

Navigating Racial Slurs: Pragmatic Insights from Malaysian Political Tweets

Nursyams Nadzirah Samsul Imraq¹, Anealka Aziz^{2*}, Maizura Mohd Noor³

^{1, 2 & 3} Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA

¹ syamsnadzirah@gmail.com

² anealka@uitm.edu.my

³ maizu567@uitm.edu.my

**Corresponding author*

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Abstract

Malaysia, as a multicultural nation after its independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, was still threatened by racial tensions due to the lack of cultural awareness. The lack of cultural awareness and pragmatics competence in intercultural communication was manifested in the usage of racial slurs. As racial slurs were commonly used to insult other races, the usage of such words endorsed racism and racial discrimination, which resulted in social and racial disharmony. This study examined the pragmatics behind the usage of racial slurs in Malaysian political tweets to understand their implications on intercultural communication and social harmony. The study used purposive sampling to select fifteen postings containing racial slurs using a qualitative research design with a content analysis method. The study analysed the pragmatics behind the usage of racial slurs in Malaysian political tweets. The findings showed that although not all racial slurs were categorised as weaponised, the results indicated that Malaysians had the opportunity to select their language conscientiously, choosing neutral alternatives or refraining from using slurs entirely to show respect for other races. This held significant importance for the diverse society of Malaysia, where the preservation of social and racial harmony should not be put at risk.

Keywords: *multi-cultural, multi-racial country, political tweets, racial slur, social harmony*

Introduction

Malaysia is known for its cultural diversity and unity, especially after its independence in 1957 and formation in 1963. The Peninsular is the home to many ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as well as Negrito, Proto Malay, and Senoi, the Indigenous people of Malaysia. In Sabah and Sarawak, there are more than fifty ethnic groups, including Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Suluk, Iban, Melanau and Kadayan (Damin et al., 2016). From this, it is visible and commendable that the cultural differences in Malaysia do not hinder its people from respecting each other, demonstrating how the unity of Malaysians is bound by not just culture and patriotism but also the willingness to understand the faiths of others (Rahman, 2021). Unfortunately, despite the common notion that Malaysia is a country home to many ethnicities, there are still racial tensions among its people (Abdul Hamid & Zawawi, 2023; Ang & Kock, 2023). The social contract established to obtain independence from British colonialism - Bumiputera rights and privileges in Article 152 & Article 153 of the constitution - has led to racial tension in the present day as the Bumiputeras wish to maintain their right while others call for a country for all (Faruqi, 2008; Mohsin et al., 2020). According to

the Malaysia Racism Report (Pusat KOMAS, 2023), racial politics was the most significant contributor to the racial tension among Malaysians in 2022. Racial slurs stem from ongoing racial tensions, fueling a cycle of racism that persists without end. Such use of language is present in many Malaysians, although it is not always explicit (Lino & Hashim, 2019; Mohsin et al., 2020). Insensitive usage of racial slurs or racial-targeted remarks will offend the people of the said culture, leading to social disharmony in Malaysia.

With the advancement and accessibility of today's technology, social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter from 2006 to 2013), has allowed people to voice their opinions. Rasmussen (2013) mentioned that the Internet encourages participation in campaigns and movements and exchanging views on various issues. These exchanges include negative ones like discrimination, cyberbullying, and fights. This study is interested in investigating the use of racial slurs against the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malays, Indians, and Chinese, on X during a specific period, the 15th General Election. The three ethnic groups were chosen, as Mohsin et al. (2020) stated that there was racial tension between them due to factors like the history of Malaysia (e.g., Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia, 13 May incident) and racial politics, which have led to a deep-rooted racism among some Malaysians.

Literature Review

Multiple researchers have defined racial slurs to describe the extent to which it is offensive to the members of racial groups. Richard (2008) explained racial slurs as words with the primary purpose of hurting, menacing and subjugating people of different racial and ethnic groups. Following Kaplan's (1999) theory on descriptive and expressive content, two sides of a spectrum emerged where some considered racial slurs to be absolute expressivism (Richard, 2008; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Hedger, 2012; Hess, 2021; Jeshion, 2013) and another emphasised conditional usage of slurs as a descriptive measure, according to the circumstances (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007; O'Dea et al., 2015; O'Dea & Saucier, 2016; Diaz-Legaspe, 2019).

