UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**GENDER SPEECH DIFFERENCES IN POLITENESS STRATEGIES
AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT**

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By

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Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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To my Late Mother, Fatima, and my Late Brother, Alwi

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

According to Lakoff (1975), women use more politeness strategies than men because of
their inferior position in a society. Furthermore, Lakoff indicated that women also use
different strategies in order to talk in less assertive ways such as with the use of tag
questions, indirect statements, and discourse particles. Many studies which have been
conducted, based on her claims, showed inconsistent findings. Commentators such as
Romaine (1994), Holmes (1995), Gordon (1997), Cameron (1992), Tannen (1993), and
Wardhaugh (1998) are of the idea that the use of politeness strategies is dependent on
many social factors that are reflected in the use of the language. Meanwhile, studies on
gender speech differences, especially those concerning the use of politeness strategies,
have been conducted in different contexts and fields. However, few such studies have
been conducted in the Malaysian context and none so far has focused on university
students.

In carrying out the study of gender speech differences in politeness strategies among
university students, the researcher utilizes a qualitative as well as a quantitative design.

The study sample consisted of the students of BA English language programme at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. The data was collected via recordings of cross-gender conversations and questionnaires.

The findings suggest that females tend to use more politeness strategies than males at the university level in the Malaysian context, which lend support to Lakoff's (1975) claim that women use more politeness strategies than men. However, not all of the reasons for using politeness strategies support Lakoff's claim that by using politeness strategies, women avoid straightforward statements due to their inferior positions in the society. Politeness strategies appeared to be mostly effected through the use of *discourse particles*. Additionally, the use of tag questions as politeness strategies is more frequent among females, and they mainly use them as negative strategies. It is also noted that females use more direct statements to effect politeness strategies and mainly use them positively, which is not in line with Lakoff's claim. The discourse particles are mainly used by university students as negative politeness strategies. However, a comparison of the results also showed that males use more negative politeness strategies than females. Another finding is that a single strategy could be used to function both positively and negatively.

It is also observed that the most frequently used discourse particles by the respondents are *you know*, *I think*, and *yah*. Tag questions used as politeness strategies are the forms right and *ok*. Most of the direct statements used as positive politeness strategies are the *would clauses*.

The study highlights some points of gender speech differences in politeness strategies among university students in the Malaysian context.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Sastera

PERBEZAAN PERTUTURAN MENGIKUT JANTINA DI PERINGKAT UNIVERSITI: DI DALAM KONTEKS MALAYSIA

Oleh

MOHAMED TAHA ALI HASSAN

Ogos 2002

Pengerusi : Dr.Wong Bee Eng

Fakulti : Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Menurut Lakoff (1975), wanita lebih banyak menggunakan strategi-strategi kesopanan (politeness strategies) daripada lelaki disebabkan oleh kedudukan mereka yang lebih rendah dalam masyarakat. Tambahan lagi, Lakoff menerangkan bahawa wanita juga menggunakan strategi-strategi yang berbeza untuk berbual dalam suasana yang lebih bertolak-ansur dan tidak mendesak seperti penggunaan ayat-ayat penyambung (tag questions), ayat-ayat penyata tidak langsung (indirect statements) dan juga partikel-partikel percakapan (discourse particles). Kebanyakkan kajian yang dijalankan berdasarkan dakwaan Lakoff tersebut menunjukkan penemuaan yang tidak konsisten. Banyak pihak contohnya Romaine (1994), Holmes (1995), Gordon (1997), Cameron (1992) Tannen (1993) dan juga Wardaugh (1998) menampilkan idea bahawa strategi-strategi kesopanan dalam penggunaan bahasa adalah direfleksikan oleh pelbagai faktor sosial. Dalam masa yang sama, kajian-kajian terhadap perbezaan pertuturan mengikut jantina terutamanya dari segi penggunaan strategi-strategi kesopanan dalam perbualan telah dijalankan di dalam pelbagai konteks dan bidang . Walau bagaimanapun, sedikit

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sekali kajian yang telah dijalankan dalam konteks Malaysia, malah tidak ada satu pun yang memfocus kepada pelajar pelajar universiti.

Dalam menjalankan kajian perbezaan petuturan mengikut jantina di peringkat universiti berpandukan strategi-strategi kesopanan atau 'politeness strategies' di dalam Bahasa Inggeris, penyelidik menggunakan kaedah kuantitatif dan juga kualitatif. Sampel kajian adalah terdiri daripada para pelajar program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Sastera Bahasa Inggeris di Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi. Data dikumpul melalui daftar pertanyaan atau lebih dikenali sebagai questionnaire dan juga rakaman asal perbualan antara sampel yang berlawanan jantina.

