

Confusion as an Ideological Tool in Malaysian Newspaper Op-Eds

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the lexical item *confusion* in opinion-editorials published by a Malaysian newspaper. The data was collected from *The Star*, a Malaysian English daily, between 1 January 2009 and 30 June 2010. To contextualize, in April 2009, the previous Prime Minister departs and the country welcomes a new leader with an apparently nationalist identity discourse of *1Malaysia* (Malaysia as an inclusive nation). This is also when religious debates surfaced regularly in the country's courtrooms and media. The findings of the study reveal that the authors of op-eds used the lexical item, *confusion*, to articulate normative and non-normative positions regarding various religious issues in Malaysia (e.g., Allah controversy, Islamic jurisprudence and religious conversion). Those who argued for the normative view, *confusion* arose within the discursive space of the religion of Islam; while for those who argued against the normative view, *confusion* arose due to the differences between the religious and the secular positions. It is important to note that the construction of meaning depended on both the semantic field of the lexical item and the context of utterance. However, what is more crucial to follow is that the term *confusion* served as an ideological tool in the Malaysian context to further the agenda of those individuals who are representatives or spokespersons for specific ideological groups within a contested polity.

Keywords: Malaysia, Invariant Meaning, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Language and Religion, Ideology

Introduction

Individuals' interpretations of a social, cultural or political phenomenon have often been characterized as manifestations of their "ideology" in opposition to our "truth" (van Dijk, 2006, 2009, 2015). This binary between *their* inadequate or "false" understanding of an issue and *our* subjectively perceived position as "true" is susceptible to criticism. Such characterizations may serve as the fodder for ideological conflicts or in Laclau's (1990) terms, social or political "antagonisms." In fact, expressions like "oh they don't understand" or "you're confused," which may



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eventually serve as a means to exclude the “other” or to label them as “misguided,” are examples of ideological positionings. This paper offers an analysis of the use of the term *confusion*, and its variants (i.e., confuse, confused, and confusing) in Malaysian newspaper discourses by showing how it is used by writers of opinion editorials in this multiethnic Muslim-majority country to “other” their opponents while debating a common issue.

In Malaysia, as in other Muslim-majority countries, one representation of Islam can be privileged over another, resulting in the establishment of normative and non-normative representations of the religion. Analysis of news media, the space where reality is constructed rather than portrayed (Fowler, 1991), often, to meet particular ideological ends, offers insight into how these positions are constructed and contested. While the normative position is articulated in line with the status quo “order of discourse” (Fairclough, 2001, 2010), the non-normative position is framed to “resist” normativity, resulting in two sets of ideological discourses. In Malaysia, the normative position is articulated by those members of civil society who are viewed as aligned to the state or, borrowing the term from Shamsul (1996), are the “bureaucratic intellectuals” of the country. On the other hand, the non-normative position is voiced by those who oppose the status quo.

Although Malaysia has been characterized as a “soft authoritarian” state (Means, 1996), non-normative voices are heard alongside normative voices in the state-sponsored media since they are not powerful enough to dismantle the positions of the state. Thus, an analysis of the interplay between normative and non-normative articulations helps provide a context for the understanding of the use of *confusion* in Malaysian newspaper discourse.

To analyze *confusion* and its variants in a specific socio-political context, i.e., Malaysia, we find it useful to begin with the notion of invariant meaning (Tobin, 1990; Subramaniam & Khan, 2016) that explains the semantic components of the lexical item. This notion is rooted in a Saussurean-inspired sign-oriented approach to linguistic analysis, popularized by the Columbia School of Linguistics (Diver, 1975; Reid, 1991; Tobin, 1990, 2000¹). According to Tobin (1990), “the same linguistic sign with a *single invariant meaning* can be inferred to have many and *diverse messages* ... within different discourse contexts” (p. 51, italics added).

