



**(DE)HUMANIZATION OF THE CHINESE AND THE  
MALAYS IN THE SIN CHEW DAILY AND THE NEW  
STRAITS TIMES: A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF THE 2013  
MALAYSIAN ELECTIONS**

**BY**

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the degree of Master of Human Science in  
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## ABSTRACT

As observed by many scholars, electoral politics in Malaysia is conducted along ethnic lines. With reference to the recent 2013 general elections, it witnessed a further erosion of racial relations between, especially, the Malays and the Chinese. Immediately after the polling results were released, it was so aghast, to the extent that national leaders openly described it as a “Chinese Tsunami” which, on the other hand, unexpectedly triggered a further round of fierce racial disputes. The exchange of words has been recorded integrally in the print media; the media were in the front line to raise issues, disseminate information, as well as to influence voters’ decisions. Hence, the current study is designed to investigate the humanization and dehumanization features in the performance of actors from two notable ethnicities, the Chinese and the Malays by going through a semiotic analysis on their viewpoints and comments about each other in two mainstream print media in Malaysia: the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*. The linguistic fragments were culled from both dailies published two weeks before and after the 13<sup>th</sup> Malaysia general elections (from 21 April to 19 May, 2013). As a result, four elements have been scrutinized and it is revealed that both actors employed enormous factuality and high identification signs, a small quantity of hedging devices, and a larger proportion of distrust performatives than trust performatives.

## ملخص البحث

الانتخابات السياسية في ماليزيا - كما لوحظ الكثير من العلماء- تجرى ضمن خيوط عرقية. وبالرجوع إلى الانتخابات العامة في عام ٢٠١٣، نجد أنها زادت في عمق العلاقات على أساس عرقي وخاصة بين الملاويين والصينيين. وبعد صدور نتائج الانتخابات مباشرة، دفع الذعر بعض القادة القوميين إلى وصف النتائج علنيا بأنها "زلزال صيني" الأمر الذي أدى، من جهة أخرى، وبشكل غير متوقع إلى إطلاق موجة أخرى من العنف والخلافات العرقية. الكلمات المتبادلة سجلت بشكل كامل في وسائل الإعلام المطبوعة. فوسائل الإعلام كانت في الخطوط الأمامية لرفع المسائل ونشر الأخبار، وكذلك للتأثير على قرارات الناخبين. لهذه الأسباب، صممت هذه الدراسة لاستقصاء معالم الإنسانية واللاإنسانية في أداء ممثلين من عرقين بارزين، الصيني والملاويين من خلال القيام بتحليل لغوي لآراء وتعليقات كل منهما حول الآخر [كما وردت] في صحيفتين يوميتين سائدتين في ماليزيا: *the New Straits Times* و *the Sin Chew Daily*. الكلمات المتفرقة اختيرت من الصحيفتين من الأعداد التي طبعت في الأسبوعين اللذين سبقا يوم الاقتراع الماليزي الثالث عشر ٢٠١٣م وكذلك من الأعداد التي طبعت في الأسبوعين بعده (من ٢١ أبريل إلى ١٩ مايو ٢٠١٣). ونتيجة لذلك تم فحص أربعة عوامل، وتم اكتشاف أن الفاعلين من كلا الطرفين قد وظفوا وقائع ضخمة، وسمات هوية خطيرة، وكمية قليلة من الوسائل المخفية، ونسبة كبيرة من الأداء المريب بدل الأداء المسئول.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or currently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other educational institutions.

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*This work is dedicated to my beloved parents and husband.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The current study is devoted to the investigation of naturally occurring discourse stemming from two selected newspapers, the *Sin Chew Daily* and the *New Straits Times*, circulated during Malaysia's recent general election held in May 2013, and specifically involves the evaluation of the performance of actors from two notable ethnicities, the Chinese and the Malays, by going through a semiotic analysis. This is made possible due to the apparent and well-recognised ethnic traits in this country's voting behaviour observed through its periodical national general elections, as well as the accommodative and incorporative features of the agreeable semiotic approach envisioned to comprehend human behaviour and intellectual life, including their communication activities in certain social settings. In addition, the angle of humanization and dehumanization is expected to shed light on the way how Malays and Chinese portray each other through their exchanges during the intensive campaign of the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections, especially prior to the Election Day (5<sup>th</sup> May, 2013) as well as the ensuing exchanges immediately after the elections.

