



# Language and Power in Various Social Contexts

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**Abstract.** Language and power are two different domains. However, as language is an instrument of communication and power is an organizing principle in every society, language and power become an interest of study in the field of sociolinguistics. Thus, this paper focused on how power is enacted through language use. Reviewing several related works of literature, the results indicate that language reveals power in society. Language and power are found in various places in society, including family, occupation, socio-economic class, politics, race, gender, mass media, and social media. Power in a language can be instrumental or influential. Language plays a vital role in maintaining ideology in society. In addition, language and power are inseparable. When language is used, one should not forget to include society and its contexts.

**Keywords:** Language · Power · Society · Context

## 1 Introduction

Language can be used as an instrument to influence people or gain control. In other words, language provides a culturally conventional tool for power [1]. Power is a concept that is broadly used to analyze human behavior. The broad idea of power is categorized into ‘power to’ and ‘power over, which can be positively or negatively interpreted. In a positive sense, ‘power to’ is used to gain personal or collective goals. In a negative sense, it is used to prevent other people from achieving their goals. ‘Power over’ refers to the relational aspect of power in which one person has power over another [2]. One is dominant, and the other is submissive.

According to [3], power can be instrumental and influential. Instrumental power is used to make people do things or make things happen. This can be found in legal or official documents, regulations, and contracts. This type of power is used to maintain and enforce authorities and is expressed by using imperative forms. For example, ‘You must clean your room!’ ‘You have to wash the dishes!’ ‘You will finish your assignment by tomorrow morning!’ The other type of power is influential power, which makes people believe or support something. It is used to persuade or influence others. This influential power is commonly found in politics or mass media. For example, when giving a speech in his 2008 campaign, Barack Obama famously said,

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

Through this speech, Obama wanted to convince the Americans that he could make a change in the country, and therefore persuade them to vote for him.

Power can also be seen in the asymmetry of address forms. The differences in address forms often indicate status differences. You might refer to your teacher using a formal address term such as Mr. Black, Dr. Murphy, or Professor Tatum. On the other hand, your teacher will address you by your first names, such as Andy, Laura, or Santi. The person in the superior position may allow you to call them by their first name, but this can only happen if they initiate the idea.

According to [3], there are several ways in which speakers show power in conversation.

- a. Initiating a conversation or changing and controlling topics. The speaker takes the lead and chooses the topic of conversation.
- b. Changing topic. The speaker changes the topic of the conversation. Politicians will tend to do this if they are uncomfortable with a topic.
- c. Holding the floor. The speaker offers little or no time for others to speak.
- d. Imperative sentences. The speaker gives orders and directions. This can be a sign of dominance.
- e. Question asking. This entails posing a direct question to another individual.
- f. Unresponsiveness. This is a type of negative power assertion method where the speaker is ignored or back-channeling is not used.
- g. Interruption. The speaker interrupts another speaker because they feel what they have to say is more important or because the first speaker's speech is invalid or irrelevant.
- h. Speech length. The speaker who speaks the longest holds the most power. For example, a manager talking to a group of employees expects to be listened to.
- i. Closing down. This happens when the speaker does not allow other speakers to carry on talking.

## 2 Language and Power in Different Contexts

Power relationships between people can be expressed through language. The expressions can be in the form of request, instruction, persuasion, argument, or other speech acts. The following are some examples of how language is used to show power relationships in conversations.

Example (1) is a conversation between a husband and a wife in a Balinese family.

- (1) Husband : *Dija sepatu Bapake?*  
(not particularly addressing anyone)  
'Where are my shoes?'
- Wife : *Ane selem apa ane coklat?*  
(getting the shoes)  
'The black ones or the brown ones?'

The question *Dija sepatu Bapak* ‘Where are my shoes?’ is actually a request from a husband to his wife to bring his shoes. The wife, who understands the context, does not reply with ‘I don’t know’ or ‘They are over there’, but she asks her husband which shoes she should bring to him.

Balinese society follows *Purusa* law, which assigns inheritance and decision-making to male descendants [4]. In a Balinese family, power relations recognize the male members of the family as more prominent than the female members [5, 6]. Thus, to be born male in a Balinese family entails a set of privileges. A Balinese female is supposed to serve the male members of her family. After she gets married, she is supposed to serve her husband and the other male members in the family. There are many cases when a Balinese female is expected to give way to her brothers in terms of career and education [7]. The following describes a situation once encountered by one of the contributors of this paper.