Penemuan kajian tersebut mencadangkan bahawa strategi-strategi kesopanan lebih banyak digunakan oleh wanita berbanding lelaki di peringkat universiti, dalam konteks Malaysia, yang turut menyokong dakwaan Lakoff (1975) bahawa wanita lebih banyak menggunakan strategi-strategi kesopanan daripada lelaki. Walaubagaimanapun, tidak semua faktor-faktor penyebab penggunaan strategi-strategi kesopanan memihak kepada dakwaan Lakoff yang menyatakan bahawa, dengan menggunakan lebih banyak strategi-strategi kesopanan, wanita cuba mengelak dari mengeluarkan penyataan-penyataan yang lebih jelas dan berterus-terang menepati kedudukan mereka yang lebih ke bawah dalam masyarakat. Strategi-strategi kesopanan kebanyakannya dikesan daripada penggunaan *partikel-partikel percakapan*, diikuti oleh ayat-ayat penyambung dan juga ayat-ayat penyata langsung. Selain dari itu, penggunaan ayat-ayat penyambung sebagai strategi-strategi kesopanan lebih kerap digunakan oleh wanita dan mereka, kebanyakannya, menggunakannya dalam bentuk negatif yang secara tidak langsung menyokong dakwaan Lakoff. Partikel-partikel percakapan digunakan sebagai strategi-strategi kesopanan

secara negatif. Walaupun begitu, perbandingan berdasarkan dalam dapatan tersebut juga menunjukkan bahawa lebih banyak lelaki menggunakan strategi-strategi kesopanan secara negatif daripada wanita. Ia juga dapat dilihat bahawa wanita menggunakan ayat-ayat penyata langsung untuk memberikan kesan mendalam kepada strategi-strategi kesopanan dan kebanyakkan mereka menggunakannya secara positif yang mana bercanggah dengan dakwaan Lakoff. Penemuan lain oleh pengkaji tersebut ialah satu strategi dapat digunakan secara positif mahupun negatif.

Didapati juga bahawa partikel-partikel wacana yang selalu digunakan oleh responden, adalah *awak tahu* (you know), *saya fikir* (I think) dan *yah*. Ayat-ayat penyambung yang digunakan sebagai strategi-strategi kesopanan ialah *betul* (right) dan *ok*. Ayat-ayat penyata langsung sebagai strategi-strategi kesopanan yang lebih kerap digunakan adalah klausa *sanggup* (would).

Kajian ini menunjukkan beberapa isi penting dalam perbezaan pertuturan mengikut jantina di kalangan pelajar pelajar universiti dalam konteks Malaysia.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 26th August 2002 to conduct the final examination of Mohamed Taha Ali Hassan on his Master of Arts thesis entitled "Gender Speech Differences in Politeness Strategies among University Students: The Malaysian Context" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1980. The committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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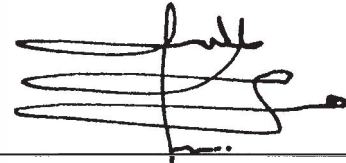
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

MOHAMED TAHA ALI HASSAN

Date: **1** 7 OCT **2002**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background to the study with reference to the Malaysian context, the statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framework, purpose, significance, and limitation of the study. The chapter ends with definition of terms.

1.1 Background to the Study

Language serves as a medium for the exchange of ideas and interaction among group members, whose conversations are analyzed by social scientists and observers to facilitate the means of communication and the avoidance of misunderstanding. In other words the language we use reflects our ideas, and the experiences we have had.

People use language to send vital social messages about who they are, where they come from, and whom they associate with. It is often interesting to realize how people may judge a person's background, character, and intention based simply upon the person's language, dialect, or in some instances, even the choice of a single word. However, sociolinguists may judge two native speakers using the same language and group their dialects into one variety or another. Sociolinguists may also judge two brothers and group their dialects into one social class or another. In most cases, the basic concentration of a sociolinguist must be on the role of language in society.

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Labov (1972: 183) defines language as a form of social behavior used by human beings in a social context to communicate and express their needs, ideas, and emotions to one another. This definition implies that people mainly use language for social interest.

With respect to language and society, Holmes (1995: 1) defines sociolinguistics as the study of the relationships between language and society. Sociolinguists are thus interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways they convey social meaning. Examining the ways people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community. This definition highlights the importance of research in sociolinguistics and thus in language in relation to society.

Another approach to language and society focuses on language use in conversational analysis. Williams (1992: 148-171) in his study of language in its social context tries to explain how we can organize our social relationships within a particular community. Addressing a person as *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, or by a first name is not only about a simple vocabulary item but also about the relationship and social position of the speaker and addressee. The same is said of sentences we use with our friends, our parents, other family members, and with our teachers. For example, the use of utterances such as *open the window*, *would you mind opening the window*, or *this window must be opened* is not just a matter of simple sentence structure; the choice involves cultural values and norms of politeness differences, and status. In considering language as a social activity, it is possible to focus on discovering the

social rules for conducting conversation and discourse and how people open and close such conversations.