The content of the current study includes five sections: a detailed introduction, a reasonably comprehensive literature review, a semiotic methodology, exhaustive results and discussion, and an inclusive and accountable conclusion. The introduction covers the background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, significance and limitations of the study, as well as the operational definitions of key concepts employed.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As a well-known multi-ethnic society formed through British immigration policies during the colonial era, three main races – Malays, Chinese and Indians – live side by side in peace and abide by the non-interference principle under the power sharing formula in Malaysia. More precisely, 50.4% of the population in this nation are Malays (they are Muslims by constitutional definition and are the largest and dominant community), 24% Chinese and 7.3% Indians, while the remaining population is made up of mainly indigenous tribes (Welsh, 2015). The Malays, together with the indigenous people, are collectively known as *Bumiputera* – sons of the soil. Although “living in peace”, this primary condition of diversified ethnicity influences the country in every way (Ibrahim, Mustafa, Kee & Ahmad, 2011), including its political progress.

After the 2008 general elections, there appears to be an increasingly clear rivalry between the ruling and the opposition coalitions in this country’s political agenda. The ruling party Barisan National (BN) or National Front, consisting of 13 parties, the main being the Malay-based United Malays National Organization (UMNO) – it is always the situation that UMNO President is the Malaysian Prime Minister even though it is not stipulated in the Malaysian constitution (Idrus, 2003), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), has governed the country since its independence in 1957, but “lost its two-thirds majority in the *Dewan Rakyat* (Parliament Lower House) for the first time in its history” during the 2008 general elections (Mokhtar, 2008: 92). The opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR), generally has been formalized through cooperation among three parties: the Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Malay-majority Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), and the multi-cultural Parti Keadilan

Rakyat (PKR) (Manaf & Sedu, 2015). With reference to the most recent 13<sup>th</sup> general election in 2013, it witnessed a further erosion of BN's popularity among the general voters although it scored a win with a slim majority, signaling that "the days of one-party dominance in Malaysia are over" (Moniruzzaman, 2013: 68).

However, the realities are more sophisticated. As Moniruzzaman (2013) has stated, this election has also accentuated the centrality of ethnicity in Malaysia's voting behaviour where the electoral politics in this country "might become more polarized along ethnic lines" (p.55). For example, the results of the 2013 polling were even described as a 'Chinese Tsunami' by one of the top leaders in BN (Moniruzzaman, 2013; Manaf & Sedu, 2015).

Triggered by this ethnic reality, politics in Malaysia is generally seen as "being about the rights of different ethnic communities who operate in an ethnically divided polity" (Welsh, 2015: 12). From the earlier studies on this country's political elections, race was found and recognised as one of the factors that swayed its voters (Idid, Sahari & Hisham, 2007). In the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections, this ethnic polarisation became more evident and played a major role, especially between the Malays and the Chinese where the majority Malays voted for UMNO, the dominant and biggest Malay-based party of the ruling coalition, and for the first time the contest between BN and PR was dominated by the Malays; while the Chinese overwhelmingly supported the opposition (especially DAP); yet the results were described by BN as a "Chinese Tsunami" (Moniruzzaman, 2013; Manaf & Sedu, 2015). Irrespective of the political disparity and disconnection, Noor (2007) has found that polarisation and inter-group prejudice between the two main ethnicities – the Malays and the Chinese – are widespread and continue to be a problem. There has also been a rise in the level of polarization between the two in the aspect of job opportunities, housing and education,

which is a detriment to the maintenance of peace in the country. Hence, Noor suggested the conflicts between both ethnic groups should be investigated with more intenseness and should be addressed immediately.

