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# DISCOURSE AND LEADERSHIP OF DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD: THE RELATIONAL VALUE OF TEXTS TO CREATE SOLIDARITY

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## **Abstract**

Dr. Mahathir Mohamed has been hailed as one of the most effective orators in the world. His speeches have been targeted at various levels of audiences at home and abroad. How does the discourse differ as he relates to the different target audiences? This paper focuses on the discourse generated by the Malaysian Prime Minister during the keynote addresses at the annual general assembly of the ruling party, UMNO from 1982-1996. Specifically, the paper investigates the discourse employed by the speaker to form relations of solidarity with the different layers of society in Malaysia. The theoretical framework adopted is a version of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as provided by Norman Fairclough (1989). CDA focuses on the social effects of discourse as discourse is socially shapes and in turn re-shapes societal formations.

## I. Purpose of Study

Malaysia had transformed from an agricultural country divided in its labor force according to ethnic origins in the 1970s and early 1980s to a united nation of peoples so diverse in their languages and religions, and yet so singly focused on a common goal – to be a developed country by the year 2020. The main objective in this study is to research the man behind that vision, and the discourse which is produced and reproduced while it dialectically shapes the Malaysian society to be what it is today. Specifically, this paper looks at the formal features of the discourse produced by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed and the relational value they hold which serves to create solidarity with the people.

## II. Data

The data is Dr. Mahathir's keynote speeches at the ruling party's General Assembly from 1982-1996. Dr. Mahathir is the president of the ruling party, which is known as United Malay National Organization (henceforth UMNO), the dominant party in the coalition party government. Specifically, three main themes found common in all the speeches are chosen. They are themes on Economy, Islam and UMNO.

## III. Methodological Approach

The analysis of the data intends to reveal the relationship of the discourse with the realities of the world from the perspective of the speaker. Fairclough (1989) describes formal features of texts as having experiential, relational and expressive values. The focus in this paper is on the **relational value** of expressions used by the speaker in his speeches. There are traces in the textual features that demonstrate relational value which means they “depend on, and help create, social relationships between participants” (Fairclough, 1989:116). In other words, the objective of this paper is to investigate the ways in which the speaker forms solidarity with the audience that may be manifested in the discourse. Three questions that this paper attempts to answer are: (a) what textual features reflect the relational value in the text; (b) are there specific target audience(s) that the speaker wants to create solidarity with, and (c) are there inconsistencies in the use of these textual features which may be reflective of an ideological struggle.

In relation to (b) above, there are several layers of audience that are exposed to the speeches. The most important target audience are the party members who are predominantly Malay Muslims. The composition and characteristics of this particular set of audience gradually change over the years and this factor is detected in the textual features in the speeches. The general traits which are relevant in this case are level of education, and background in terms of age and shared events.

The analysis is done based on the themes of UMNO and economy. A major assumption is that the larger environment and the text producer's interpretation of this larger environment play a critical role in the way discourse is shaped. Modern theories of discourse, which this investigation adopts, intend to uncover the text producer's 'representation of the world' (Fairclough, 1989) which does not necessarily reflect reality

#### IV. Non-Technical Expressions in the Sections on Economy

The discourse found in the speeches reflects the speaker's desire to create relations with specific groups in the audience. In the early years, that is, from 1982- 1985, there is speaker's presupposition that the majority of the membership comprise middle-class folk. For this reason, the speaker uses simple, non-technical terms to urge the people to adopt a certain behaviour or attitude. However, this trend changes as the composition of members changes.