- (2) Arie : Hi, Ita, that was an excellent presentation on the metabolic process! You could make a good doctor!
- Ita : Thank you, Bu Arie. I did want to be a doctor, Ibu. But I had to join English language education.
- Arie : Why so, if I may know?
- Ita : My brother wants to be a doctor, too. And my father is just a school teacher. He cannot send two children to medical school. So, he asked me to cancel my plan.
- Arie : Oh, I am sorry to hear that, my dear.
- Ita : It’s okay, Ibu. I like it here, too. I can graduate soon and then I will work, so I can support my family.

In Example (2), it can be observed that Ita and her brother both wanted to go to medical school and become medical doctors. However, she became one of Bu Arie’s students in the Department of English Language Education, from which she will graduate as a prospective English teacher. The reason she had to cancel her plan to be a medical doctor was that she had to give way to her brother’s plan. Furthermore, she plans to support her brother’s plan. A simple request from her father produced two effects: she had to cancel her plan, and she intends to support her brother. This implies three effects of *Purusa* law upon her life: first, a sister should give way to a brother; second, a father’s request is a command; third, women exist to serve men. Even though she may not have been explicitly telling about *Purusa* law, she internalizes its essence to the point that she assumes she made the decision to support her brother in going to medical school – the very reason she could not pursue her dream to be a medical doctor. It is through everyday discourse in the family that she internalizes her secondary position in the family as if it were the truth that women were the ‘second sex’ [8].

The next case is that of a Balinese student in the department where the principal author of this paper teaches. The student said he did not like joining online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, so he wanted to take some academic leave. However, he said he could not do so because his father disagreed. The father said:

- (3) *Nak ngujang kamu cuti kuliah? Kuliah geen. Bapak suba mayah UKT.*

‘Why do you want to take academic leave? Just continue studying. I already paid the tuition fee.’

In Example (3), it can be seen that the father disagreed with his son taking leave from college. He ordered his son to continue studying, even though this was contrary to the son’s wish to take a break during the pandemic. The father implicitly forced his son to do what he said by stating that he had already paid the college tuition fee. Therefore, the father influences the child’s decision, and the child must follow the father’s order. As a son, he must obey his father, as [9] described who and what a child wants in their life are dependent on and/or influenced by their father’s will.

Most Balinese families live in a compound house with members of their extended family, including grandparents and in-laws. In this kind of living arrangement, the male members are more privileged than the female ones, and the more senior female members of the family have a higher rank than the more junior female members [10, 11]. A simple statement from a mother can be interpreted as a command to her daughter-in-law to make coffee for her husband.

- (4) Mother : *Kurnane suba bangun.*

‘Your husband is awake.’

Power is also expressed in Balinese traditional social meetings, as can be seen in Example (5).

- (5) *Kelian adat : Yening mersidayang, nganggen kebaya putih.*

‘If possible, wear white kebaya.’

This expression is a request, humbly stated by a village chief to the female villagers to wear white *kebaya*. However, the female villagers will respond to this request with the utmost obedience as if it were an instruction. Hence, it can be expected that all female members will wear white *kebaya* for the ceremony.

Balinese society believes in shamanistic healing. Most Balinese believe in the power of shamans to help them through difficult times, mainly when someone is ill. They call shamans, *Balian*. Many Balinese even first consult or prefer to visit a *Balian* before they go to any medical doctor. In most cases, they will follow the suggestions of a *Balian*, as can be seen in Example (6).

- (6) Patient : *Panak tiange mencret meketelun. Sampun kenten, Ibi dengokine ken ipah tiange. Mulih ipah tiange jeg ngelepen ten bangun-bangun.*

‘My child has had diarrhoea for the past three days. And yesterday, my sister-in-law visited us. Since then, my child only sleeps.’

Balian : *Nden malu, nden. Bapa lakar ngenyit dupa malu. Kar plajain Bape malu palemahan umah ceninge.*

‘Wait, I need to burn some incense and look at the condition of your house.’

*Nah tepuk suba jani ne. Di bucun umahe kaja kangin harus bersiang. Ada tetaneman ane sing patut ditu. Nto ba ngerabeda jani. Ne harus bersiang aji pecaruan agung.*

(Some minutes later)

‘Well, now I know. The corner of the house must be cleaned. Some plants shouldn’t be there. Now that’s what’s causing the problem. The plant must be cleaned with a ceremony.’

Patient : *Nggih, tiang ngiring punapi ja patutne.*

‘I will follow whatever you say.’

In Example (6), most patients will follow a *Balian* suggestions, whether they fully believe in them or not. Since Balinese society holds that supernatural power does exist, the combination of this belief and the *Balian*’s word compels the ceremony suggested by the *Balian*. The last statement reveals how much a *Balian* influences a patient in following his words or suggestions.

