

## Lexical Characteristic in Malaysian Inter-Religious Discourse

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### Abstract

The numbers of religious issues in Malaysia within 30 years indicates that inter-religious discourse among different religious adherents is not always easy to handle and cannot be easily understood due to the complexities of various issues involved. This study aims to (1) identify the keywords in inter-religious issues in Malaysia, and (2) discuss the lexical characteristic in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia. The discussion is based on the meaning concept suggested by Russell (1940). The data in the discussion relate to the three religious issues in Malaysia which are interpreted as having sensitive and provocative words from 2011 until 2015. The data were gathered taken from local newspapers and interviews with religious authorities. The discussion shows that keywords in inter-religious issues, such as hurt, disappointment, misunderstanding, ignorance etc. are based on negative perception toward the practice of people from different religion. The result also shows that negative gradable for all the issues, such as religious hatred, shocked and angry need to be encountered. The study suggests that the negative perception toward different religious practice needs to be understood comprehensively by examining the reason behind the disagreement of the practice, and any circumstance to create religious misunderstanding must be avoided.

**Keywords:** Religious discourse analysis; Language and religion; Religious language.



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### 1. Introduction

As a multi-religious country, Malaysia needs high level of tolerance in maintaining its harmony. The numbers of religious issues within 30 years indicate that inter-religious discourse among different religious adherents in Malaysia is not always easy to handle and cannot be easily understood due to the complexities of various issues involved. The lexicon used in expressing religious issue highlights religious adherents' feelings and emotional states regarding their religious beliefs and reactions. Apart from Muslims as the majority, there are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and others which different belief and understanding. This study aims to (1) identify the keywords in inter-religious issues in Malaysia, and (2) discuss the lexical characteristic in inter-religious discourse in Malaysia.

The identification of keywords means the reason or argument of the words that is sensitive and provocative in the Malaysian context of inter-religious. The discussion on lexical characteristics refers to gradable words (adjectives or nouns or verbs) in order to investigate the contextual aspects of meaning, and distinguish between different varieties of context sensitivity as a rather rigid one, marking individual words either positive [ + gradable] or negative [ - gradable].

### 2. Literature Review

According to Merriam-Webster, lexical is relating to words or the vocabulary of a language as distinguished from its grammar and construction (Webster, 2000). Lexical item refers to the semantics of the language. Lexical means constitute the semantic units conventionally associated with linguistic forms, and form an integral part of a language user's individual mental grammar, meaning is a property of situated usage-events, rather than words (Evans, 2006). That is, meaning is not a function of language per se, but arises from language use.

It relates to knowledge of words as well as word meanings and thus, forms the basic building blocks of language learning experience. As the cornerstone of language proficiency, lexical knowledge is the key element as it enables one to respond to the four language skills effectively.

Similarly, lexical competence also ensures ability to cope with various types of reading (Nation, 2013). In essence, vocabulary learning far transcends form-meaning correlation and is not the mere piling up of individual words (Nation, 2013). It encompasses two dimensions which are word knowledge dimension and word skill dimension (Kaur, 2013). Word knowledge involves knowledge of word form, its meaning and its contextual use, both receptively (passive or recognized) and productively (active vocabulary). Word skill dimension on the other hand, refers to the ability to use the word in a wide range of contexts. It requires the understanding of appropriate grammatical functions, common collocations, appropriacy in different contexts and frequency of use.

Kjellmer highlights it is possible that the constitution of a lexical is broadly universal in character in the sense that it reflects concepts and things of importance in each culture, since what is generally relevant to speakers of one language is also relevant to speakers of other languages (Kjellmer, 1990). The characterization of the lexical of a language is obviously of very great linguistic interest, but in addition it may hence be of extra-linguistic interest in

that it may shed light on the world-view, priorities and modes of thinking of those who possess the lexical and use it (Kjellmer, 1990).

The term inter-religious discourse is fundamental to be used as a process of discussion and negotiation among religious devotees. Apart from inter-religious, other terms which are being used are inter-religious understanding, inter-religious dialogue, inter-faith dialogue, inter-religious communication, inter-religious cooperation, inter-religious initiative, and dialogue of religions.