The study of language in its social context is concerned with stylistic variation and social variation. Differences may occur according to differences in age, gender, social class, or ethnic group.

As far as sociolinguistics are concerned, among other things, they are interested in language and gender. Such a study is concerned with the role of the language in reflecting gender variations and unique ways of talking, thinking, and behaviour. On the other hand, the impact of gender in language and the implication of such differences may appear in a given society. Language differs according to its usage as well as its users. Social varieties, social norms, culture, or experience may cause differences in language use (Holmes, 1995: 164 -189).

Women, for example, have been considered a subordinate group with a different language (Holmes, 1995: 173). This way of thinking may lead to many social problems. In their attempt to conduct such a study, sociolinguists try to give explanations and suggest ways to avoid misunderstandings that may exist in a given society or a group of people who live together.

According to Freeman and McElhinny (1996: 218), it was reported that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scholars tried to understand instances of gender dominance and differences. Gender discourse had been variously discussed in the linguistics literature under the topics *sex and gender, women language or*

speech, gender and men's and women's language, and *language and sex.* Although women were found to speak differently, not all the researchers agree that gender speech differences are as pronounced as they are believed to be. On the other hand, linguists (for example, Cameron, 1992; Holmes, 1995; Romaine, 1994; and Wardhaugh, 1998) who judge gender speech differences are careful to attribute them to social factors.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women's liberation movement towards emancipation and equal rights succeeded in opening windows for studies such as gender speech differences. The basic demands are the re-evaluation of women's rights and tolerance of gender discrimination especially in the United States of America, the place where the women's movement began. Women and feminists were demanding similar gender rights. This movement resulted in an effort to eliminate societal inequalities based upon gender and sex (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996: 218).

The study of gender discourse appears to have been initiated by three books. They are *Male/Female Language* (Mary Ritchie Key 1975), *Language and Women's Place* (Robin Lakoff 1975), and *Language and Sex Differences and Dominances* (Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley, 1975; in Freeman and McElhinny, 1996: 218).

According to Fasold (1984: 102), the work of Lakoff was the first widely influential study of language and gender. The work was presented firstly in a journal article under the title *language and women's place*, and later in a book (Lakoff 1975) under the same title.

The study of gender discourse has always been grounded on eliminatory disadvantages. Some biological differences, like the size and volume of women's brains, were measured. They were found to be smaller than that of men's. Thus, some researchers consider some biological differences as inevitable (Cameron, 1992: 36).

The study of gender discourse has recently come to be discussed as a unique study that is concerned with gender dominance and differences, with its own tendencies, research, analysis, and methodology. Researchers in many universities and institutes now study gender discourse. Gender speech differences form a branch of gender discourse.

1.1.1 The Malaysian Context

The Malaysian context in this study refers to the speech habits of members in the Malaysian society or the speech of the people who live in Malaysia, taking into account the discoursal dependencies of language use. According to Asmah Hj. Omar (1997: 8), the national language in Malaysia is the Malay language, which is better known as *Bahasa Melayu*. The upgrading of the status of *Bahasa Melayu* was due to the rise of nationalism that led to the independence of Malaya in 1957 and which brought about the need for a Malaysian national language. The choice of the Malay language as a national language fulfills nationalism needs because of its position as a major language, its role as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups, its possession of high literature, and its previous position in administration besides the English language during the colonial period.

According to Asmah Hj. Omar (1982: 51-52), in Malaysia, the main groups are Malays, Chinese, and Indians. All the three groups use the Malay language, which is the national language. In addition, different ethnic groups and different religious groups use many regional dialects. Malay Muslims use Arabic in their prayers and other religious affairs. Chinese use one or more of the Chinese dialects according to different geographical areas. For example, in Penang, the Chinese use Hokkien and in Kuala Lumpur they use Cantonese and Khek (Hakka) besides the use of Mandarin, which is linked to those who studied in the Chinese schools. Indians mainly use the Tamil language.

The English language entered Malaysia with the British colonial power as a language of the rulers. It was also spoken by a small fraction of the population during that time. It was used as the main language in administration, education, diplomacy, and commerce, especially in big towns where the British resided. Thus the use of the English language at that time was enhanced by the individuals' need for job and education (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1992; in Abdullah Hassan, 1994: 67, and Jariah Mohd Jan 1999: 88-89).

According to Asmah Hj. Omar (1992; in Abdullah Hassan, 1994: 74), Malay is the dominant language that occupies the uppermost stratum in Malaysia. English, on the other hand, is the low status language because of its earlier dominance and the significance attached to it in education, media, and other social aspects. Thus in viewing the language situation, Malay is more dominant, followed by the English language and then, the other languages.