

## Language Use in *Edisi Siasat*: Changing Hues in Malaysian Media Presentation?

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### ABSTRACT

*When Edisi Siasat was first aired on NTV7, the approach of presenting the issues through the presenter's outrageous use of language did not go unnoticed by the public. It is claimed by some as 'a breath of fresh air on Malaysian TV'. In other words, rather than approaching issues that are considered sensitive to the Malaysian communities 'in the usual preachers' fashion so beloved by the Malaysian mainstream media', this programme 'expresses the outrage the way one would while having an impassioned chat over teh tarik at the local mamak stall' (Ziad Razak 2003). However, there are also viewers who regard such approach as being insensitive toward the Malaysian way of communicating. This paper looks at the approach of the programme from the aspect of language use and the public's perception toward such use in the media.*

**Keywords:** *media discourse, language use, media presentation*

## **Introduction**

The approach of presenting the issues through the presenter's outrageous use of language did not go unnoticed by the public when *Edisi Siasat* was first aired on NTV7. *Edisi Siasat* expresses outrage that one would while having an impassioned chat over *teh tarik* at the local *mamak* stall, and this is definitely different from the usual preachers' approach of sensitive Malaysian issues normally used in the mainstream media (Ziad Razak 2003). Such approach is claimed by some as 'a breath of fresh air on Malaysian TV' (Ziad Razak 2003).

On the other hand, the language use, which is considered as coarse and indecent by many people, has also caused widespread concern. Not only it is regarded as being insensitive towards the Malaysian way of communicating, such language use may also contribute to the coarsening of life and erosion of a civil society. Particular concern is on the negative effects of the exposure to this kind of language on children and youths (Bork 1996). This is because Social Learning Theory asserts that the behaviours we view most often, and those that are easy to imitate, tend to be the most influential (Bandura 1977).

While some viewers agree that the approach taken by the programme in disclosing the social issues has succeeded in opening the eyes of the public and relevant authorities, they are also concerned that children will repeat those socially inappropriate words and phrases in their daily communication. Television violence studies have produced evidence which suggests that repeated exposure to verbal violence could desensitise viewers resulting them to be accustomed to offensive language and subsequently using it more often in everyday conversation (Kaye & Sapolsky 2001). It is, therefore, feared that the trend of using vulgar and profane words may lead to the decadence of *budi bahasa* (politeness and finesse in behaviour) among young Malaysians. Some viewers have even gone so far to suggest that incivility, rudeness and bad manners among the young generation are attributed to exposure to profane laced television programmes (Kaye & Sapolsky 2004).

This paper is an attempt to examine the language use in *Edisi Siasat*, particularly the words and phrases that are considered as cussing, coarse, indecent and inappropriate, and the effects that they have on viewers.

## **Language Use in Communication among Malaysians**

Malaysians, in general, put strong emphasis on politeness and proper decorum. They are expected to demonstrate *budi bahasa* when communicating as this indicates proper upbringing. As the Malay *pantun* goes:

*Tangkap papan kayu bersegi,  
Sampan sakat di Pulau Angsa;  
Indah tampan kerana budi,  
Tinggi bangsa kerana bahasa.*

The above *pantun* relays a clear message of the nation's standard vis-à-vis the higher realm of *budi* and *bahasa*. It is on this belief that *budi bahasa* has been placed as one of the important foundations in various policies and philosophies of the nation's development.

Asmah (1995:47), in describing politeness among the Malays, asserts that:

*If a speaker, native or otherwise, makes a mistake in the use of certain affixes, his listeners may think that all he needs is practice in the usage of those grammatical items. However, if [the speaker] chooses the wrong pronoun or the wrong honorific he will be labeled as coarse, rude, not well-bred, etc.*

Language use in social communication among the Malaysians can be categorised along the continuum of refined to educated language. Speakers may choose any one along the continuum depending on the context of the interactions.

### **Refined versus Coarse Language**

When one is considered as a person talking with *budi bahasa*, he is regarded as speaking refined language or *bahasa halus*. The language use is marked by words and phrases that are considered as refined to the hearer. In the Malay community, one is expected to speak such a way as it is linked with 'gentility and good breeding' (Asmah 1987: 86). This can be achieved through linguistic indirectness, hedges and other 'positive politeness strategies' (Jamaliah Mohd Ali 2000). In other words, it is not only just what is said that matters, but also how it is said.

