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## Language Politeness in Malay Culture in Malaysia

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### Abstract

This paper intends to conceptually discuss on the issue of politeness in Malay culture in Malaysia. The data was collected in a qualitative method namely library research in which the past studies had been gathered in order to communicate the deliberations, briefly. The results revealed that politeness is part of identity in Malay culture in Malaysia. It represents the quality that this ethnic holds and any gestures of impoliteness are regarded and suggested as a threat in the community's identity. This study suggests that the scope of politeness is narrowed down in the future study and further discussions on sub-elements in politeness area are presented in relation with the status quo of the language use in communication. This paper concludes that young people especially should always practice language politeness because impoliteness is a representation of their identity vulnerabilities.

**Keywords:** Malays, Islam, Politeness, Impoliteness, Language, Values, Identity.

### Introduction

Malaysia is a unique country in which it consists of a multiracial society yet, its citizens live in harmony. According to Malaysia Demographics Profile 2019 (2020), Bumiputera made up 62 percent of the whole population in Malaysia, followed by Chinese with 20.6 percent, Indian with 6.2 percent, others with 0.9 percent and lastly, 10.3 percent for non-citizens. Islam has been declared as the official religion of Malaysia since its independence. Since Malay is the majority ethnic in Malaysia, the researchers are interested to provide a discussion on (im)politeness practices in communication.

### Literature Review

The word *politeness* is derived from the root word '*santun*' in Bahasa Melayu. '*Santun*' means *politeness* according to *Kamus Dewan* (Fourth Edition, 2010). Politeness or good deed exists in two forms of language: oral or written form. Nonetheless, the practice of language politeness is dynamic.

Some factors that must be taken into account in assessing, understanding and practising language proficiency are religion, racial, cultural, geographical factor. Clear instance is provided where the ways Western societies execute language politeness in daily life are differ from the ones being practiced in the Eastern civilisations. Their perception and practices also what distinct between the two continents.

Historically, in Malaysia politeness was one of the keys to mold Malay identity. Holding extra-ordinary moral values is the raw definition of politeness. Being polite can be seen through both verbal and non-verbal forms. The main reason for the cultivation of politeness amongst the Malays is due to the fact that Islam as the official religion of the Malays in Malaysia. Hence, Islam's principles and conducts have to be the part and parcels of the living and being Islam. In Malaysia, Malays are born Islam. Malays are discouraged to speak impolitely to others. This moral teaching is believed, also being promoted by other ethnics in Malaysia. This statement can be supported by Fountaine et al. (2002) as shown in the following table 1. on the top ten value preferences of Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Table 1. Top Ten Value Preferences of Malays, Chinese and Indians (Fountaine et al. 2002)

Ranking	Malays	Chinese	Indians
1	Honesty	Courteousness	Devotion to family
2	Order	Responsibility	Holding a degree
3	Continuous	Honesty	Responsibility
4	Responsibility	Willingness to help	Willingness to help
5	Religiosity	Holding a degree	Honesty
6	Concern for face	Order	Concern for face
7	Filial piety	Developing oneself	Carefulness
8	Devotion to family	Determination	Taking risks
9	Courteousness	Tolerance of others	Tolerance of others
10	Tolerance of others	Carefulness	Filial piety

From the table 1.0, it can be seen that *Courteousness* which belongs to the same thesauri to politeness, is listed in the top ten of the most preferred value within the two main ethnics in Malaysia which are Malays and Chinese. Hence, politeness can be claimed as one of the main emphasis in the daily value practices.

### Methodology

In this paper, the best method found was document analysis. Jargons or special terminologies have been gathered in order to define the important terms such as politeness, impoliteness, and 'santun' in Bahasa Melayu. Studies on 'values' were also collected in order to deliberate the contents respectively in its section.

### Discussions

Malaysia is a part of the Eastern community that is unique in its nation not only because its people are multicultural, but also the different religion practices, languages and sociocultural backgrounds and practices. Therefore, there is heterogeneity in the lens of linguistic politeness. Nonetheless, with the majority of Malays, Malay philosophy represents Malaysian core culture. In Malaysia, the majority of its citizens is Malay. As mentioned previously, Islam has becoming the guide to its people especially those Malays. What formed the principle of conducts are based on Al-Quran. The forms and relationships, the essence of values, attitudes, opinions and speech are the fundamentals of this religion that Malays need to obey.

Recently, the issue on impoliteness among citizens have become more prominent. More reports appear day by day, complaining, reporting and debating on the language phenomenon. Social media per se, is the most obvious medium of communication where people can freely express their emotions and thought unfiltered. Language on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp cannot be controlled easily. Many researchers around the globe are also aware of this issue hence, making impoliteness as the subject of study. Gauthier (2017); Mak and Darics (2017); Azman et. Al (2017, 2019) are some of the scholars who conducted studies on impoliteness particularly on taboo language and swearing online. As the awareness on impoliteness rises, this is where the needs to bring politeness to the front has to be made.

Since the Malay community emphasizes on language politeness, so every single word has been put its own *value*. The *value* may be a positive or negative one. The concept of *value* of language is a determining factor to the types of language it will form. The types of are: fine language, rude language, and abusive language, and offensive language. Hence, accordingly, the use of language needs to be adapted to different circumstances, moods and groups, and levels (Moain, 2001). The *speaker* has to understand:

- i. the reason of speaking,
- ii. the contents of speaking,
- iii. the ways of speaking,
- iv. who the listener is, and
- v. the context of speech.