As generally identified, the mass media, be it traditional or new media, have been playing an integral part in the elections (Thaheer, Yaakop & Sualman, 2013, Manaf & Sedu, 2015) through raising issues and disseminating information. The politicians or political parties rely on the media to persuade people and influence their voting decisions. The issues covered extensively in the media are believed to be the strategies employed to gain votes. On the other hand, voters make their choices to cast votes based on the information partially obtained through media reporting. As such, the press can facilitate the electoral process of the country (Idid & Kee, 2012). However, the contents of the media are portrayed differently through applying varying frameworks like agenda setting (Ibrahim, Mustaffa, Kee & Ahmad, 2011) or framing (Manaf & Sedu, 2015; Kee, Ibrahim, Basri & Nie, 2011) and depending on various factors, like their ownership (Manaf & Sedu, 2015), and ethnic background (Idid & Kee, 2012). Thus, by extracting and studying the ethnic views or issues intensively presented in the mainstream media during an election period, a unique picture about the ethnic polarization in this specific social context can be obtained.

The current study is designed to study the above issue from a semiotic point of view by studying the language use of the two ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese, in two major print media in Malaysia: the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*. The resulting semiotic analysis, an important media analysis technique, would be expected to provide a different and insightful investigation over the underlying language use embedded in the social atmosphere, especially in the general elections' context in Malaysia. It would also lead us to a deep, clear and unique view

on this national event as well as its underlying ethnic issues from the cues underlying the linguistic uses.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Based on Noor's (2007) research, the present ethnic pluralistic nature of Malaysia can be traced back to its colonisation by the British, and until the country obtained its independence in 1957, the immigrants who were largely from China and India were governed under the British's "divide and rule" policy which paved the way for the underlying social polarization along the ethnic lines until now. After independence, one major racial conflict took place between the Malays and the Chinese in May 1969. Although subsequent violent strife was kept under control, there are still many concrete or abstract discrepancies, biases, and conflicts that endanger inter-ethnic harmony. The simmering ethnic disaffection usually comes to the force in times of social political issues, like national elections.

According to Noor (2007), a strong bias can be observed between the Malays and the Chinese given that the differences between the two are very salient. The two groups differ in historical background: the Malays are indigenous people known as *Bumiputera*, while the Chinese are immigrants from China. In terms of economic status, the Malays are mostly seen as disadvantaged, while the Chinese are mostly privileged. With reference to their political status, the majority Malays are the dominant group possessing nationalistic government ideology, while the minority Chinese regard themselves as a sieged group (Chin, 2013b) and try to be more politically correct. With respect to religion, Malays are considered as Muslims constitutionally, while most of the Chinese confess to Buddhism. They differ in terms of the stereotypes assigned to them where a survey (Noor, 2007) found 71% Malays agreed that the Chinese prioritise materialism, and 63% Chinese agreed that most

Malays are not enterprising. These various factors, to a large extent, contribute to the different ideologies behind both groups, and hence, some prominent attributes could be identified through the news reports in mainstream newspapers throughout the election campaign. Additionally, ethnic tensions are expected to be triggered by political battles since the media organization will “give priority to conflicts, power struggles and dramas” (Manaf & Sedu, 2015: 31).

As defined, (de)humanizing discourse in the current paper refers to the comments, viewpoints and attitudes held by the Chinese and Malays towards each other. The (de)humanizing statements utilised in the newspapers during election time are either contributory or detrimental to the intergroup relations (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams & Jackson, 2008) in the Malaysian society, and affect the election results indirectly.

Contrary to the huge emission and powerful impact of media information, the effort to examine media language is still limited; as a result, only the surface of the conceptions can be comprehended (Yildiz, 2002; Sari & Yusuf, 2012). Thus, extensive studies in this area should be encouraged and carried out, and more in-depth investigations should be conducted on the news discourse itself considering that a large number of studies in this field are used to examine newspaper graphics, headings, and photographs, rather than language signs.