Richard (2008) expressed concern about allowing the descriptive use of racial slurs, focusing on "simply about its use." He highlighted the pragmatic aspect of slur usage, where the word carries illocutionary force, indicating its intended meaning. Anderson and Lepore (2013) considered racial slurs as inherently racist, as the targeted races find the terms offensive. Hess (2021) argued that using a slur is inherently derogatory, irrespective of intention, as it implies accepting its meaning. Other researchers agreed that endorsing the descriptive use of racial slurs implies agreement with the epithets' actual meaning, condoning racism (Richard, 2008; Hedger, 2012; Camp, 2013).

Regarding the descriptive use of racial slurs, factors like the relationship between interlocutors, the context of the conversation, and the intended meaning must be considered. O'Dea and Saucier (2016) stated that racial slurs vary in the level of offensiveness, with slurs among friends perceived as less offensive than

those from strangers. Racial slurs usage in a humorous context is also one of the circumstances where descriptive use of racial slurs could occur (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007; Diaz-Legaspe, 2019). Expressive usage of racial slurs is linked to a higher perceived level of offensiveness, and it depends on the acceptance of the hearer, which is also affected by the relationship between them and the speaker as well as the context of the conversation.

Some researchers suggest a mixed approach to analysing the pragmatics and semantics of racial slurs (Bach, 2018; Croom, 2014). Bach (2018) proposed loaded descriptivism, an updated version of hybrid expressivism, suggesting that slurs have a secondary meaning loaded into them, combining descriptive use with implicit expressiveness. On the other hand, Croom (2014) proposed an empirical approach to slurs, stating that the offensiveness depends on how slurs are used in natural language. The slurs may not always be offensive, and judgments should be based on empirical evidence. He illustrated this by discussing restrictions on using a specific racial term, suggesting that it should depend on the context and agreement within a community rather than being dictated by external standards.

Racism, Racial Slurs and Racial Politics in Malaysia

Malaysia, despite its multicultural population of over 60 years, still faces racial tensions. Pusat KOMAS' (2022) Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report 2021 highlighted a rise in racism and discrimination incidents, with racial and religious politics being the most prominent at 28 per cent. Malaysian politics, historically influenced by race and religion, has perpetuated social stratification and division among racial groups. The political system, favouring ethnic-based governance, contributes to racial discrimination and racism, especially when leaders invoke racial harmony selectively.

Racial slurs, used by individuals and groups, exacerbate social harmony issues, notably in politics. Instances include a political figure slurring a Malaysian Indian athlete who brought the Malaysian team to the semifinal Sudirman Cup (Vignesh, 2021) and a Malay candidate being insulted during elections when he represented a Chinese-dominated political party (Yusof, 2022). These racial slurs, often online, contribute to cyberbullying and divisive narratives on social media. The 15th Malaysian General Election witnessed a surge in race-based narratives, emphasising the influence of social media in shaping public opinion. Despite Malaysia's multicultural identity, research on racial slurs is scarce. Sensitivity around topics like racial discrimination, religion, and politics adds complexity.

X and its Role in Malaysian Politics

With its 280-character limit, X remains popular in Malaysia, boasting around 4.4 million users in early 2022 (Kemp, 2022). Despite its brevity, X is a versatile platform for communicating, sharing thoughts, and staying informed. Features like hashtags, trending topics, threads, and Spaces (live forums) facilitate easy access

to news, making it particularly appealing to the youth (Abdullah et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2023). The platform's high traffic supports various uses, including news dissemination, rumour circulation, protests, campaigns, discussions, learning, and emergency communication (Sadapotto et al., 2021).

Within the Malaysian X community, political discussions are commonplace, especially with the occurrence of the 15th General Election (GE15) in late 2022. This trend is not new, as political discourse on X was already diverse and extensive during the 13th General Election, according to Kasmani et al. (2014). They noted the vast array of information, including links to political news articles, YouTube videos, Facebook posts, and other forms of content circulating on the platform. The authors concluded that political discussions on X contribute to democratic awareness, enhance political literacy, and promote increased political participation among users, regardless of their political affiliations.