On the other hand, *bahasa kasar* or coarse language is usually linked with the coarseness of the speaker's behaviour and low breeding. The characteristics of this *bahasa kasar* are marked by the choice of lexical items and phrases in the utterances. Unless spoken in non-quarrelling situation or as a reflection of close intimacy between the speakers, the use of *bahasa kasar* does not demonstrate one's refined behaviour or is regarded as not knowing the Malay culture. To be labelled as such would be insulting particularly to the Malays.

The following examples show the forms of coarse language as opposed to the neutral form of saying the same thing (Asmah 1987: 89):

<b>Coarse</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	
<i>lantak</i>	<i>i. minum</i>	(drinks)
	<i>ii. makan</i>	(eats)
<i>gasak</i>	<i>biarlah</i>	(let it be)
<i>mengambus</i>	<i>pergi</i>	(goes away)
<i>bertenyeh</i>	<i>berbual</i>	(converses)
	<i>bercakap</i>	

## **Educated Language**

Educated language is another variety of language used in this country which is also known as the language of books (*bahasa buku*). This is the variety used in schools, colleges and universities. It is the sophisticated language, where 'the sophistication feature is not derived from breeding but rather from the presence of formal education, academic and professional qualifications' (Asmah 1987: 90). Its sophistication is marked by the lexis, morphology of its words and the syntactic structure (Asmah 1987). It is also the language of literature, administration, mass media and various other professional fields.

## **The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Code**

The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 has drawn up a Content Code which sets out the guidelines and procedures for good practice and standards of content disseminated to audience by service

providers in the communications and multimedia industry. The Code identifies what is regarded as offensive and objectionable while spelling out the obligation of content providers within the context of social values in this country.

Section 211 of the Act spells out that the content disseminated will be viewed in the context of the country's social, religious, political and educational attitudes and observances. It prohibits anything which offends good taste or decency and offensive to public feeling.

To ensure compliance with the Act, under this rule, the use of bad language is prohibited as it can be offensive to many people. The use of bad language here refers to crude words, derogatory terms that are most likely to cause offense and especially if the language is contrary to audience's expectation.

The Code has drawn the rules and regulations against bad language as the following:

*i. offensive language*

The language is considered offensive in terms of the use of disparaging or abusive words which is calculated to offend an individual or a group of persons, and is not permitted in the media discourse;

*ii. crude references*

Crude references are prohibited in the media discourse. These refer to words, in any language commonly used in Malaysia, which are considered obscene or profane including crude references to sexual intercourse and sexual organs. It is, however, permissible to use such words in the context of their ordinary meaning and not when intended as crude language.

*iii. hate speech*

Hate speech refers to any portrayal (words, speech or pictures, etc.) which denigrates, defames, or otherwise devalues a person or group on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or disability and is prohibited. In particular, *descriptions of any of these groups or their members involving the use of strong language, crude language, explicit sexual references or obscene gestures*, are considered hate speech.

*iv. violence*

Where the portrayal of violence is permitted with appropriate editorial discretion as in news reporting, discussion or analysis and in the context of recognized sports events, care must be taken to consider the use of explicit or graphic language related to stories of destruction, accidents or sexual violence, which could be disturbing for general viewing.

(Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Code 1998)

***Edisi Siasat***

Categorised as an investigative news magazine programme, *Edisi Siasat* is a hybridised television programme developed as an acknowledgement of changing and narrowing audience categories by a local private station, Natseven, or better known as NTV7. This programme specifically targets youths who are the least interested group to watch current affairs programme compared to any other television generic forms like entertainment, drama, soap operas and others. The half-hour programme is aired during early evening hours at 8.30 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays; and 9.40 p.m. on Mondays – which are considered as the prime time. Most of the issues tackled by the programme are scandalous such as the uncovering of sand stealing, illegal racing, drug abuse, indecent sexual activities by youths, prostitution, cult, incest and other social ills. No subject seems too taboo to be reported for *Edisi Siasat*. Apart from these controversial social issues, the programme also deals with the plights of abandoned and poverty stricken old folks, children suffering from chronic illnesses and others. Though the social problems presented are not new to Malaysians, the presenter's use of outrageous language which is claimed by some viewers as coarse, inappropriate, indecent and rude gives them new prominence. Undeniably, the programme has succeeded in drawing a million viewers for each of its series. In fact, its rating skyrockets and falls second to the reality series *Survivor* (Reme Ahmad 2004). However, despite its popularity, this brave new segment of news from NTV7 also receives negative comments from viewers on its sensational crude discourse.