Inter-religious language is frequently prescribed for has similar features with religious language. According to Kayadibi and Buang (2011), religious language is specifically (1) the expression of metaphysical thought, especially word of God; (2) the language of the scriptures, including the language of the Quran; (3) the language of religious ritual (Kjellmer, 1990). Hence, religious language or inter-religious language contains many symbolic expressions, commands and prohibitions. This diversity of expressions produces a variety of understandings among its users.

In terms of features, previous studies by Sherry (Sherry, 1977), Kane and Phillips (Kane and Phillips, 1989) and (Keightley *et al.*, 2015) have shown that there are specific linguistic features of religious language, with regard to lexical, phrases, sentences and meaning. However, these studies are more prominent in Western philosophy compared to Eastern philosophy due to the expansion of the horizon of philosophy, particularly in analyzing the relationship between language and religion, through the philosophy of religion and philosophy of language.

### 3. Methodology

The discussion is based on the meaning concept suggested by Russell who views meaning from the physical presence (literal or denotative) of the vocabulary on the one hand (Russell, 1940), and the lexical characteristics which refer to gradable words (figurative or connotative) in order to distinguish between different varieties of context sensitivity as either positive gradable or negative gradable on the other hand. Russell's concept is supported by Hazen's concept of content lexical categories which carries most of the reference meaning in dealing with gradable adjectives or nouns (Hazen, 2014).

The data in the discussion relate to the three categories of religious issues in Malaysia which are interpreted as having sensitive and provocative words within five years from 2011 until 2015. The data for keywords in inter-religious issues were taken from interviews with three religious authorities from Kelantan's Christian Federation of Malaysia, the State of Sabah Mufti Department, and Penang Diocesan Pastoral Institute.

The interview's questions were: (1) the sensitive and provocative keyword (reason or argument) in the issue; (2) the factors behind the issue; and (3) the need to promote a good inter-religious discourse in Malaysia. The data for lexical characteristic in inter-religious discourse were taken from two local newspapers, i.e. (The Sun Daily) and (The Malay Mail Online, 2015).

The data from interviews are labelled with Q and A while from newspapers indicated by the newspapers' name and date. The data are analysed by focusing on the keywords and lexical characteristic in the issues. For the purpose of reliability, inter-rater checking and rechecking will be made. The categories of the issues are:

1. Muslim vs non-Muslim's issue (M-NM) which was sparked by Muslim and disagreed by non-Muslim. The issue is *kafir karbi* which refers to non-Muslims or infidels with whom war can be waged.
2. Non-Muslim vs Muslim's issue (NM-M), which practised by non-Muslim and disagreed by Muslim. The issue is Christianisation, which is the conversion of Muslims to Christianity.
3. Non-Muslim vs non-Muslim's issue (NM-NM), which practised and disagreed by non-Muslims. The issue is religious vandalism which refers to the vandals who damaged the statue of a deity at a Hindu temple.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Keywords in Inter-Religious Issues in Malaysia

#### 4.1.1. *Kafir Harbi*

*Kafir harbi* means infidels with whom war can be waged. Based on the Christian respondent, the issue made non-Muslims angry because it hurt and disappointed them mentally and spiritually. They were attacked by a religious label due to their disagreement over the idea of the Islamic law implementation. In example 1, the keywords of the issue are hurt, disappointed and misunderstanding.

(1) M-NM

Q: What is the sensitive and provocative keyword in the issue?

A: Hurt and disappointment. It is not true when non-Muslims were considered as enemies.

A: There is a misunderstanding because non-Muslims are having no intention to have war.

What are the literal meanings of hurt, disappointment and misunderstanding? According to Oxford Dictionaries (Dictionaries, 2010):

1. Hurt: actual bodily harm is any hurt or injury calculated to interfere with the health and so called comfort of the victim and must be more than merely trivial or transient.
2. Disappointment: the feeling of sadness or displeasure caused by the nonfulfillment of one's hopes or expectations.
3. Misunderstanding: a failure to understand something correctly.

