPs in their deliberation of the policy.

Methodology

Data Collection

This research investigates the usage of linguistic devices by Malaysian Members of Parliament (MPs) during language policy deliberations. The data used in this study is the Malaysian *Dewan Rakyat* transcripts, also known as Hansards, of parliamentary sessions (downloaded from www.parlimen.gov.my). The Hansards that were retrieved for this study were from early 2000 until the end of 2002. The total analysed data size for the *Dewan Rakyat* transcripts comprised excerpts from the 10th Parliament. However, the Hansards starting from February 2000 until May 2002 were not analysed because there was no discussion on the PPSMI issue. The 10th Parliament excerpts consisted of 25,034 words, which were speeches made between 19.6.2002 and 21.10.2002, months before the implementation of the policy. Altogether, the speeches were delivered by 43 MPs from the government parties. All the transcripts of the meetings were skimmed and scanned by using the PDF find search tool for any discussions on the PPSMI issue (The focus was on specific speeches on the PPSMI issue by the Malaysian parliamentarians (MPs) of all parties that formed the government at that time) by the parliamentarians. They were then put into MS Word tables and labelled based on the respective meetings, names of speakers and dates. The data for this study were obtained through the analysis of 8 meetings in total. The study combines both linguistic and textual analysis at the same time. Purposive sampling was adopted for this study because of the huge amount of data. Purposeful samples are statistically representative of the population and are made up of cases with a lot of details that can be analysed in depth (Wiersma, 2000). After gathering the samples, relevant data on the discussion on the PPSMI issue were selected. The selected data were then examined for occurrences of coercion.

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was used in determining the relevant parts of the discussion of the PPSMI issue, like showing supporting or opposing the language policy and analysing the data. The selected data were analysed semantically for the types of coercion used by the pro-government MPs in the debate. The analysis involved identifying words that resembled the types of linguistic forms and devices of coercion. Each sentence was carefully examined to find the occurrence of the linguistic features. They were coded once found. In order to be in line with the research questions and objectives, each of them was categorised systematically throughout the coding process. This was purely a linguistic examination of the language use per se, so any other elements (like tone and gesture) were not considered. After all the relevant devices were coded, the occurrences of linguistic features were manually counted to see their frequencies in the language debate. They were put into their categories which were later compared and contrasted to see which devices were more or less used in the debate. The overall frequency counts were examined to see the usage patterns of the linguistic devices in the debates. The study analysed MPs' speeches in the original Malay language, focusing on semantic signals of coercion, to accurately examine the use of devices in parliamentary data, not in English. The following table demonstrates the sample analysis:

Table 2: Sample Analysis of Coercion

No.	Content	Representatives	Directives	Commissives
S1	<i>dan saya percaya penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris untuk Sains dan Matematik untuk masa ini memadai,</i>	√		
S2	<i>tetapi bukannya lebih baik sepertimana yang dicadangkan tadi kalau kita memperkuat learning skill,</i>	√		
S3	<i>kita tunggu hujung tahun ini melihat dan kita akan meneliti sedalam-dalamnya kesan dasar pelaksanaan PPSMI.</i>			√
S4	<i>tunggulah satu dua bulan ini untuk kita membuat keputusan berhubung-kait dengannya.</i>		√	

The qualitative approach was also applied when the researcher examined selected excerpts of the speeches and scrutinised the type of linguistic devices, the semantic signs of the devices and inferred the motive of the MPs' selection of the devices by looking at the immediate context. The inference was also made based on the socio and historical context that revolved around the language policy turmoil in Malaysia

Results and Discussion

The first objective of the study is to find the types and frequencies of coercive devices used by the MPs in the parliamentary debate on PPSMI. Table 2 lists 144 coercive statements in the form of performatives made by MPs from the government coalition during the 10th parliamentary debate. The MPs' usage of coercive devices was largely in the representative category, with 79 tokens. The second highest was the directive category (45), followed by commissives (20).

