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Female Language Used in a Male-Dominated Workplace in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In the modern society today, women are now more progressive and hold a significant role in society due to their contributions. However, several studies have indicated that women are still being looked down upon in the workplace setting due to gender biasness. The paper analyses whether the patriarchal system prevalent in Malaysia had an impact on the language used by females. A semi-structured interview is conducted between fifteen female participants who have worked in a male-dominated industry for at least two years in Malaysia. The analysis is derived from two theoretical frameworks; Kendall and Tannen's Genderlect Theory and Cameron's Patriarchy and Sexism in a Language through thematic analysis. Findings revealed that most participants used rapport-talk when conversing with their female colleagues; however, they would turn to report-talk when conversing with their male colleagues to be taken seriously. Moreover, the findings also revealed that the participants share common themes, which are patriarchy, profession, position, and situations when conversing. This has shown that gendered language is still prevalent in the Malaysian workplace due to patriarchal influence which needs to be addressed.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of the very few studies investigating language and sexism. With the current issue of mistreatment in workplace settings towards women in Malaysia, there is a need to re-evaluate the current evidence-based, as women are now more progressive and have more significant societal roles.

1. Introduction

In a complex world with a wide variety of aspects to consider, it is inevitable for language variations to occur. The diversities in factors such as nationality, culture, religion, age, and

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gender influence how people experience conversations. For many years, linguists have invested in researching the language variation in different genders (Coates, 2015; Osman et al., 2017). However, there has been a recent uprising of arguments regarding the effect of patriarchy towards language. Cameron (2020) claimed that women had experienced gendered language as a tool used by their male counterparts to undermine or exert power over women. Due to this existence of sexist language, Weimann-Sandig and Sem (2022) argued that most women conform to societal expectations based on gender and sexism. Christie (2022) also agrees that due to the existence of sexist language, researchers have to build resistance towards such mistreatments. Hence, there is a need to re-evaluate and question the current evidence-based that is now decades old as women are now more progressive and have more significant role in society due to their contributions (Christie, 2022; Weimann-Sandig & Sem, 2022; Sczesny et al., 2015). Due to such issues, the present study explored language and gender in Malaysian workplace settings from the female's perspective. It is also to identify if there is an effect of patriarchy towards the language context in the workplace settings.

The theory of patriarchy and sexism in language is applied to discover the effect of patriarchy towards the gendered language in a workplace setting (Cameron, 2020). The word 'patriarchy' is derived from 'patriarch', which means the rule of the father or is used to describe a male-dominated family. According to Litosseliti (2014), the term sexism is used to describe the difference in treatment towards an individual based on their sexual membership back in the 1960s. Moreover, the concept of patriarchy was first formulated in the 1960s by feminist thinkers, commonly used in that period of time to describe inequalities and violence to which women are subjected. Women are also deemed less as an expression of the will of 'men' than as the product of a social and symbolic organisation (Dixit, 2020; Macé, 2018). Nowadays, patriarchy generally refers to male domination and the power relationships in which men dominate women to characterise a system whereby women are kept as subordinate in several ways (Dixit, 2020; Wood, 2019). Patriarchy is also best described as an institutionalised system of male dominance. Thus, as confirmed by Chan et al. (2021) and Wood (2019), it is common to use patriarchy to establish social relations between men and women, which commonly act as a material base in a hierarchical manner that shows or creates independence and solidarity among men, allowing them to dominate women. With the current progress of female development in society, it is important to handle the issues that arise regarding females to ensure females achieve liberating equality as males in the workplace (Chan et al., 2021).

Cameron (2020) argued that many women from various settings had experienced gendered language in the form of harassing, mocking and belittling. Weimann-Sandig and Sem (2022) revealed that female construction site workers experienced significant sexual harassment at their workplace. This has also affected the way females converse with their male counterparts in order to be treated equally and respectfully (Goh et al., 2021). Thus, the theory of speech styles between genders is explored in this research, specifically the types of speech used by women. The style of speech that will be focused on is 'rapport-talk' and 'report-talk' by Kendall and Tannen (1997). Tannen (2007) further defines that both genders adapt to their specific speaking style, "rapport-talk" for the speaking styles of females and "report-talk" for the speaking styles of males. She believes that women and men have different speech styles, where women view conversations among them as negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support and reach consensus. Men, on the other hand, negotiate to maintain the upper hand in a conversation and protect themselves from others' perceived attempts to put them down and look at conversations as a contest. In a workplace setting, interactions between male

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and female coworkers are unique in the aspect of constraints due to the hierarchical structure involved within the organisation (Kendall & Tannen, 2015). Hence, the scope of this study focused on the conversation among coworkers as it is deemed important to analyse the difference in the structure of interaction between males and females in workplace settings.