### 4.1.2. Christianisation

Muslims believe that some Christians attempted to spread Christianity within Muslims. As the propagation of other religions is prohibited within Muslims, the Christianisation was seen as an attack to Islam. It was linked to a music concert organised by non-Muslims and it was disagreed by non-Muslims. There are two keywords of the issue, smart and strategy. The Muslim respondent insisted that the use of the word Allah is one of the strategies of Christianization. Christians were described as very smart in promoting Christianity and the use of the word 'Allah' was identified as one of their strategies as stated in example 2.

(2) NM-M

Q: What is the sensitive and provocative keyword in the issue?

A: They are very smarts (crafty). The use of the word 'Allah' is a strategy of Christianization.

How the words smarts and strategy can affect Muslims' perception? According to Oxford Dictionaries (Dictionaries, 2010):

1. Smarts: having or showing a quick-witted intelligence; acumen
2. Strategy: a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim.

### 4.1.3. Religious Vandalism

The keywords of the issue are misconception, ignorance and extremism as shown in example 3. It is clear as the person who vandalised has destroyed some religious materials inside the church. According to the respondent, the vandaliser of church is a religious ignorant and extremist.

(3) NM-NM

Q: What is the sensitive and provocative keyword in the issue?

A: This is a misconception. They don't know the concept of statue.

A: There are also ignorance and extremism.

What the words misconception, ignorance and extremism mean? According to Oxford Dictionaries (Dictionaries, 2010):

1. Misconception: a view or opinion that is incorrect because it is based on faulty thinking or understanding
2. Ignorance: lack of knowledge or information
3. Extremism: the holding of extreme political or religious views; fanaticism

## 4.2. Lexical Characteristic in Inter-Religious Discourse in Malaysia

### 4.2.1. Kafir Harbi

On 23 June 2016, Malaysians were shocked by a statement made by the Mufti of Pahang that it is a sin for Muslims to support the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which he labelled as *kafir harbi* for its opposition to the implementation of hudud in Malaysia (The Strait Times, 2016). His statement had invited disapproval and condemnation from many parties due to the unwanted consequences that it may invite, with them demanding him to retract his statement. Several police reports, too, were lodged against the Mufti. The statement also created uneasiness amongst non-Muslims who fear the negative implications of the term *kafir harbi*.

Not only non-Muslims, Muslims also disagreed with the statement of Pahang Mufti who has labelled non-Muslims in Malaysia as *kafir harbi*. The label was very dangerous as it described a negative gradable of non-Muslims given by Muslims. It seemed that non-Muslim have done a very big mistake by contradicting Muslims' effort in implementing the Islamic law in Malaysia. The fact was that non-Muslims were not Muslims' enemies as they were living together harmoniously and peacefully.

From the newspaper, there are three lexicons as shown in example 4; violence, religious hatred and extremism, that can be linked to the consequences of religious misunderstanding in the issue.

(4) M-NM (The Sun Daily, 2016)

They fear the statement from the mufti would spark violence, incite religious hatred and encourage extremism as technically, people categorised as "*kafir harbi*" can be killed for being against the implementation of Islamic principles and going against God (The Sun Daily, 2016).

The lexicons in the issue have potential in sparking violence, inciting hatred and encouraging extremism towards non-Muslims in the name of religion. The issue has to be tackled effectively particularly by withdrawing the word from being used in the current Malaysian context.

### 4.2.2. Christianisation

Universiti Teknologi Mara's (UiTM) Malacca campus had organized a seminar on threat of proselytization, which drew criticism from political parties and the Christian Federation of Malaysia (Malaysia, 2015). The Higher Education Ministry has defended a local university which had organised an anti-Christianisation seminar, saying that the seminar was an intellectual discussion on critical issues. This was met with criticism from the opposition bench, with DAP's Lim Kit Siang calling it a coward act (Malay Mail Online, 2016).

The Muslims' prejudice against Christianisation was led by their interpretation of the Quranic verse "Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their form of religion (2: 120)". Evidently, some local scholars claimed that there was an attempt to Christianise Malay Muslims in Malaysia (Khairuddin and Ismail, 2013). Among the strategies used in this Christianization was the use of the Malay language. Therefore, Islamic law is now applied to prevent the use of the Malay language as the language of other religions. In some states, the terms

mosques, pilgrimage, prayer, zakat and hajj have been designated as exclusive terms by the enactment of Islamic state laws.