In Hindu Balinese society, it is believed that God has power in every aspect of life, animate and inanimate [12, 13]. In every house, there is a family shrine. People offer flowers at least once a day. They offer rice and what they have cooked as soon as they finish cooking. Before they start an activity, they give an offering and pray for permission, wishing that the activity would run smoothly, as can be seen in Example (7).

(7) Ibu : Ada penunggun karang dini? Maturan malu!  
‘Is there any shrine here? Make some offering, first!’

Arie : Nggih wenten, Bu. Mangkin tiang maturan.  
‘Yes, there is. Now I’m making the offering.’

In Example (7), the *Ibu* ‘mother’ asked if there was a shrine and ordered the daughter to make some offerings. This was done because they believe that God is the source of strength, peace, health, happiness, and success.

The relationship between language and power is present in the Balinese social structure. Balinese society has four caste systems: *Brahmanas*, *Satrias*, *Wesias*, and *Sudras* [14]. Brahmana is the highest caste, consisting primarily of religious leaders who are the most respected people. Ksatria is primarily composed of royalty and nobles. Waisyas are merchants, while Sudras are the lowest caste, consisting largely of farmers. This caste system has obliged the Balinese to speak in different linguistic levels, depending on who speaks to whom [15, 16]. For example, when a Sudra is speaking to a Brahmana, the Sudra must use a high level of Balinese in order to show respect. When a Brahmana speaks to a Sudra, on the other hand, he or she may speak in low Balinese. This situation is exemplified in (8) and (9).

- (8) Sudra : *Ampura Ratu, tiang metaken, Ratu Presida muput tigang sasih cucun titiange?*  
'I'm hoping you'll be able to lead the three-month baby ceremony for my grandchild.'
- Brahmana : *Nah, buin pidan dinan cucune?*  
'When is the ceremony?'
- Sudra : *Malih pitung raine nike.*  
'In seven days.'
- Brahmana : *Oh, buin pitung dina. Nggih nyidaang. Sawitare jam sia semengan..tuur ampun Ratu ke Griya.*  
'Oh, in seven days. I will do it. Pick me up at 9 a.m.'
- Sudra : *Nggih Suksma Ratu.*  
'Yes, thank you.'
- (9) Gusti Aji : *Dije Gede Tulus uling ibi tusing maan ngenah?*  
'Where is Gede Tulus? I have not seen him since yesterday.'
- Nyoman : *Ipun kantun ring Badung nike.*  
'He is still in Badung.'
- Gusti Aji : *Lamun suba teke orain ngalih ke jero.*  
'When he is back, tell him to come to my house.'
- Nyoman : *Inggih Gusti Aji.*  
'Yes, Gusti Aji.'

In Example (8), it is demonstrated that the Sudra speaks with a high level of Balinese, whereas the Brahmana responds with a lower level of Balinese to the Sudra. When a Sudra speaks to a Weisya, he also uses high Balinese, as shown in Example (9). Thus, a Sudra is expected to address the upper caste members in high Balinese, while the aristocrat will respond in low Balinese to assert his superiority.

Using different levels of language is not exclusive to Balinese society only. In other societies such as Javanese, societal structure plays a role in language usage. Javanese is divided into three levels, which are referred to as *Krama Inggil*, *Krama Madya*, and *Ngoko*. When you speak to a senior or someone whom you respect, *Krama Inggil* or *Krama Madya* should be appropriately used. *Ngoko* is commonly used among friends or peers, to someone younger, or to those with lower social status. Observe Examples (10) and (11).

- (10) Anak : *Pak, kulo badhe kesah.*  
'Dad, I am going out.'
- Bapak : *Arep nang endi nduk?*  
'Where are you going?'
- Anak : *Nggene Dita pak, badhe ngrampungaken PR kolo wingi.*  
'I am going to Dita's house. We continue making the homework from yesterday.'

- Bapak : *Lhoh, PRmu wingi opo ora wis di warahi mbak to nduk?*  
'Didn't your sister help you with the homework?'
- Anak : *Nggeh pak, tapi kulo badhe kelompok, dawuhipun Bu Guru wingi sinau kelompok becik damel sinau.*  
'Yes, Dad. But I want to work with the group. The teacher said working in a group is good for learning.'
- (11) Addi Dalem : *Gusti, punika wonten serat panyuwunan saking RRI ngersakaken ngisi giyaran wulan Mei meniko saben dinten Senin jam wolu ngantos jam sanga dalu bab kawruh budaya.*  
'Gusti, here is a letter from RRI, requesting for a broadcast in May every Monday from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. about cultural studies.'
- Putri Dalem : *Nggih, engko aku diilengke.*  
'Yes, remind me then.'
- Abdi Dalem : *Inggih, Gusti.*  
'Yes, Gusti.'