Notable political movements gaining traction on X include #KerajaanGagal, #BenderaPutih, #KitaJagaKita, and the Bersih (The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) Movement. These movements, mainly the first three, aimed to highlight government shortcomings and propose solutions to social and political issues. The impact of these online movements was substantial enough to effect change. Johns and Cheong (2019) affirmed the effectiveness of social media and online networks in mobilising and sustaining social movements, emphasising their strategic role in raising awareness and funds.

Social media, especially X, can bring political figures both criticism and a platform for effective communication with supporters or the public. According to Lim and Lee-won (2016), maintaining an online social presence is akin to having a physical presence, enabling improved communication that leaves positive impressions, especially for political figures.

In the Malaysian context, Adanan and Sualman (2018) discovered that young voters view virtual engagement as a tool to establish politicians' credibility and trustworthiness from the Malaysian perspective. While online activity does not guarantee automatic success, it goes beyond societal presence and relevance, encompassing the personality and mindset required to be a representative and leader. This is why political figures are increasingly active online, aiming to stay relevant and become key opinion leaders despite the potential for scrutiny, comments, and criticism from netizens.

Racial Slurs Against Majority Races in Malaysian Political Tweets

In general, Malaysian political discourse, the slurs *meleis* and *isley* are often mentioned to offend a Malay whose political beliefs are right winged. However, it is important also to note that these two terms are usually used by and not limited to the Malays themselves against other Malays or Muslims, especially when their opinion differs (Nurul Najihah & Mohd Nordin, 2019). The reason these are considered slur words is because they project hatred against a racial group or an attribute of the racial group.

The word '*keling*' initially referred to the people who came from the Kalinga kingdom (Dhinesha, 2020; Meddegoda, 2021; Nizha, 2018), has a negative connotation in the Malaysian context. It carries no respect or disrespect towards the receiver (Ambikaipaiker, 2008). The word also serves as an adverb or adjective such as *janji keling* and *cakap macam keling*, which rooted from internalised negative stereotypes and racism against Indians (Altabaa & Fadzir, 2022). As a slur, *keling* can also translate to 'dirty,' 'noisy,' 'disgusting' and 'problematic' (Stop calling Indians *Keling*, 2023). Another word is *pariah*, associated with the lowest caste among Indians. Most media practitioners refuse to include in any of their reports and postings because social media platforms, including Facebook, would ban or block posts with the word *pariah* as well as *keling* (Azahar et al., 2022). All in all, the usage of these two words is considered offensive to the Indian community because of the negative meaning they carry.

The word '*sepet*' is an adjective to describe eye shape, and it is often used as a weapon against the Chinese as a slur, making it offensive against the racial community. The next word is DAP. It stands for the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Malaysian political party that has been labelled as a chauvinistic political party since the demographic of its members is dominated by the Chinese (Tan, 2021; Ilah, 2022). This has made the word DAP synonymous with 'Cina' or Chinese in general, making it an adjective or adverb to describe the Chinese and, at some point, a pronoun to refer to the Chinese. The next word is Kafir. According to Nasrine (2011), the word Kafir (كافر) is an Arabic word with the meaning of a "disbeliever" or "rejecter". While it is a word used in the Holy Book of Al-Quran, Muslims in Malaysia would use the word to refer to non-Muslims as an insult (Ting & Shamsul, 2022). While these three words are commonly used in daily conversation, the context of the usage and the connotation they carry are what makes them racially pejorative against the Chinese community.

The study analysed racial slurs used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used. Based on past studies, common racial slurs against the three primary races are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: The Common Racial Slurs against the Malay, Indian and Chinese

Race	Slurs	Explanation
Malays	<i>Meleis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wordplay of Malays. • Used to describe a Malay with radical views on religious and social issues (Nurul Najihah & Mohd Nordin, 2019; Tham & Ahmad, 2021).
	<i>Isley</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A wordplay of Islam. • Used to describe PAS supporters and Muslims who are perceived to be 'conservatives' and 'extremists' (Ahmad Fahmi, 2022).
Indian	<i>Keling</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originated from the kingdom of Kalinga. • Used as an adjective or adverb following racial stereotypes against Indians.