In the years following 1985, in addition to lower middle class men, the party members included more mid-middle class and upper middle class men and women professionals. In the section on Economy in the speech of 1983, the speaker gives his opinion and analysis of the economic situation. In order to relate with the majority of the members who are lower middle class with non-economic backgrounds, the words he chooses to explain and justify are non-technical and layman. For example, the problems that some countries faced were the result of *berhutang dengan banyak* (to owe a lot (of money)), *boros berbelanja* (wasteful spending or extravagant), and *gelojoh* (greedy, usually with reference to food). These words can also be used to describe bad spending habits that 'people' have (and not just those of governments or countries). Not only are these expressions non-technical, they are also very informal. This is especially so with the last word *gelojoh* (greedy) which belongs to a different classification scheme from the others. The other words are directly related to money but *gelojoh* is usually used with food and over-eating. These words have relational value as they are simple enough for the members to understand and relate to. They also have relational value as the speaker presupposes a shared value with the audience in that these are qualities which are negative.



In the recession years of early-mid 1980s, in order to alleviate the economic woes of the country, he suggests the following: *berjimat-cernat* (to be thrifty), *perbelanjaan dikurangkan* (spending is curbed), or *mengurangkan hutang* (reduce borrowing) and *mengikat perut* (figurative: to tighten the belt because of difficult times). Again, these are terms which the ordinary man can relate to. Therefore, even though distance is created in telling people what to do, he overcomes this by using terms which are simple and appeal to common-sense.

He also uses simple examples which the people can relate to. In the following excerpt, the speaker explains to justify government loan and expenditure. The unequal status between the speaker and the audience is made clear in the first part of the text. However, another strategy is mobilized in the second half of the text in order to put the audience on the same plane as the speaker. To illustrate,

1 *Berhutang untuk membina projek penting yang boleh mendatangkan hasil kepada kerajaan adalah munasabah. Tetapi kita tidak boleh berhutang untuk berbelanja pengurusan yang berterusan atau "recurrent expenditure" seperti gaji, pencen dan lain-lain. Kita tidak boleh berbuat demikian, sama juga seperti seorang tidak boleh berhutang untuk makan hariannya.*

"To borrow for the purpose of important building projects which can bring in revenue to the government is sensible. But, we cannot borrow for continual administrative expenditure or "recurrent expenditure" for example for salaries, pensions and so on. We cannot do that, just as a person cannot borrow for his daily meals" (literal translation).

In the first part of the text, distance between the leadership and the people is created, firstly, because the "revenue" mentioned belongs to the "government" as opposed to if he were to say 'bring in revenue to the nation/ us' Secondly, administrative functions are spelled out in "recurrent expenditure, for example salaries, pensions" This defines the relationship between 'we, the leadership in authority handing out salary, etc. to you, the working class people' In order to overcome this, in the last part, the speaker finds some common ground in order to assimilate the people to the government. ("We cannot do that, just as a person cannot borrow for his daily meals".) The relational significance is in putting the leadership and the people as facing the same kind of problems.

The speaker uses illustrations which the common people can relate to. For example,

2. *Kita berhutang hari ini, dan anak cucu kita akan menanggung beban pembayaran. Nenek moyang kita menggadai negeri untuk*

*perbelanjaan yang membazir seperti acara perkahwinan besar-besaran, dan akibatnya ialah kita dijajah.*

“We owe (money) today, and our grandchildren will (have to) bear the burden of repayments. Our great-grandparents mortgaged our country to pay for extravagance like lavish, grand weddings, and the result is we become colonized”

Both *anak cucu* (grand-children) and *nenek moyang* (great-grandparents) are kinship terms which make them affective terms. The speaker presupposes one’s feelings of protectiveness over one’s family especially if they are grandchildren. As a result of ‘owing money’ now, ‘our grandchildren’ are the ones who will be made to suffer. The intended effect would be to convince the audience to follow his advice otherwise this would be the consequence.

The next sentence, however, is vague in its reference to “great-grandparents” First, he puts the audience in a ‘protective’ frame, in that ‘we’ should not have too many debts if we care for our grand-children who ultimately will be the victims. Then, in the next sentence ‘we’ are the victims of ‘our’ great-grandparents over-extravagance. The references are ambiguous, but the choice of affective terms nevertheless is intended for relational purposes.