Example (10) shows a conversation between a father and his daughter. The daughter uses Krama Inggil to communicate with her father, but the father uses Ngoko with her daughter. In Example (11), the *abdi dalem* (caretaker of a royal family) employs the Krama Inggil when she talks to Putri Dalem, who is a Priyayi or an elite in a traditional Javanese society. In the Javanese culture, the higher someone's social status is, the greater authority he/she has [17, 18]. This also effect on the use of honorific expressions including the title of nobility and greeting word [19]. The manifestation of Javanese speech levels is a clear expression of this authority.

In addition to social structure, the use of language to demonstrate power can be observed at the workplace. Example (14) is a conversation between a manager and a secretary.

- (14) Manager : Can you have the report done by tomorrow morning?  
Secretary : Will 9:00 am do?  
Manager : 8:00 am would be wonderful.

In Example (14), the manager seems to be asking whether the secretary can finish the report in the morning; however, he wishes the report to be done. Therefore, the secretary asks about the exact time. She asks if 9:00 am will do, but the manager insists that it should be done by 8:00 am. He persists with his insistence via a compliment by using the word 'wonderful'. In doing so, he denies the secretary's request. Being in the lesser position in this power relation, the secretary has to agree to the manager's request. [20] claimed that distinct verbal expressions convey the power that supervisors and subordinates differentially adopt in everyday interaction.

Another example of power relationships in a working environment is Miranda Priestly's line in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

- (15) Miranda Priestly : There're some reasons that my coffee isn't here. Did she go to Rwanda for the beans or something?  
[21]

What Miranda says is a statement followed by a question. However, as the editor-in-chief of *Runway*, Miranda demands that her coffee be available and readily prepared by her assistant.

The following example is taken from an American comedy–drama television series, *Gilmore Girls*. Lorelai, the owner of Independence Inn, hears the telephone ring and asks the receptionist, Michel, to answer the phone.

- (16) Lorelai : Michel, the phone.  
Michel : Mm-hm. It rings.  
Lorelai : Can you answer it?  
Michel : No. People are particularly stupid today. I can't talk anymore.  
Lorelai : Do you know who's really nice to talk to? The people at the unemployment agency.  
Michel : Independence Inn. Michel speaking.  
[22]

In Example (16), we can see that Lorelai asks Michel to pick the phone up. However, Michel refuses by saying, 'No. People are particularly stupid today. I can't talk anymore.' In response, Lorelai threatens him by saying, 'You know who's really nice to talk to? The people at the unemployment agency.' Lorelai's response implicitly threatens Michel: he can lose his job if he does not pick up the phone.

The use of power in language is also applied in education, as can be seen in the following example.

- (17) Teacher : You can write your assignment in the form of a table, list or in the form of an essay. Bonus points will be given for assignments in the form of an essay with good essay structure.

In the above example, the teacher's statement gives alternatives for writing an assignment. However, there is a certain emphasis in the way the teacher states the alternatives: she will give bonus points for assignments written in essay form. This implies that the teacher prefers the assignments to be delivered in the form of an essay instead of a table or list. The teacher does not directly state that the students should write in essay form; however, the way she chooses her words to express her preferences will put a certain amount of pressure on the students to write their assignments in the form of an essay. This is not simply about getting bonus points, as noted in the teacher's statement: it has more to do with the fear that the teacher will not like a student's assignment if it is not written in essay form because the students know that the teacher likes reading essays better than reading tables or lists.



Power is also shown in the health and medical field. A medical doctor is higher than the patient in their power relation. Therefore, they can coerce their patients into following their medical advice, as can be seen in Example (18).

- (18) Doctor : To improve your lung capacity, you need to exercise more regularly.  
 Patient : But I don't have time to exercise.  
 Doctor : Well, you can start making time for exercise before it gets worse. In the meantime, this medicine may relieve your breathing.

We can see that the doctor advises the patient to do physical exercise. When the patient is defensive and says that he has no time to do it, the doctor emphasizes that his suggestions should be followed; otherwise, the patient's condition will worsen. The doctor then performs his duty by giving a prescription that can relieve the symptom and explicitly mentioning that the medicine can only 'relieve' the symptom rather than heal it completely. The word 'relieve' reemphasizes the statement that the patient needs to change his lifestyle.

### 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, language reveals the power in society. Language plays a vital role in maintaining ideology in society. Language and power are inseparable. When language is used, one should not forget to include society and its contexts. Language and power are found in various places in society, including family, occupation, socio-economic class, politics, race, gender, mass media and social media. Power in a language can be instrumental or influential.

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