Tobin (1990) defines invariant meaning of a lexical item as being constant and consistent within a language system, and is applicable to all contexts of its use. Messages conveyed by that lexical item, on the other hand, can vary. To put it in other words, each message carries the abstract residue of invariant meaning; while, with different nuances in different contexts. In each context of articulation of the message, the invariant meaning will recur but will take into account the socio-political milieu of occurrence.

Methodology

In order to explain the ideological use of *confusion*, the data was collected from *The*

Star, a Malaysian English daily with the largest circulation in the country at the time of data collection (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). Each issue of *The Star* published between 1 January 2009 and 30 June 2010 was scanned for the occurrence of the lexical item and its variants in opinion editorials. The total number of occurrences of *confusion* and its variants were 49 in the data, all from the domain of religion (i.e., Islam). The field of religion was chosen since a number of debates on religion surfaced around 2009-2010 at the national level (Sankar, 2013; Neo, 2014).

In discussing newspaper texts in which the word *confusion* and its variants are used, we offer a linguistic analysis, interspersed with an “explanation” (Fairclough, 2010) of that analysis. The linguistic analysis follows Tobin’s (1990) sign-based lexical analysis. The interpretation looks at the immediate context in which the word *confusion* is used. It also looks at the larger context in which the word is located in order to establish the relation of the word with the text as a whole. These two steps correspond to what Reisigl and Wodak (2009), within the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), define as co-text and context. Reading the word in relation to its context provides insight into understanding what we call the specific “moments” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) of articulation, as they are realized in headings, sub-headings, or in other different strategic locations in the body of a specific text within a larger discourse (e.g., the discourse of religion). In this regard, we share the views of Laclau and Mouffe (1985),

[We] will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments* (p. 105, italics in the original).

This paper is rooted in the ideals of CDA (see Fairclough, 2001, 2010; van Dijk, 2009, 2015) and within this particular branch of discourse studies “ideology” is viewed as one of the key concepts. Ideology, in our view, is a “system” of beliefs or ideas in general terms; also, it is a matter of thorough critical investigation by combining a “micro” linguistic analysis with “macro” social concerns (van Dijk, 2006). In other words, since discourse does ideological work (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), it is necessary to interpret the linguistic construction of a text against its contextual background.

Analytical Tools

In normative and non-normative discourses, the attribution of *confusion* serves to articulate specific ideological positions. We consider first the dictionary definitions of *confusion*:

CONFUSION [noun]

- When people do not understand what is happening, what they should do or who someone is – e.g., there seems to be some CONFUSION over who

is actually giving the talk; To avoid CONFUSION, the twins never wore the same clothes

- a situation, often with a lot of activity, and noise, in which people do not know what to do – e.g., in the CONFUSION after the bomb blast, I lost my bag and wasn't able to stop and look for it.

- The variants of CONFUSION are: Confuse [verb], Confused [verb+d; adjective, adverb], Confusing [verb+ing; gerund; adjective]. (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, online version, 2010)

Based on dictionary definitions and our analysis of the dataset, we hypothesize the invariant meaning of CONFUSION as a state of mind when some form of *cognitive disequilibrium* takes place.

In technical terms, if X is confused, X is having a cognitive disequilibrium. The disequilibrium is dependent on a few conditions, which are:

If X is a human being, disequilibrium can be self-induced or some Y is causing it for X to experience;

If Y is causing it for X, Y must have some authority to cause the disequilibrium. Y can also do it to misguide X.

While the invariant meaning of CONFUSION can be postulated as, *a state of disequilibrium*, one of the messages can be, X is misguided. Surprisingly no one seems to realize that this *confused* political message could damage the liberalization agenda.

The above statement presupposes that those who do not subscribe to the liberalization agenda are confused, that is, they are misguided. Our contention is, misguided is not the invariant meaning of CONFUSION; rather, it is just one of the messages conveyed in a particular context. Being misguided may not appear in every message, but cognitive disequilibrium is present in the example of misguided.