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this study is to conduct a semiotic analysis on identified ethnic representations in two newspapers: the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily* during the 2013 Malaysian general elections. It exclusively focuses on the role of the newspapers in portraying ethnic representations by examining the distribution of

linguistic devices and forms using the semiotic framework. Thus, four objectives have been posed in the following order:

1. To find out whether linguistic factuality is consistently maintained in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*.
2. To find out whether the doers are identified clearly in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*.
3. To find out whether the doers utilise hedging devices in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*.
4. To find out whether trust performatives are used in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To address the above objectives, the present study constructed the following research questions:

1. Is linguistic factuality consistently maintained in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*?
2. Are the doers identified clearly in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*?
3. Do the doers utilise hedging devices in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*?
4. Are trust performatives used in the *New Straits Times* and the *Sin Chew Daily*?

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The carrying out of this study contributes to or deepens our understanding of media's presentation on two significant Malaysian ethnic groups. It offers important insights as to how a mainstream Chinese-based newspaper portrayed comments, views, and attitudes of the Chinese towards the dominant social political group – the Malays, in the context of the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections, as well as how a Malay-based mainstream English newspaper presented the comments, attitudes or views of the Malays towards the minority Chinese.

As Idid and Kee (2012) have admitted, different methods, from descriptive, analytical to empirical (all are speculative in nature), have been employed by political scientists, psychologists, sociologists and also communication scholars using various methodologies like field observation, surveys, and content analysis when studies on Malaysian elections were carried out. The current study, on the other hand, devotes to investigating the embedded meanings of the surface language use in both chosen newspapers which have different ethnic stands within the specific social context of the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections by using semiotic analysis. It would contribute to the knowledge of ethnic representation in media language use as well as the understanding on the issue of ethnic polarization within Malaysia's social context. Moreover, the potential value of this research manifests itself in its contribution to the existing body of literature on media semiotic analysis, especially on news discourse.

## **1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The current study is based on only two local newspapers in Malaysia, while there are still numerous other print media functioning in the same way. The results and findings cannot just be generalised or extended to those news outlets except the two under

scrutiny. Thus, future researches might include more newspapers or other social media and measure a larger quantity of text excerpts to get a more exacting picture about ethnic representations in this country's major political events.

## **1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS**

Under this subheading, a brief introduction about the definitions has been offered to several basic and pivotal concepts involved in the present study. Admittedly, this is conducive to muster a better comprehension and purview on the quintessential substance penetrating the whole research activity as well as writing process.

### **Humanization & Dehumanization**

Humanizing and dehumanizing discourse, in this study, refers to the comments, viewpoints, and attitudes held by the Chinese or Malays towards their respective out-group members: Malays, Malay leaders or Malay organisations, and Chinese, Chinese leaders or Chinese associations, as well as how they were represented in the two newspapers. Put simply, the concept of dehumanizing means the denial of distinct human capabilities (like maturity, reason, and sympathy) to others (Haslam, 2006); otherwise it will be the humanizing side. The (de)humanizing statements utilised in the newspapers during election time will either contribute to or denigrate the intergroup relations (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams & Jackson, 2008) in the Malaysian society. In the current research, it is mainly measured through four crucial components, namely factuality, identification, hedging, and trust performatives. Principally, it is expected to gauge and shed light on the racial relationship between the Chinese and the Malays presented by their respective newspaper mouthpiece in the context of a heatedly contested national election.

## **Factuality**

According to Aquino (2014), factuality and actuality are intimately related to news reports in addition to their important attribute of objectivity. In this study, factuality is mainly exploited through signs which indicate static or dynamic actions, like statements/opinions making, and completion of actions. Based on the level of objectivity and truthfulness of those signs, another three subcategories can be formulated, namely factuality (including ‘do+ verb’, and ‘verb+ -s/-ed’), hypotheticality (including ‘must’, ‘shall’, ‘should’, ‘would’, ‘will’, ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘might’ and ‘could’), and ambiguity (including ‘to+ verb’, ‘verb+ -ing’ and ‘verb+ -en’).