	<i>Pariah</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historically meant to refer to an indigenous individual from southern India. Used to show association with the lowest caste in the Indian society.
Chinese	<i>Sepet</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literally means slanted (eyes) Used as a synonymous to a Chinese person
	<i>DAP</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A political party viewed as a Chinese-majority organisation. At some point, is considered a communist, chauvinistic party
	<i>Cina Kafir</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kafir - an Arabic word meaning infidel or non-believer. Used to derogate the non-Muslims by the ‘believers’ of Islam—mainly against the Chinese in the Malaysian context.

Related Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Researchers have proposed different frameworks to understand the use of racial slurs. Scholars categorise the usage into descriptive (providing literal meaning about another race) and expressive (conveying emotions or attitudes towards another race). Kaplan (1999) introduced these distinctions and emphasised the impact of tone and sentential form on the meaning of expressive words.

Hedger (2012) applied Kaplan's framework but disagreed on the descriptive use, arguing that racial slurs are fully expressive, reflecting hatred and contempt. Hedger concluded that uttering racial slurs is problematic regardless of intention or context.

Nunberg (2018) introduced the concept of ventriloquist implicature, suggesting that the offensiveness of slurs arises from conversational implicature. Nunberg (2018) argued that using slurs is a pragmatic failure violating the Gricean maxim of manners where the speaker fails to be appropriate in the conversation and that an epithet will always have a neutral counterpart, which the speaker fails to consider the better word choice. He emphasised the importance of considering alternative, neutral terms.

Falbo (2021) proposed two classifications for slurs. Demonstrative use allows for replacing slurs with pronouns or names, considering awkwardness in some situations. Weapon use involves using slurs offensively when silence would be more appropriate. Falbo identified weapon use as one of the most offensive communication strategies.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a content analysis method for its data analysis. Qualitative research design focuses on understanding the meaning and reason behind phenomena based on assumptions and theoretical perspectives, usually related to how individuals or groups perceive society (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020), while content analysis analyses texts qualitatively to make meaning and sense of the persons and their words (Vromen, 2010; Lindgren et al., 2020). The qualitative research design and content analysis approach is suitable for the study as it focuses on analysing racial slurs

used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used.

Data for the study was gathered from X. Britannica (2022) defines X as an online microblogging platform with tweets or short messages of less than 280 characters. X has a large population of users where the posts are publicly accessible and can be screened through their advanced search with multiple terms for a topic, which can be utilised to purposely sample tweets in exploring and understanding emerging phenomena (Sibona & Walczak, 2012; Sibona et al., 2020). For the study, fifteen political tweets containing racial slurs against certain racial groups, either from individuals or public entities, were identified. Homogenous purposive sampling was used as it focused on a particular population where all samples possess similar predetermined criteria related to the study (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020; Thomas, 2022). As for the word search, different keywords taken from past studies and keywords containing racial slurs related to Malaysian political themes, such as “#GE15” and “#PRU15”, were used in X’s advanced search to collect samples for this study, and these samples must be from the 1st – 31st January 2022. To protect the tweet owners' privacy and safety, profile pictures, display names and tweet handles were censored, and only the content of the tweets was analysed.

It is essential to analyse the usage context to understand the pragmatics behind using racial slurs. Table 1 shows the analysis instrument, adapted from Kaplan’s (1999) descriptive and expressive content theory and Falbo’s (2021) demonstrative and weapon use of slurs theory. The instrument divides the usage of slurs into two types: Descriptive and weaponised. The descriptive use of slurs is assumed to be used without intending harm or expressing derogatory feelings towards the targeting race(s). On the other hand, the weaponised use of slurs aims to attack or offend the mentioned racial group(s). Not only would it usually convey the speaker’s attitude against a race, but it is also likely to have a negative underlying meaning in the usage. Details of the contexts are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Adapted Coding Scheme from Kaplan (1999) and Falbo (2021) for Data Analysis