The word ‘very smarts’ in example 2 literally refers to high degree of intelligence and ability in hiding intention to achieve a specific goal. This means the issue is seen as a Christians’ goal which is being managed crafty. The word seems to be a negative gradable for non-Muslims given by Muslims. It remarks that Christians are not to be trusted because of their hidden agenda.

From the newspaper, there are two lexicons as shown in example 5; tragedy and liberalism, which clearly associated to the Christianity. The K-Pop band concert was allegedly used as a strategy of Christianisation.

(5) NM-M ([The Malay Mail Online, 2015](#))

“Indeed, this tragedy proved that the violent stream of liberalism — an ideology that tries to fulfil all human needs even by destroying religious and cultural values — has succeeded in tearing down the dividing wall of Islamic identity that has been built before,” it said.

An article appearing on *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia’s* (Isma) official website now claims that Christianity was behind the lecherous acts that took place in full view of the public, and captured on video, when members of K-Pop band B1A4 allegedly “molested” three young tudung-wearing Muslim girls at a concert ([The Malay Mail Online, 2015](#)).

The lexicons in the issue express Muslims’ concern about Christians’ attempt in destroying their Islamic values. The issue need to be dealt through discussion and dialogue.

### 4.2.3. Religious Vandalism

The vandals damaged the statue of a deity at a Hindu temple in Bayan Baru on 2 July 2016 ([The Star Online, 2016](#)). The statue, worth about RM500, was kept at the Dewa Sri Mathurai Veeran Temple when it was damaged just before midnight. In the span of two months, four temples had been vandalised, with the first being a Hindu temple in Penanti Estate, Ara Kuda early last June ([The Star Online, 2016](#)). The latest, a temple in Bayan Baru, George Town became the fourth to be vandalised. All four temples were built more than 80 years ago. The temple in Penanti Estate is more than 100 years.

Destroying religious material is against universal religious teaching of value. No religion allows the devotees even to act wrongly in religious place or to religious materials as they are sacred in which respect has to be paid. The incident indicated a negative gradable of non-Muslims within them.

The vandal was from different religions and he/she also has misconception towards different religion understanding due to his/her ignorance, i.e. limited knowledge about other religions. The vandalism also relates misconception to extremism in which the vandaliser cannot accept the differences.

In the newspaper, there are three words describing the feeling and emotion, which are sad, shocked and angry over the incident as shown in example 6.

(6) NM-NM ([The Sun Daily, 2016](#))

Just a week after a Hindu temple was desecrated in Penanti, another Hindu temple located about a kilometer away also fell prey to vandals who broke the statues of deities. Temple committee chairman, Bala said he was sad, shocked and angry over what happened and questioned the social influences for such incidents to be happening now ([The Sun Daily, 2016](#)).

The lexicons in the issue demonstrate that a kind of discomfort religious situation existed in the Malaysian context. This kind of incident should be condemned and all religious devotees have to respect all places of worship.

## 5. Conclusion

The discussion shows that keywords in inter-religious issues in Malaysia, such as hurt, disappointment, misunderstanding, very smarts, a strategy, misconception, ignorance, extremism are the feelings which based on negative perception toward the practice of people from different religion. For example, a particular Muslim’s practice which is disagreed by non-Muslim and vice-versa relates closely to the religious background and history of the people who are involved in the practice. As the data were taken from the interviews, they were expressed by the respondents through their observation and involvement in the issues.

The result also shows those negatives gradable for all the issues, such as religious hatred, tragedy, sad, shocked and angry need to be encountered as mentioned in the research problem. The findings reveal that lexical characteristic reflects the worse scenario of inter-religious situation in Malaysia if the level of tolerance among religious adherents is not managed effectively. The study suggests that the negative perception toward different religious practice needs to be understood comprehensively by examining the reason behind the disagreement of the practice, and any circumstance to create religious misunderstanding must be avoided. Inter-religious discourse indeed should be actively held in order to highlight the similarities between different faiths. As the data for lexical characteristic were taken from newspapers, they reflect the ideology of the newspapers.

## Acknowledgments

This work was fully funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education under Trans Disciplinary Research Grant Scheme (Ref: TRGS/1/2015/UUM/02/2/2).

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