Although there is a contradiction in references above, what follows in the second sentence provides vivid examples which the audience can relate to. The speaker assumes that the audience will negatively evaluate “lavish, grand weddings” This is an event which is very pertinent especially to Malays. Holding grand and spectacular weddings for their children, even if it meant having to borrow money or sell property, was common practice among the Malays. But since the late 1970s, when the Malays became more aware of the requirements in Islam, to a certain extent, lavish and wasteful spending was reduced. In choosing this example, the speaker expresses a perspective which is religious as well as cultural.

The overall resultant effect of over-spending is that “we become colonized” This also reflects the speaker’s intention of appealing to a shared value with the audience. In order to motivate the audience to change their attitude or behaviour, a strategy that is often mobilized is to predict undesirable outcome if they do not. Being “colonized” is a shared past which is often referred to ‘intertextually’ as the prediction or threat of presumably unwanted result (Fairclough, 1989). In addition to this shared past, the speaker also refers intertextually to what he calls ‘neo-colonization’ (Kamila, 1999). This is the notion of being dependent economically to developed nations vis-à-vis western countries. This new form of colonization is ideologically unacceptable to the speaker and this is manifested in his discourse. He puts this forth to the people as common ground and it is accepted as common sense.

The economy revived in the late 1980s and following several government programs, a greater number of Malays and Bumiputeras received higher levels of education. Following this, there was a gradual change in the composition of UMNO members from the 1980s through the 1990s. The implementation of new economic programmes as well as the change in characteristics of the audience gradually re-shaped discourse patterns particularly in the use of non-technical to more economic terms.

New concepts emerged in the late 1980's but the speaker provides simple definitions in order to form relations with the people. In the speech of 1987, the concept of 'franchising' was brought up. In the section on Economy that year, the speaker gave a report of the economic status of the country. Several new programmes had been drawn up by the government and one of them was the system of franchising. Only one sentence referred to this concept that year. To illustrate, he says "'Satay' which at one time was sold only by those who knew how to make it, can now be sold by anyone through the franchise system" No definition was given on it in this speech. However, the example given is 'satay' which is a popular Malay food item. The foreign concept of franchising is thus localized through this association. The definition and explanation of franchising was eventually given in the speech of 1992.

Social formation or re-formulation was brought about by several new economic policies during the Mahathir administration from the 1980s through the 1990s. Among them are the Industrialization policy, Malaysia Incorporated, Privatisation, Islamisation, and Vision 2020. In the beginning, many of these programmes did not enjoy warm welcome by the general public nationally as well as internationally. Reaction towards the ventures undertaken by the Prime Minister had been negative from the start. The greatest controversy involved the car manufacturing industry. Dr. Mahathir had to contend with criticisms from all quarters - foreign and domestic; from politicians to academicians; and from analysts to economists.

Another economic 'move' by the Mahathir administration is the concept of "Privatisation" The idea of "Privatisation" was first announced in 1983, but implementation was first carried out in 1984. In the recession years of 1985 and 1986 it gained impetus (Khuo, 1995: 131). Dr. Mahathir explains in a speech given at the "Conference on Privatisation in Malaysia: Opportunities and Implications" that privatisation is the converse of Nationalisation. Just as nationalisation was supposed to remedy the inequities of the capitalist private enterprise system, privatisation is expected to remedy the failures of nationalisation (Mahathir, July 14, 1988). His policies and perseverance paid off as the economy recovered from a minus (-) 1% growth in 1985 to 1% in 1986. Then it experienced a 5% growth in 1987 and subsequently, until 1996, in excess of 8% annually. Local support grew through campaigns and promotions via the government-run media. As history has it, many of these 'controversial' (at that time) policies achieved great success. With the nation's achieve-



ments and leaders' carefully planned discourse, attitudes changed as society developed self-confidence.