Types of Use	Contexts	Coding
Descriptive	Describing the other race, whether or not it is the case (Kaplan, 1999). e.g., “Aku ada sorang kawan Keling” (<i>I have an Indian friend</i>)	D1
	Conveying literal meaning (Kaplan, 1999). e.g. “Mata dia sepet” (<i>Their eyes are slanted</i>)	D2
	Can be replaced with a pronoun or name of individual referred to (Falbo, 2021). e.g. “Si Sepet tu suka makan ketupat” (<i>The slanted-eye guy/girl likes eating ketupat</i>)	D3

Weaponised	Conveying a speaker's attitude/ emotions/feelings against the other race (Kaplan, 1999). e.g. "Meleis ni cakap macam takde akal" (<i>These Malays speak like they have no brain</i>)	W1
	Implying underlying meanings behind the racial slur (Kaplan, 1999) e.g. "Mestilah semua tak boleh, <i>Isley</i> kan?" (Of course, nothing is permissible; it's Islam, right?)	W2
	Conversationally inappropriate use of slurs (Falbo, 2021). e.g. "Keling ni punya video kelakar lah" (This Indian's video is quite funny)	W3

Findings

Racial Slurs Used Against the Malay

The study analysed racial slurs used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used. Excerpts 1-5 display tweets containing racial slurs against the Malay. The usage of the word *Isley* in Excerpt 1 is considered weaponised, where the post has an underlying meaning (W2), connoting that the Islamic value in PAS is different from the Islam that they embrace. The usage of the word *Isley* in this context not only shows the writer's prejudice against the Muslim Malay community who supports PAS but also generalises all PAS supporters as Muslims whose Islamic belief is different from the 'right' one.

I respect my religion which is islam but not the 'isley' in PAS. Please learn to differentiate between those two. #PRU15

4:16 PM · Nov 21, 2022

Excerpt 1: Racial Slur Against Malay in W2 Category

The usage of *Isley* in Excerpt 2 is considered weaponised, which has an underlying meaning in the expression (W2). The writer was referring to the PAS supporters who worked and 'had fun' in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The writer considered the supporters imposters as they would move to a city centre to make a living but go back to their hometown to vote for PAS during the election.

betul la kan. Cari duit & huha kat KL, bila balik ngundi terus isley 🤔
mencikkkk #PRU15

[Translate Tweet](#)

8:37 AM · Nov 20, 2022 from Jalan Bakri, Johor

Excerpt 2: Racial Slur Against Malay in W2 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 3 is considered weaponised in which it conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Malays (W1). The writer used profanities to direct the anger against the Malays. The word 'stupid' expresses their negative emotion against the Malays, followed by a Malay curse word '*kpla buto*' which literally means dickhead. The tweet was posted with the intention to call out some racist Malays who used race and religion to gain political support, conveying their utter disappointment with some Malay community members who would resort to such an approach in politics.

Meleis is the stupidest people on planet , always wanted to escalate ,
perang demi bangsa dn agama kpla buto but kau , trs boleh rasict pula
kat bngsa dn agama org lain nama saja stu malaysia tpi meleis rasict
[#Malaysia](#) [#PRU15](#)

1:38 AM · Nov 23, 2022

Excerpt 3: Racial Slur Against Malay in W1 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 4 is considered weaponised in which it conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Malays (W1). The writer believed Muslim Malays could not move forward as a developed country. This is disrespectful and culturally insensitive towards Muslim Malays who choose to prioritise their religion and protect their beliefs. The statement made by the writer contained an essence of secularism – the ideology of separating religion and civil affairs – as compared to the Islamic view of integrating both. The use of the word *meleis* connotes the author's dissent against the Muslim Malays' belief.