(Kramersch, 1998)

As a result, according to Kadir (2000), some of the concepts in the Malay daily lives which are *shame, self-worth, dignity*, and *decency* have to be emphasized in order to uphold the value system.

*"The language is not tradable"* and *"one who lost his language lost his nation"* (Effendy, NY) are examples of the folks saying on how politeness in the Malay community is so important to this nation. Another famous anonymous proverb is *"language is the soul of its people"* (Osman, 1975) explaining that the Malays positioned the language as a key to reflect the race. Evaluation and interpretation of a person's personality can be projected through the speaker's language. It is defined that the choice of language (vocabulary/word) is the variable to the determination of the speaker's politeness. In addition, a good, positive impression on personality depends on this. For example, if the speaker's language is polite and refined, then he or she is considered polite. However, if the language used is rude and unpleasant to the listener, then he or she is considered rude.

Kramersch (1998) claimed that the language also reflects attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and directly reflects the cultural reality of society. Politeness among the Malays is associated with heart or conscience. The Malays are prohibited from insulting and belittling one's traits during the interaction. The condition of the choice of word should be polite, not containing elements of disgrace or *threat* to the *face* of oneself, family and others even when the speaker thought that what he says is something right. It indicates that every member of the community should be careful when speaking. Collins (2008) stated that impoliteness usually leads to conflict. Improper utterance may cause harm such as miscommunication or *threatening* the *face* of the listeners. This is considered impolite. This can be supported by Fauzi, Ibrahim and Maros (2013) that impoliteness (and impolite person) can be triggered by a language. In the context of Malays, impoliteness is highly prohibited in Islam and regarded as sinful.

Language is an essential element in a culture that is the consequence of behaviour and the use of carefully selected words (Moain, 2001). The sense of politeness in the life of the Malays is evident with an anonymous pantoum that indicates the importance of courtesy and politeness sounds ‘*Yang kurik itu kundi Yang merah itu saga. Yang cantik itu budi Yang indah itu bahasa*’ (Anonymous in Mohamad & Hasan, 2006). This pantoum brings the meaning of when courtesy is combined with the proper language, a clear definition is derived. It generates a genuine conversation that comprises words that are perfect and pleasant, full of respect sense for others, well-mannered and accompanied with dignity.

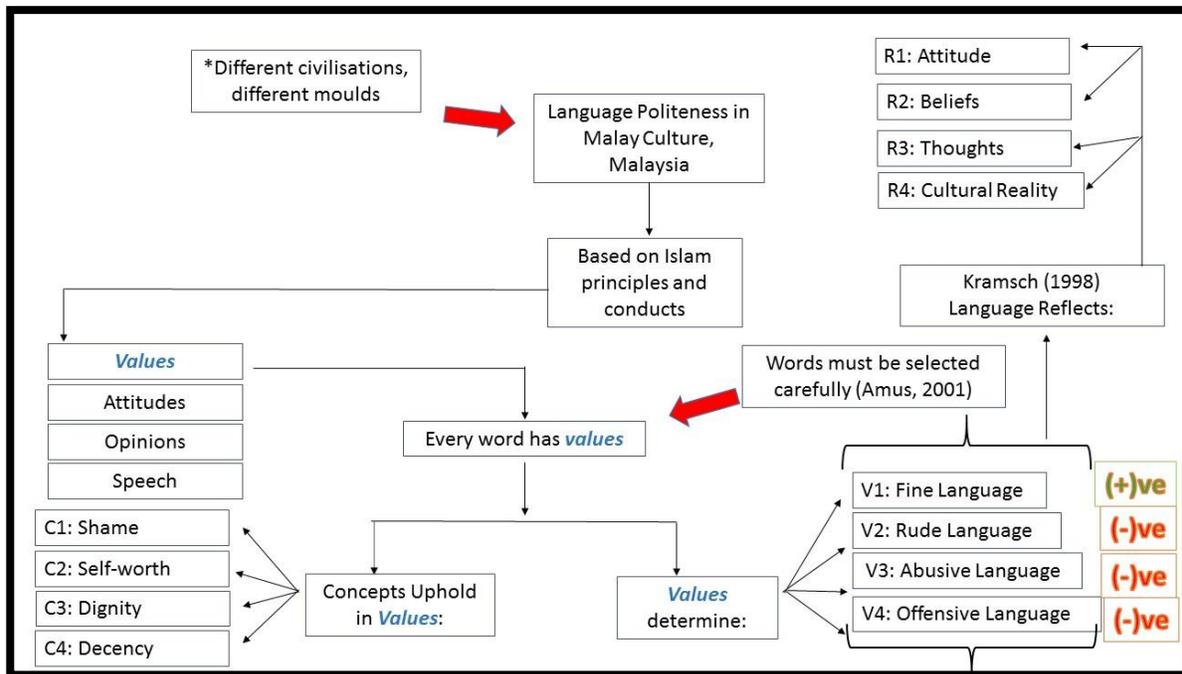


Figure 1. Diagrams the Concepts of Values in Language Politeness in Malay Culture in Malaysia  
 Figure 1. simplifies the discussions made on the concepts related to language politeness in Malay culture in Malaysia. The diagram could also function as a formula to understand the issue related to identity of one culture and the value concept in language.

**Conclusion**

In essence, this study paper concludes that language is an essence to politeness in Malay culture in Malaysia. The researchers suggest that the scope of politeness is narrowed down in the future study and further discussions on sub-elements in politeness area are presented in relation with the status quo of the language use in communication.

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