**The Study**

Portrayals of physical aggression and sexual behaviour on television and the effects on children and young people have been extensively researched

(Smith & Donnerstein 1998; Bushman & Huesmann 2001; Craig et al. 2004). However, research on the use of language in the media and the effects that it has on children's behaviour has been scarce. The use of coarse language which can be considered as a form of verbal aggression has received less attention in the research of media discourse.

The objectives of this study are, therefore, to:

- i. examine the language use in *Edisi Siasat*, particularly the words and phrases that are considered as cussing, coarse, indecent and inappropriate; and
- ii. find out the reactions of the programme viewers toward such language use.

The study is qualitative in nature employing a text analysis method. It involves eight of the *Edisi Siasat* series which were screened in the year 2004. This series covered social issues such as illegal racing, drug abuse, incest, indecent sexual activities by youths and cult. Five of the series were recorded by the writers while the other three were provided by the *Edisi Siasat* producer, Puan Faizah. The series was viewed and the discourse was transcribed.

An analysis of the language used by the presenter in highlighting the issues was carried out to identify the words and phrases that are considered coarse, indecent or inappropriate based on criteria described by The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Code. In obtaining the viewers' reaction and perception with regard to the language use, purposive sampling method was employed. Twenty viewers who claimed to have watched the series were asked of their viewpoints regarding the use of language in the programme.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Language Use in *Edisi Siasat***

Based on the text analysis, it was found that words like *haprak* (useless idiot), *jalang* (slut), *kurang ajar* (ill-bred), *keparat* (heathen), *bangsat* (bastard) and phrase like *apa ke jadah* (what the hell) were liberally used in the programme. The following table briefly illustrates the words and the contexts in which they were used.

Table 1: Words Used in Context

Words	Context
<i>haprak</i>	illegal racing, drug abuse, incest, indecent sexual activities
<i>jalang</i>	indecent sexual activities
<i>kurang ajar</i>	illegal racing, incest
<i>keparat</i>	incest, illegal racing, drug abuse
<i>bangsat</i>	drug abuse, incest, illegal racing
<i>apa ke jadah</i>	illegal racing, drug abuse, incest, indecent sexual activities, cult

In any social context of interaction in Malaysia, the words *haprak*, *jalang*, *kurang ajar*, *keparat* and *haprak*, are considered as very coarse and should not, or even would not, be uttered by those who consider themselves as being properly brought up. These words are normally uttered only in a hateful situation which involves quarrelling and unresolved conflicts between the speakers, which, in all probability, would end up in long term enmity between them.

In this programme, however, the words were freely and rampantly used to strongly and negatively describe the people involved in the activities reported. Under The Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Code, these words and phrase fall into the category of ‘hate language’. It seems that these words were deliberately chosen and used, instead of words with positive connotations, to degrade a person or group. Such highly emotive words, either intentionally or unintentionally, may shape negative emotive response of the viewers towards the people described in the programmes, i.e, illegal racers, prostitutes, drug addicts and punks.

In addition to those words, the phrase *apa ke jadah* is extensively found in the discourse. In the programme, the phrase was used by the presenter to express outrage on the events that took place or issues discussed. Though the use of this phrase seems appropriate with the context, such use is considered as coarse. The phrase would be categorised as *bahasa kasar* (Asmah 1987) as opposed to just the neutral *kenapa* (why). Being a Malay, and thus, knowing the rules and finesse in speaking, the presenter is indicted as being insensitive towards the Malaysian way of communicating.

Many media texts arise from an explicit intention of promoting given values or attitudes, whether sincerely, because the writer believes in them, or cynically, to attract an audience. Scriptwriter’s attitude of the discussed issues that is expressed or embodied in the language features



used in his writings and powerful script, normally captures viewers' attention and can create a lasting impact.

Zainal Rashid Ahmad, the scriptwriter of *Edisi Siasat*, justified that the provocative choice of words and phrases peppering the programme script portrayed his seriousness in demanding the authorities' as well as members of the public's concerted effort in handling the social issues brought forward (Reme Ahmad 2004). The above-mentioned words; *haprak, jalang, kurang ajar, keparat, bangsat, apa ke jadah*, certainly helped to express his great concern on the issues or events discussed.