Language and gender in a workplace setting have been discussed numerous times in several studies (Coates, 2015; Christie, 2022). Nonetheless, the previous studies have not incorporated the elements of local religions, cultures, beliefs and traditions, which potentially impact the use of language by different genders in the local setting of the working industry (Osman et al., 2017). Hence, a limited number of studies have emerged to address this gap. Thus, it is crucial for this study to employ Kendall and Tannen's (1997) Genderlect Theory and Cameron's (2020) Patriarchy and Sexism in a Language (i) to identify the types of language used by females in a male-dominated workplace in Malaysia and (ii) the factors that influence their speaking styles. This research yields important information regarding the linguistic behaviours of females working in Malaysia, which helps discover their usage of gendered language and provides insights on the reasons behind their language use.

2. Methodology

The paper addressed two research questions to achieve the objectives of this study;

i. What types of language are used by females in a male-dominated workplace in Malaysia?
ii. What are the factors that influence females' speaking styles in a male-dominated workplace?

This qualitative descriptive research is conducted through a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Nowell et al., 2017). Lambert and Lambert (2012) claim that this approach provides the study with a competent summarisation of the particular experiences that participants have undergone. Moreover, this approach provides flexibility in analysing the findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). There are three stages of conducting a thematic analysis; (i) the first begins with the coding of the text on a line-by-line basis by providing a transcription of the whole interview session; (ii) the second stage includes generating the descriptive themes that are closely related to the study; (iii) the third step is the formation of final analytical themes, wherein new interpretations, explanations, or hypotheses are formulated based on the findings.

The purposive sampling technique is utilised to choose the participants in this study. Fifteen female participants were involved in the study, aged 20 - 30, worked in a male-dominated industry and were born and raised in Malaysia. According to Nowell et al. (2017), there is no clear rule in determining the number of samples in qualitative research since it relies on the objectives of the study. Thus, the sample of this study has reached its saturation of data by having 15 participants. Therefore, a semi-structured interview is carried out to elicit information from a specific theme from the participants, which allows the interviewer to pursue in-depth information around the topic, as the data will be beneficial for getting the story behind the participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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There are two key features in a competent qualitative interview: (a) the interview flows naturally, and (b) the data is comprehensive (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ruslin et al., 2022). Therefore, in this semi-structured interview, a scheduled list of around six structured questions pertaining to the research topic is prepared. The questions are open-ended as it allows flexibility for the interviewer to guide the interview. Each interview session took around 30-45 minutes. The interview is recorded and transcribed to extract the data, which is analysed by categorising the data with pattern coding and thematic analysis. Due to the constraint of space, the present paper will only highlight five significant responses.

3. Result & Discussion

3.1. Types of Language used by Females in a Male-dominated Workplace in Malaysia

Table 1 shows the types of language used by females in a male-dominated workplace in Malaysia based on Kendall and Tannen's (1997) Genderlect Theory, whether they used rapport-talk or report-talk when conversing with their superiors.

Table 1: Types of Language Used by Females in a Male-Dominated Workplace in Malaysia

I. Interviewee uses Rapport-talk within their workplace	
Participant	**Transcription**
A	…when I was talking to my female superior she was much more like we had this friendliness…but when I talked to my male superior, it was more directive…I would prefer a female superior…they're more likely to hear thoughts from their female colleagues… more understanding..
B	…when the male superior tries to make a light conversation, I would try to follow up with a more friendly but it does get a bit overbearing…I personally try not to offend them…, because still, they are my superiors...and during working hours I would say there's not much of a difference.., I would say I'm more of a straightforward conversationalist…
C	My ex-boss (female) was very approachable,...it makes me comfortable, and I do also rely on someone's vibe as well,...sometimes you know when that person wants us to be either formal or informal with them…my ex-boss was okay with me being informal and that's why I tend to be more friendly with her.
D	When I'm speaking to my boss (male), I would use a more approachable way of communicating…, especially when I need to explain the situation into a simpler way for them to understand..
E	Uhh I think so because I think we all try to sound as polite as possible… as in the way they (male colleagues) change their talking into kind of like a softer tone when they talk… but I think I'm friendlier with the female colleagues.
II. Interviewee uses Report-talk within their workplace	
A	…when I'm writing or even when I'm speaking to a male superior, I tend to use more formal wordings.

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B	...due to the nature of my job… I set the expectation that I should be able to convey my information properly…
C	I started to talk to him in a lower note, lower pitch, and then he started to take me seriously, so whenever I told him to either check my work or ask him a question, he will come to me, like, instantly, rather than the way he was before I changed my pitch.
D	…with my colleagues (male)...uhh... I would use a more direct approach. If it's quite urgent... where I won't usually circle around whatever I want to say.
E	…if it's a very urgent thing, we're kind of very straightforward about everything.

Based on Table 1, all participants switch between rapport-talk and report-talk. All participants agree that to appear approachable and friendly, they often resort to rapport-talk to be more appealing to the person they are talking to. In the case of report-talk, all participants conform to it when they wish to be efficient or to be taken seriously by their male superior. When compared to female superiors, all participants used rapport talk as they were more comfortable conversing with them as compared to their male superiors, where they used rapport talk as a way not to appear rude and not be misunderstood.

3.2. Factors that Influence Females' Speaking Styles in a Male-Dominated Workplace in Malaysia

Table 2 shows factors that influence females' speaking styles in a male-dominated workplace in Malaysia based on Cameron's (2020) Patriarchy and Sexism in a Language.