The next time whenever any article like SAYS post Malaysia's rank in
Worlds Most Racist Country I dun wan see comment filled with noo laa
defend it laa. How extreme insecured u meleis are to prioritize religion
over development in election. Shame! [#GE15](#) [#PRU15](#) [#Undi](#)

2:44 PM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 4: Racial Slur Against Malay in W1 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 5 is considered as describing a racial group, whether or not it is the case (D1). This tweet was extracted from a longer thread (series of tweets) by the writer, telling a story about how political discourse was always present in Malaysia in the sense that there was constant news and coverage about the country's political scene. The context of the use was to disapprove of the word *meleis* itself due to its detriment.

Maka aku harap segala kritikan kita terhadap diri bangsa sendiri bukanlah atas dasar politik kebencian, hendak merendah-rendahkan, melemahkan semangat bangsa sendiri. (Cth: menggelar meleis, mengata Melayu malas, mengata Melayu tak tepati masa, dsbg.)

[Translate Tweet](#)

11:03 PM · Sep 3, 2022

Excerpt 5: Racial Slur Against Malay in D1 Category

Racial slurs used against the Indian

Excerpts 6-10 display tweets containing racial slurs against the Indian. The usage of *paria* in Excerpt 6 is considered as describing a racial group, whether or not it is the case (D1). The writer's intention of using the word *paria* here can be considered somewhat educational. The writer made this post related to politics, aiming to educate Malaysians and increase their political literacy.

tamil tu suku bangsa india yg kebanyakan duk kat india selatan cam kerala, tamil nadu, chennai.. dalit or paria ni pula kasta, kasta tertinggi dipanggil brahma

yg dtg ke Msia kebanyakan dr selatan

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:20 PM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 6: Racial Slur Against Indians in D1 Category

The usage of *paria* in Excerpt 7 is considered weaponised, which conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Indians (W1), and it also has an underlying meaning in the expression (W2). It was a response to a news headline about a former Member of Parliament who advocated for women's rights in Afghanistan. The writer of the tweet questioned the relevance, arguing that the conflicts in the Central-Asian nation do not concern Malaysia. The clause '*paria* naik junjung' is an alteration of a Malay proverb 'kaduk naik junjung', which figuratively refers to an individual of a lower class who becomes haughty or stuck-up once given a recognition or position that brings them up the hierarchy. Therefore, the usage of the word *paria* in this post is weaponised (W1) as the writer was channeling the hatred towards the political figure and implying that the politician was someone of a lower class just because she is an Indian, indirectly invalidating her opinions because of her race (W2).

Orang Afghanistan tak kacau kau pun, yg ko sibuk dengan politik taliban
tu apa hal, paria naik junjung, kirim ke qabul baru tahu 🍌

[Translate Tweet](#)

11:27 PM · Jan 27, 2023 · 28 Views

Excerpt 7: Racial Slur Against Indians in W1 & W2 Categories

The usage of *keling*, *paria* and *orang minyak* in Excerpt 8 describes a racial group, whether it is the case (D1) as the slurs were used to refer or describe a racial group. The writer expressed concern about the possible racist remarks emerging after the ending of GE15, as political figures and supporters who used the notion of racial harmony in their campaign could use racial sentiments again after garnering the votes they needed. The usage of the slurs can be considered descriptive (D1) as they were mentioned to describe the racial slurs the Indian community had to deal with for the past decades.

Ladies and gentlemen, brace yourselves, as things are about to go sideways, let's also brace ourselves for the wave of phrases such as "keling", "paria", "orang minyak", "balik india" and some other shit probably their parents thought them to use 😏

Kudos Malaysia 🇲🇾 [#PRU15](#)

2:10 PM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 8: Racial Slurs Against Indians in D1 Category



Excerpt 9: Racial Slur Against Indians in W2 Category

The usage of *keling* in Excerpt 9 is considered weaponised, which conveys an underlying meaning (W2). In this tweet, the writer was replying to another tweet from Astro Awani on Tun Dr Mahathir's stand in the 15th General Election, asking whether he would be joining hands with the contender from the other block. Since Tun Dr Mahathir did not provide a clear answer, uncertainty prevailed. In this context, the writer implies the difficulty in understanding Dr Mahathir's speech, suggesting he spoke "like an Indian", which is a weaponised use with an underlying meaning (W2).