From one perspective, the individual's expression rather than the central editorial control in *Edisi Siasat* might permit greater language diversity. However, such move has received strong disapproval from members of the public as it is regarded as inappropriate socially. Zainal, on the other hand, did not consider that the language used was inappropriate or offensive, but rather it reflected the reality of the events or issues being described (Reme Ahmad 2004). Furthermore, his contention was the words and phrases were not overly or excessively used, and the use was justified by the context of the programme.

## **Viewers' Perceptions**

Twenty purposely selected viewers of *Edisi Siasat* were interviewed on their perceptions regarding the language use in the programme. The key findings of this study were: 1) their views on the language use, 2) effects of the language use on the audience.

When asked about their views on the strong language used in *Edisi Siasat*, there was a general agreement (11 out of 20 viewers) that words like *jalang, bangsat, keparat* and *kurang ajar* used by the presenter were crude and lack of finesse. A few of the female viewers (3 out of 20) even considered the word *jalang* was highly insulting particularly when it was uttered by a male presenter. Some of them (6 out of 20) further commented that the language used did not truly reflect how Malaysians would deal with the issues. Generally, *budi bahasa* governs the linguistic behaviours of individual members of the society, especially for the Malays. Thus, when they want to have a serious discussion about social problems, they do not liberally pepper their speech with this kind of words and phrases. The viewers also expressed their fear that such language use would only

desecrate the Malay language and could inevitably threaten the image of the Malays as the gentlemen of the East.

Meanwhile, when asked about the appropriate airing time for the programme, some of them (7 out of 20 viewers), who are parents and non-parents, expressed their great concern that the programme is aired during prime time. They commented that impressionable children might be watching the programme and pick up the indecent words and phrases. One female parent said that,

*“If you’re exposing children to a lot of swear words, then they’re going to use them in the wrong context and it might hurt someone’s feeling though they do not mean to.”*

Another non-parent viewer was of the opinion that,

*“They (the words used by the presenter) are a form of verbal abuse where the intention is to insult, especially when said with aggression. So, it is unacceptable to use these coarse words on prime time tv programme. It would be awfully embarrassing getting up and turning off the programme in the middle”.*

Thus, it can be concluded that the use of strong language was considered uncomfortable for those viewing in a family situation. Therefore, their suggestion was that the producer should consider changing the programme slot to non-prime time. In addition, they suggested the use of on-air and verbal warnings on the coarse language used by the presenter and advice on viewer discretion or parental monitoring and guidance. Apart from that, some (8 out of 20) suggested censoring the programme by bleeping the indecent or aggressive words and phrases.

On the other hand, the reaction of some viewers to the programme has been positive. 7 of the viewers thought that the use of such language is appropriate. It is well justified as the words and phrases used only in exceptional circumstances when it is only particularly important to the programme context. To them coarse language is not prominent in the programme as it is limited to issues critically demanding swift actions from the authorities and members of the public. They further commented that the presentation style was earthy yet earnest which is necessary to highlight the programme context. To them news report particularly on the long unresolved social ills should not be sanitised to the point where they no longer seem so distasteful. Furthermore, the issues described were of newsworthy and not sensational reporting. Each series is supported by

visual content providing evidence of the activities such as hidden cameras showing hungry punks digging through rubbish bins for leftovers, prostitutes and transvestites walking the streets offering sex services, youths having sex in public places and many other shocking distasteful acts. So, to these viewers, it is only apt that such words and phrases were used to express distaste and outrage on the discussed issues.

## **Conclusion**

In general, most Malaysians still uphold the need to practise *budi bahasa* as the norms and preferred value in public discourses. Parents particularly, disagree on the use of such language on media as children and youths are impressionistic groups who tend to reproduce such inappropriate words and phrase in their daily interactions. *Kempen Budi-bahasa* was launched on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2005 at Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to encourage Malaysians to practise *budi-bahasa* in everyday social interactions and public discourses. In his officiating speech, the prime minister expressed his growing concern on the erosion of *budi bahasa* among Malaysians and sees it as a threat to the safeguarding of peace and harmony in this multiracial country. Ironically, the language use in *Edisi Siasat* seems to be out of step with the campaign. Hence, as an agent of public discourse, it is feared that the profanity-laced language used in the programme might further contribute to the erosion of civil society and increase rudeness among its members. It might be changing hues in the media presentation, but the sensitivity of the society with regard to language use should be taken into consideration.

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