Table 2: Factors that Influence Females' Speaking Styles in a Male-Dominated Workplace

Factors	Transcription
Patriarchy	A: ...I think it's because of the patriarchal system… in Asia, we tend to respect the male more, in a way that we have to follow the male lead,...this has been the teaching…, so that's the reason why in 2022 (it) still exists…women now can speak out more, but the limitations are still there B: …it reduces the anxiety of having any sexual harassment at work or just being put down as a woman by men…making their comments or judgements or accusation as a joke, in a workplace, by saying, "oh you're not exactly good at it, as a woman" "you're not exactly doing this right, like your other colleague". C: …male colleagues like to talk in a different manner to us (female colleagues) as if they are more professional in the workplace…that's why I have to be more direct to them as well. I do witness as well in meetings male colleagues tend to be more comfortable around superiors, they would talk like they're friends unlike female colleagues… D: I did talk to him (male superior) in a,...just sound friendly…However, it took a turn because he did not take me seriously. And then something did happen where he was blaming me…then I started to talk to him in a

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	lower register note, lower pitch and then he started to take me seriously…
Profession	A: …because I worked in a legal environment before and then I've worked as a cashier, many years back, I would say that there's a difference because, in the professional field, the male and females are treated quite equally better than in a non-professional environment.
	B: Due to the nature of my job as a freelancer and editor, freelancing editor/translating/writing… I set the expectation that I should be able to convey my information properly…without any sort of unnecessary comments or unnecessary questions when it comes to tasks or jobs.
Situation	B: But I do try not to ruin the mood when they are trying to be friendly, yeah.
	C: …some situations would need me to use a different approach looking into the topic we're discussing on…
	E: I guess it depends on the situation because I'm working in the emergency department, so yeah...if it's a very urgent thing, we are kind of very straightforward about everything.
Personal preference	B:...I'm more of a straightforward conversationalist, where I generally do not make small talks when it comes to office hours.
	D: Personally, for me, I would always speak equally to whichever gender I'm talking to. It's as a sign of respect.
	E: I think it depends on the person, because the doctors that I work with are all kind and they are very gentle when they approach me, so I've never experienced a doctor that's like, straightforward.
Position	B: I personally try not to offend them to their face because still they are superiors in that sense.
	C: I tend to talk formally because of their designation because you know they're the boss, so I did tend to speak formally…
	D: So in terms of communications, if it's in a work setting, I don't think the language we use is gender-biased. There's no such thing in a legal field... so yeah basically, it's a neutral communication, I would say.
	E: I think so because you're trying to appeal to the superior…like senior staff nurse, as a student, you try your best to like, try not to piss them off.

The factors that influence females' speaking styles in a male-dominated workplace are patriarchy, situation, profession, position and personal preferences. Most participants stated that the patriarchal system that was imprinted in them by their culture influenced their speaking style as they felt the need to be more respectful towards their male counterparts. There are also situations where the participants were often looked down constantly compared to their male counterparts and were deemed less professional when working just for being a woman, to the extent that they experienced verbal abuse. This shows that patriarchy is still prevalent, and women are subjected to it in the workplace settings in Malaysia. Hence, this causes them to change their speaking style to be taken

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seriously and to remind their male counterparts to remain professional when conversing with them.

Nevertheless, the treatment they received while working was also determined by the type of profession. It is reported that female workers in a non-professional field often experience discrimination as males are assumed to hold a more authoritative position within the workplace. This is in contrast to those working in a professional field where female and male workers are often treated equally. Despite that, the position that the females hold plays an important factor in whether they are subjected to discrimination and biasness. Nonetheless, the factors that influence females' speaking styles when conversing with their male counterparts would also depend on their personal preferences, where it is deemed appropriate and more natural for them.

5. Conclusion

This study examined whether the patriarchal system influenced the language used by female workers in a male-dominated workplace in Malaysia. From the above findings, it can be concluded that these female workers conform to Goh et al. (2021), where they used report-talk when they conversed with their male coworkers and superiors in order to be treated equally and respectfully. In contrast, they used rapport-talk with their female coworkers and superiors since they were more welcoming and approachable. Therefore, the findings concurred with Tannen (2007), where women tend to use rapport-talk when conversing between them because it is deemed an adult conversation for closeness in which they seek and offer support and reach an agreement. Moreover, the present findings also complemented the studies by Chan et al. (2021) and Wood (2019) by highlighting several factors that influenced the speaking styles of female workers in the workplace setting. Patriarchy and position are the two most highlighted factors that affect their speaking styles. Hence, the present findings conform to Kendall and Tannen (2015), whereby the hierarchical structure involved within the organisation affected the way they respond to their male coworkers. Nonetheless, the current study also posited three other contributing factors, which are profession, situation and personal preferences. Thus, it is evident that patriarchy is still prevalent in modern society despite women being given the equal opportunities in society. However, issues of gender discrimination and biasness are still perpetuated in terms of the language used in workplace settings. Hence, it is crucial for this problem to be addressed, as if it is left unchecked, it will eventually become a part of the social and cultural norm.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by UiTM Research Ethics Committee. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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