This construct is one of the fundamental criteria and indexes to judge whether the reports from both newspapers in question are clinging to or reflecting the real ethnic circumstance in Malaysia, and whether they tend to report objectively or polish them in a hypothetical way, or choose to leave them in an ambiguous status. As these language manifestations would potentially have an impact on readers’ evaluations to some extent, for instance, the prevailing use of factuality in an event report would sound more ascertainable and convincing than the employment of a large quantity of hypothetical modal verb signs. On a macro level, these micro language effects require news agencies or institutions to be responsible for directing readers’ values and judgments in a proper orientation, rather than taking advantage of their sentiments negatively and even aiming to sharpen the existing social contradictions along ethnic lines. In this sense, it is a basic but important parameter in assisting the interpretation of the nature of a text into a humanizing or dehumanizing category.

## **Identification**

It aims at the signs of people, things, quantity, and nominalization, which bear identification information of doers. The level of clarity conveyed through those entities/ subjects/doers can be further put into three scales, namely *high identity*, *low identity*, or *identity not required*. The high identity category includes ‘proper nouns’, ‘pronouns’, ‘possessive nouns’, ‘demonstrative nouns’ and ‘the+ nouns’; the low identity markers include ‘a/an+ noun’, ‘number+ noun’, ‘lexical number+ noun’ and ‘noun+ -s’; while, ‘ $\emptyset$  noun  $\emptyset$ ’ denotes that the identification for this noun, for some reasons, is not required. Whether the identification is clearly presented will somehow affect readers’ perception consciously or unconsciously.

## **Hedging**

Hedges are made up of various linguistic forms such as approximators and shields which in fact do not have a clear boundary (Wang, 2010). It could be “a word, a phrase, the entire sentence, or the intended illocutionary force of the utterance, or its perlocutionary effect” (Bruce, 2010: 203). There are certain linguistic forms/markers to convey the meaning of hedging, like modal verbs (e.g. *might*, *could*, *would*, and *may*) and epistemic verbs (e.g. *appear*, *believe*, *seem*, and *think*), but this attribute might experience a change in some circumstances. As an undeniably useful common rhetorical strategy, it serves to attenuate or mitigate the full value or commitment that an utterance might possess, for instance, to express politeness, to hide the truth, to seem less powerful, and to shield from certain responsibilities or confrontation (Bruce, 2010).

## **Trust and Distrust Performatives**

Performatives refer to any statement that attempts to achieve some communicative purposes like warning, promising, or asserting; besides, a performative utterance is also conditioned with elements like the context of utterance, authorisation in the process of utterance producing, as well as its recognition (Govindasamy & Khan, 2006). The original discovery was made by Austin (1975) who prescribes performatives in a way that the delivering of an utterance is the carrying out of an action, and further it is restated by him as illocutionary acts. Additionally, to achieve this effect, it is a necessary to utter the words in appropriate circumstances, occasions or contexts. For example, a person who is going to name a ship should be the eligible one who has been appointed to do this (Austin, 1975). Essentially, performative utterances utilised in a discourse are able to make certain changes towards the reality. However, to achieve this, it is important for the utterance maker to possess some kind of authority beforehand and to conduct the utterance in a recognised context.

In the current study, first and foremost, the trust or distrust performatives mean that the statements are constructed to convey and show trust or distrust status; secondly, all the excerpts stemmed from political leaders, influential figures, or position-holders from varying political parties, organisations, agencies and institutions in Malaysia. Their words are deemed to be able to represent and impact certain segments of people in a society, and this influence towards the potential audience would become more evident and intense in the context of the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

In the current study, the semiotic analysis is a sign-based way of handling language-based data. It is employed to explore the four individual components in question, namely fatuality, idnetification, hedging and trust performatives. They have their own