The usage of *Paria* in Excerpt 10 is considered descriptive, conveying literal meaning (D2), as there was no contempt or hatred directed against the Indian community in the tweet. The author meant only to describe the hierarchical situation of a society full of corruption. The people who could not fund the campaigns or reject bribery were the ones considered as *paria*. This situation would only make the rich get richer and the poor stay or become poorer.

The root of corruption. Invest dlm politik, nnt dpt pulangan beribu kali ganda. Rakyat biasa yg takde buat sumbangan atau tak suka merasuah akan jadi rakyat kelas paria.

[Translate Tweet](#)

6:33 AM · Sep 26, 2022

Excerpt 10: Racial Slur Against Indians in D2 Categories

Racial Slurs Used Against the Chinese

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 11 is considered weaponised in conveying the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Chinese (W1). The writer expresses strong resentment towards DAP and implies that the younger generation's support for DAP might lead them to face discrimination and become slaves to the Chinese (*barua sepet*) in their own country. This viewpoint implies that the Chinese are not considered equal Malaysian citizens and should not hold leadership positions.

Yang muda muda sokong konon buat apa takut dap, all the best nanti bila dah masuk alam pekerjaan. Jadi barua sepet tu dekat tanah air sendiri.

[Translate Tweet](#)

1:46 PM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 11: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W1 Category

The usage of *Cina Sepet* in Excerpt 12 is considered to describe a racial group, whether it is or is not the case (D1); the derogatory language was employed to depict a specific racial group, the Malaysian Chi-

nese. In this tweet, the writer expressed concern about the perceived threat from Malaysian Chinese (*Cina Sepet*) governing the country than the potential invasion from China.

Takpe, orang kita tak takut negara China
Orang lagi takut bangsa DAP MCA GERAKAN cina sepet ni takut nanti
hilang tanah merempat kat negara sendiri kalau mereka ni perintah

Kalau China ceroboh takkan terjejas la kita, big brother kan, asalkan
bukan bangsa cina sepet

[Translate Tweet](#)

4:32 PM · Feb 28, 2022

Excerpt 12: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in D1 Category

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 13 is considered conversationally inappropriate use of slur (W3) as the writer used the word *sepet* to describe Lim, a Chinese. It is inappropriate as the tweet was crafted with sarcasm and a passive-aggressive tone, making the slur weaponised.



Excerpt 13: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W3 Category

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 14 is considered weaponised in conveying the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Chinese (W1). The writer expresses strong resentment towards the Chinese politicians,

attributing the shortage of eggs supply to the actions of certain political parties, whom he believes to be the Chinese politicians (*sepet*).



Excerpt 14: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W1 Category

In Excerpt 15, the use of "kafir" is deemed a conversationally inappropriate slur (W3). The writer expressed their opinion on the unfolding of the GE15, foreseeing a challenging competition between Muslim Malays and non-Muslim Chinese. Due to some internalised detest of the first against the latter, the term has evolved into a derogatory racial slur when paired with a racial group's name. Consequently, the use of "kafir" in this post is considered inappropriate in the conversation, turning it into a weapon in dialogue (W3).

Pru15 ni sbnrnya perjuangan islam melayu lawan cina kafir. Kita tunggu sape yg jd kerajaan nnt.

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:39 AM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 15: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W3 Category

Discussion

The study defines racial slurs as words that negatively describe or refer to a racial group, following Richard's (2008) definition: words with the primary purpose of hurting, menacing and subjugating people of different racial and ethnic groups. However, it also considers situations in which using racial slurs descriptively may be tolerable (but not encouraged), as suggested by Boromisza-Habashi (2007) and Diaz-Legaspe

(2019). To understand the intention and message behind these slurs, the study analyses their pragmatics, following Kaplan and Falbo's (2021) approach, which considers whether the usage is demonstrative or weaponised, depending on the context. While the study acknowledges the descriptive use of racial slurs to describe a race (D1), it disagrees with past studies that view all racial slur use as purely negative and expressive (Richard, 2008; Hedger, 2012; Camp, 2013; Hess, 2021). The study aligns with Kaplan (1999), Croom (2014), O'Dea and Saucier (2016), and Falbo (2021), emphasising that the conditions and circumstances of usage should be considered to determine whether a racial slur is descriptive or weaponised.