Table 2 Performatives in the 10th Parliament

	Representatives	Directives	Commissives
Insisting	64	-	-
Complaining	10	-	-
Defending	5	-	-
Requesting	-	20	-
Ordering	-	14	-
Explaining	-	3	-
Reminding	-	2	-
Defying	-	6	-
Promising	-	-	17
Threatening	-	-	3
Total	79	45	20

As evidently portrayed in the data, three types of performative verbs (representatives, directives, and commissives) were found in the deliberation of the PPSMI policy in selected datasets of the 10th Parliamentary debates. The distribution of high numbers of coercive devices in the 10th Parliamentary debate showed that the MPs have selected them to naturalise the strong rejections made by the people's representatives from the opposition alliances. This is because, in the early years of the policy's implementation, two major ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely Malays and Chinese, were very harsh and protested strongly against the policy (Sua & Santhiram, 2017). The government was also greatly condemned during the 10th Parliamentary debate. Thus, as a response, the MPs became more assertive, as they received many accusations and criticisms from MPs of the opposition parties. The 10th Parliamentary session, which took place between 1999 to 2003, saw rejections from Malay (PAS) and Chinese (DAP) opposition parties. As mentioned by Kaur and Shapii (2018), the Malay people felt threatened by the change in policy, while the Chinese and Indians felt that English would infringe on their uniqueness and downgrade vernacular education.

The second research objective is to investigate the way the linguistic devices of coercion used by the MPs in the PPSMI policy deliberations. Statements made by government MPs were carefully analysed for signs of coercion. The Malay performatives that indicated persuasiveness and reflected subtle coercions were identified. Coercive devices can be classified into three of Searle's performative classifications, namely insisting (representatives), requesting (directives), and promising (commissives). The following are a few examples how coercive devices were used by the MPs:

Example 1

An example of coercion was the act of insisting. The word "insist" is defined in Malay as "*berkeras mengatakan/menegaskan/hendakkan/mahukan*" (tr. to declare/maintain firmly). In terms of making coercive allegations in the parliament, the MPs insisted that the Opposition should think positively about the implementation of the PPSMI policy. For example:

*Apa yang kita lihat di sini kita **harus** lihat secara positif, **jangan** lihat secara negatif.* (Dato' Mahadzir bin Mod Khir/Setiausaha Parlimen Kementerian Pendidikan/DR19.9.2002) (Excerpt 1)

(tr. What we see here, we should look at positively, do not look at it negatively.)

In Excerpt 1, the MP used the word “*harus*”, which is defined in Malay as “*tidak boleh tidak/tidak dapat tidak/mesti/wajib/patut*” (tr. indication of obligation), to assert that the audience “*lihat secara positif*” (tr. look positively) at the implementation of the PPSMI policy and “*jangan lihat secara negative*” (tr. do not look at it negatively). These words were a representative type of performatives that carried subtle coercion. The word “*harus*” in this context semantically showed something must be done (*wajib*). In Malay tradition, the word “*wajib*” has a strong denotation; if something is “*wajib*”, then, it must be carried out. This word is deeply rooted in Islam, whereby “*wajib*” is used with obligatory acts, such as praying five times a day and fasting in holy Ramadhan month. Thus, the first performative act of insisting in this analysis was “*kita harus lihat secara positif*,” whereby the MP opted a subtle coercive signal that the audience must take PPSMI as something beneficial for the country.

Example 2

During the 10th Parliamentary debate, government coalition members have also used request statements. Making a request is a directive performative. Directives are speech acts in which the speaker attempts to persuade the listener to take action. The following excerpt illustrates how a statement of request was manipulated to achieve the MPs’ goals:

Dalam kesempatan ini, saya ingin meminta Dewan yang mulia ini bersama-sama melihat langkah kerajaan ini sebagai usaha memperkasakan negara kita dan sebagai usaha mempertingkatkan keupayaan dan daya saing masyarakat kita supaya dapat berdiri sama tinggi dan duduk sama rendah dengan bangsa-bangsa termaju di dunia ini. (Tan Sri Dato’ Seri Musa bin Mohamad/DR17.9.2002) (Excerpt 3)

(tr. In this occasion, I would like to ask this noble House to view the government’s move as an effort to empower our country and to enhance the capacity and competitiveness of our society so that we can be on the same level as other developed nations in this world.)