## V. The Use of Euphemisms

Fairclough (1989) states that

text producers often adopt strategies of avoidance with respect to the expressive values of words for relational reasons. A euphemism is a word which is substituted for a more conventional or familiar one as a way of avoiding negative values (Fairclough, 1989: 117).

In condemning the actions of some members of the party, the speaker chooses to use the euphemistic phrases *menggunakan wang yang banyak* (use a lot of money), *taktik main duit* (the tactic of playing with money (literal translation)), *sagu hati* (gratuity) and *penggunaan wang* (the (mis)use of money) instead of the more direct and coarse *rasuah* (bribe).

The following excerpt taken from the speech of 1984 in the section on UMNO illustrates this point:

3. Dengan semakin ramai orang Melayu menjadi kaya, rebutan jawatan dibuat dengan menggunakan wang yang banyak ... Saya merayu kepada ahli-ahli UMNO ... supaya tidak membenarkan diri mereka dipengaruhi oleh taktik main duit dan mengutamakan diri sendiri...

"With the increase in the number of wealthy Malays, struggle for positions is done through the use of a lot of money.... I implore UMNO members, ... not to allow themselves to be influenced by the 'tactic of playing with money' and self-importance ..."

The formulations underlined can easily be substituted with the word *rasuah* (bribery) without a change in meaning. However, in the interest of maintaining relations especially with the members who may be involved, the use of a euphemism is mobilized.

It is important that the speaker maintains relations because the people involved are those within the party and some from the highest level of authority. He even refers to these people in his speech.

4. Dahulu, wakil-wakil ke perhimpunan agung mencari tempat tinggal sendiri di hotel-hotel kecil, tetapi kerana undi mereka diminati oleh calon-calon majlis tertinggi, maka mereka diberi layanan yang istimewa

"Previously, representatives to the general assembly look for their own accomodation in small hotels, but because their votes are sought after by candidates of the supreme council, (now) they are given 'special services'"

It can be inferred that nowadays the 'representatives to the general assembly' in the above excerpt do not look for their own accomodation in small hotels anymore. By implication, the 'candidates of the supreme council' who seek the votes of these representatives pay for their accomodation in large exclusive hotels. Instead of blatantly saying '*diberi rasuah*' (are given bribes), the speaker chooses to use the euphemistic '*diberi layanan yang istimewa*' (are given special services).

It can be observed from this excerpt that there is a struggle by the speaker in distancing himself from the 'accused' while simultaneously maintaining relations with them. Since the 'accused' are candidates for the supreme council members, they are actually the 'strongmen' in the organization. So utilizing euphemisms is one strategy to address the issue and at the same time continue relations.

There is a stark difference between the discourse found in the 1980s and 1990s with regards the use of the words *rasuah* and *sogokan*, both of which mean 'bribe'. A whole section of the speech in 1996 is spent addressing this issue. The speaker laments on the prevalence of bribery and the undesirable outcome of it. In that year, euphemisms are not used in referring to the subject. The matter is addressed directly and reference is made to all members and leaders. An example is,

*5 Pada mulanya sogokan dibuat secara tersembunyi. Kakitangan kerajaan yang lain yang sedar akan kecurangan yang sedang berlaku akan mengugut supaya mereka juga disogok. Akhirnya yang berkuasa dan yang tidak berkuasa, akan turut terlibat dengan rasuah. Oleh kerana semua terlibat masing-masing tidak akan berasa malu lagi. Semua akan melindungi amalan rasuah. Rasuah menjadi amalan terbuka. Dan budaya rasuah ini mungkin akan menular ke seluruh masyarakat*

"At first the act of bribery is done on the quiet. Other civil servants who become aware that an indiscretion has taken place also want their share of the bribe. Finally, those in power and not in power, ... will consequently be involved in bribery. As everyone is involved, no one will be ashamed anymore. ... All will protect the practice of bribery. Bribery will be an open practice. And this culture of bribery maybe will spread widely throughout the whole society" (1991).