D1 refers to the descriptive use of racial slurs, whether accurate or not. In the analysis, four samples (Excerpts 5, 6, 8 and 12) in this category were used for educational or referential purposes, addressing the slurs rather than targeting a specific race or its members. In this context, the study aligns with Boromisza-Habashi's (2007) and Diaz-Legaspe's (2019) findings, indicating that racial slurs can be tolerable for educational purposes.

D2, involving the attempt to convey a literal meaning, only appeared in one sample (Excerpt 10). The term "*paria*" describes a social class of individuals who abstain from corruption, remaining at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As racial slurs often carry negative definitions and connotations, instances of conveying the literal meaning of a racial slur are limited.

D3 did not have any recorded instances in the study. This context involves replacing a racial slur with a pronoun or a person's name, following Falbo's theoretical framework where slurs can be used in a demonstrative manner. The absence of D3 in this study may be because of the X platform, where users are not always directly connected. It could also be the nature of political discourse, where there is often little to no personal connection between the author and the person being referred to.

W1, the first weaponised context, involves using racial slurs to express negative feelings towards another race (Excerpts 3, 4, 7, 11, 14). The writers openly directed their hatred towards the targeted race, aligning with Richard's (2018) idea that slurs carry strong intent, conveying hatred, contempt, and negativity. While this study does not view slurs as entirely expressive, Hedger's (2012) and Hess's (2021) theories of slurs being purely expressive and racist upon utterance can be applied here.

W2, the second weaponised context, is when speakers imply underlying meanings in racial slurs. Understanding these instances requires cultural background knowledge, in line with Bach's (2018) theory of loaded descriptivism. The samples (Excerpts 1, 2, 7, 9) demonstrate that even descriptive uses of slurs can have negative implicit meanings.

W3, the last context, deems the use of slurs conversationally inappropriate. In these cases, authors used racial slurs in irrelevant or unnecessary situations, where omitting the slur would not affect communication (Excerpts 13, 15). This may result from normalised use or a lack of cultural sensitivity. Some authors seem unaware that slurs can be offensive. Following Nunberg's (2018) theory of ventriloquist implicature,

speakers may use a default referential name, while others might find it heterodoxical, wrong, or disrespectful. Nunberg (2018) also highlighted the possibility of speakers being oblivious to the extent of a slur's offensiveness. In some instances, authors did not seem to care about the appropriateness of the word used in the conversation, violating the Gricean maxim of manners and leading to a pragmatic failure.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This research aims to raise awareness about the impact of mindful speech and discourage the use of slurs as weapons. This can enhance pragmatic competence among Malaysian readers, helping them understand how the context and circumstances of using racial slurs can change their impact and meaning. On a national level, this study could initiate a small step toward improving cultural competence among Malaysians. While not all racial slurs are considered weaponised, the findings suggest that Malaysians could learn to carefully choose their words, opting for neutral alternatives or avoiding slurs altogether out of respect for other races. This is crucial for Malaysia's diverse society, where social and racial harmony should not be jeopardised.

More research on language use is needed to enhance social harmony and racial unity, which can impact both positively and negatively. Racial slurs are still commonly used descriptively and as weapons in daily conversations. While this study focused on racial slurs in the Malaysian political scene and their pragmatic usage, it is necessary to investigate their use in different settings. Additionally, exploring racial slurs against other races in Malaysia, like Sakai, Jakun, and Batak, would raise awareness about their harmful usage and promote cultural competence among readers in the country.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, and initial draft preparation by Nursyams Nadzirah Samsul Imraq; supervision, writing, review, and editing by Anealka Aziz and Maizura Mohd Noor. All authors have reviewed and approved the manuscript for publication.

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Data availability statement

The dataset for this study comprises publicly available tweets retrieved from Twitter/X. As these tweets are openly accessible online, they can be obtained directly from the platform. However, any analysis or processed data generated during the study is available from the authors upon request. This study received an ethics review exemption from the university, referenced as FERC/2023/03/LG243/EX/138.

Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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