Excerpt 3 displays a performative act of requesting “*ingin meminta*” (tr. would like to ask). The members of the House were requested to appreciate the implementation of the PPSMI policy as an effort by the government “*usaha memperkasakan negara kita*” (tr. effort to empower our country). The word “*ingin*” in this context means “*berasa mahu/hendak/berhasrat*” (tr. want/wish). According to Asmah (2015), “*permintaan*” (tr. request) is a soft exclusive directive. The MP was softly directing that everyone should accept and follow the policy, which was for “*negara kita*” (tr. our country). The perlocutionary act that perhaps was expected by the MP was obedience among those who were against the policy. Furthermore, through the statement of request, the MP conditioned the listeners to submit to the idea of “*mempertingkatkan keupayaan dan daya saing masyarakat kita*” (tr. enhancing the capacity and competitiveness of our society) as the reason for the policy. The Opposition were also subtly coerced to change their mind through the performative statement of request.

Example 3

The government had also made a promise in the 10th Parliamentary debate using a statement of commissive, “*kita akan mengambil kira*” (tr. we will take into account). This promise was made by the speaker so as to create a feeling (perlocutionary effect) of hopefulness, or encouragement among the listeners.

*Begitu juga, saya tahu dalam kalangan ibu bapa ada yang menimbulkan rasa kebimbangan mengenai kelas-kelas peperiksaan ini juga **kita akan mengambil kira** sekiranya ada saranan, walaupun kritikan, **kita tetap menerima**.* (Dato' Mahadzir bin Mohd Khir/DR26.6.2002) (Excerpt 5).

(tr. Similarly, I know that there are some parents who raise concerns about exam classes [children taking national exams], we will also take into account if there are suggestions, or even criticisms, we promise to accept them.)

In excerpt 5, the MP used the device “*mengambil kira*,” which means “*ambil peduli/menghiraukan/mengambil perhatian akan*” (tr. heedful). The word “*ambil peduli*” has a strong connotation in Malay, as the society is built based on cooperation, respect, and understanding. “*Ambil peduli*” can also be a part of the “*tolong-menolong*” concept (tr. helping each other). The usage of this device showed that the government was aware of the concerns and suggestions of other people. In this context, parents (*dalam kalangan ibu bapa*) were worried that their children’s exam performance would be affected, if PPSMI was practiced. Thus, the government needed to make a promise, and this was achieved through the performative act of “*kita akan mengambil kira*” (tr. we will also take into account). Politicians have to ensure that they are respected and that their power is preserved. Promises create hopefulness and encouragement, thus, leading to respect and acceptance. When a government makes a promise, they are expected to fulfil their promise. The hopeful audience will wait for the promise to be fulfilled, and thus, the phrase “*kita akan mengambil kira*” subtly created obedience. In the excerpt, the MP has also made a promise to parents (*dalam kalangan ibu bapa*) through the device “*kita tetap menerima*” (tr. we promise to accept). The word “*tetap*” in this context semantically means “*menepati/memenuhi, contohnya janji*” (tr. to be fulfilled, for example, a promise). This policy was a crucial matter, thus, the MP promised that the government will take care of it and would even accept critiques (*walaupun kritikan*) regarding the policy. The MP was painting a picture that the government was open-minded and rational. Thus, the MP was delicately coercing the parents to adhere to the policy and to make no additional negative remarks. Making a promise through the devices “*mengambil kira*” and “*tetap menerima*” were signs chosen by the MP to coerce parents to accept the policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study achieved the objectives of examining the occurrences of the different coercive devices and the way the linguistic signs of coercion were used by the government MPs in deliberating a sensitive issue of a language policy in a multiethnic setting. It can be inferred that coercive devices are heavily used when the policy is first introduced, while objections have been intertwined with ethnicity issues, the government used subtle coercive devices to make people agree with the policy and to show firmness. The MPs chose the representative category as the main linguistic form to achieve their goal. This was followed by the directive and commissive categories to deliver their messages coercively to the audience. In addition, the semiotic analysis showed that these features or devices were used to enhance credibility, and to paint images of positivity, firmness, and accountability. This study provides a unique perspective on political discourse, analysing linguistic elements from a semiotic lens, which may aid in the replication and expansion of this approach. It is recommended that future research analyse how linguistic signs can be further manipulated and linked with the notion of governmentality.

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