Another example is,

6. *...calon-calon mula menyogok wang dan hadiah kepada para wakil. Perlumbaan diadakan antara calon-calon dan sogokan meningkat nilainya. Kini proses menyogok dimula lebih awal. Setahun atau lebih sebelum pemilihan diadakan, sogokan dimulakan. Bukan prestasi kerja atau kebolehan seseorang itu yang dijadikan asas pemilihan. Yang menentukan sokongan ialah nilai rasuah yang sanggup dihulur*

"... candidates begin to bribe delegates with money and gifts. As there is competition among candidates, the bribes increase in value. Now the process of bribery starts earlier. Acts of bribery begin a year or more before elections are held. A person's quality of work or capabilities are not the basis for his nomination. The basis for supporting him is the value of the bribe that he is willing to hand out" (1996).

In the speech of 1991, the speaker used the word *rasuah* for the first time without euphemistic expressions. The choice of vocabulary is similar to those in the examples from 1996. After advising members directly of the bad effects of this practice, he says. "I am aware that what I am saying will cause a furore in certain quarters within and outside the party and government" (1991). It is understood from this that bribery is an admitted practice and he directly addresses the problem without using euphemisms in the interest of maintaining relations.

From these examples, it can be concluded - only as it pertains to the subject of 'bribery' - that at this juncture of his political life, the speaker has moved from being implicit and indirect to being explicit and direct. He is direct and forthright in handling the issue even as he refers to colleagues in the party. In the year 1996, he had been the Prime Minister for 15 years and he had dealt with this same issue for many of the 15 years he had held office. Therefore, he has moved from using euphemisms to maintain relations with members of the party, to using direct and forthright terms such as *rasuah* and *sogokan*. In a way, his confidence in his status of power is made more explicit. At the same time, his stand in the subject matter is unrelenting which may indicate a desire to portray himself as being innocent of the same act.

In the years to come a committee within the party was set up to monitor and investigate suspect dealings among party leaders and members. As a result, some members found guilty were suspended from contesting positions in the party

## IX. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the speaker's desire to form relations with the different layers of audience is largely coded in his discourse. The Muslim-Malays are the main target audience for the most part. They dominate the political party UMNO and the speeches are primarily addressed to them. Nevertheless, there are indications in other parts of the speeches that the speaker intends to maintain relations with other communities. The discourse adopted demonstrates the speaker's intention to create solidarity with specific groups in the audience.

Several economic policies and programmes were implemented by the Mahathir Administration from the 1980s through the 1990s. On February 28, 1991, at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council (MCB), Dr. Mahathir presented a working paper called "Malaysia: The Way Forward". In it he presented his idea of a "developed" Malaysia by the year 2020. This agenda is known and popularised as "Vision 2020". The term "developed" has been defined as encompassing economic and material growth, as well as development in all other aspects of life; namely political, social, spiritual, moral and culture. The nation has been urged to model its own brand of development and not emulate the existing ones.

Dr. Mahathir has identified nine "challenges" which must be overcome before the nation can achieve its objective. Among them is to form a truly Malaysian people who are united in their thinking. National unity, loyalty to the country, harmony and tolerance are some of the qualities that will have to be understood and practised. Some familiar aspects reminiscent of the New Economic Policy (of the 1970s) objectives which can be found in Vision 2020 are the eradication of poverty; and a balance in socio-economic status among all the races, in all districts, in all states and between rural and urban areas (Department of Information Malaysia, July 1992). In other words, the objective calls for an equal distribution or a good mix of peoples with regards to wealth, professions, and so on. Dr. Mahathir who believes in the free market system relates the following in an interview

We didn't want to have a redistribution of wealth in the communist way, where you impoverish everyone. We wanted to make sure the Chinese and Malays were equal, not by having the same amount of money but making sure there would be rich Malays. That way the Malay rich will have something in common with the Chinese rich, so they won't think so much about race (Time, Dec 9, 1996).

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