In other words, the linguistic sign, *confusion*, works ideologically when cognitive disequilibrium (its invariant meaning) and its message (e.g., misguided as in the above example) form a symbiotic relationship.

Interpretation of Data: Linking Invariant Meaning with Socio-political Context

The analysis of data includes the discussion of a set of controversial issues, i.e., the rights of using Allah by the non-Muslims in the country, Islamic theology, and the jurisdiction of an Islamic legal system. Authors of op-eds articulated the issues in the newspaper from normative and non-normative positions that include state funded religious organizations like *Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* (IKIM, tr. Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia), non-governmental organizations like Sisters in Islam (SIS), and other regular columnists.

Allah Controversy

This controversy involves whether non-Muslims in Malaysia have the right to use the term *Allah* (tr. God in Arabic) when referring to God. The media covered the issue extensively due to the strong emotions expressed by parties for and against the use of the term. The controversy intensified as the debating parties contested whether *Allah* was a generic name for God or was exclusive for Muslims. While the views expressed were both normative and non-normative, they were deemed normative when articulated by an agency endorsed by the state. IKIM's views are normative because it is a government agency; on the other hand, NGOs like Sisters in Islam do not express the views of the state and are hence non-normative. Likewise, individual columnists like Marina Mahathir, Azmi Sharom, or Shad Faruqi, as members of civil society, represent their non-normative personal views, although, in some instances, those views may coincide with the positions of the state.

The first excerpt we consider is an op-ed written by an IKIM senior fellow titled *Understanding the "Allah" controversy*. The somewhat longer sub-heading that follows the heading states in boldface:

[SB-11-08-2009] The established and verified position of Muslims has always been that the term "Allah" is not an Arabic derivative but is itself revealed by The One and Only God to humankind through His chosen messengers.

The postulation that Allah is not an Arabic derivative is presented as an "established" and "verified" position, in factual terms, which is further intensified by an emphatic marker, "always." When something is established and verified, the presupposition is that it is not to be questioned, that is, the verified *truth* is self-evident. Thus this sub-heading constructs factuality linguistically as the author uses copula verbs (i.e., is, has) instead of modal verbs. Having established factuality, the subheading uses rhetorical figure of allusion, alluding to certain religious tradition. In the above example, the reference to "The One and Only God" in the same sentence that includes Allah locates the discourse within an Islamic tradition. Although similar claims are found in other religious traditions, for instance, in the Old Testament, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deut, 6:4, King James Version), this sub-heading confines the semantic field of "The One and Only God" to the Islamic tradition by referring to the "position of Muslims."

Interpretation of the "immediate text internal co-text" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009) in which a lexical item appears is imperative to understand the item. Our claim is that the framing of the arguments in the heading and sub-heading prepares the reader for the arrival of the lexical item, *confusion*, demanding a specific reading:

[MZI-19-01-2010] BY NOW, Malaysians are generally aware that there have been disputes between the Muslims and the Christians pertaining to the use of the term "Allah" by the latter. Unfortunately, however, it seems that of the whole controversy most Malaysians can be sure only of that much. The rest,

judging from the many viewpoints and contentions raised thus far, seems convoluted and *confused* to them.

In the above text, the claimant, the author Zaidi Ismail, states that a certain population, i.e., Malaysians, seem to experience cognitive disequilibrium about the specifics of an issue (i.e., controversy around the use of Allah by non-Muslims) which the writer claims is *unfortunate*. The marker “unfortunately” is an example of expressive modality (Fairclough, 2010), a modality that establishes the author Zaidi’s representation of reality and understanding or knowledge of it. Here, Zaidi’s understanding might be mediated by his agency as a representative of an institution (i.e., IKIM), capable of passing normative verdicts on religious matters.

On the other hand, Marina Mahathir, a regular columnist to the newspaper, presents an alternative reading to the IKIM op-ed. The title for her regular column, *Musings*, suggests a non-normative interpretation of the issues that she writes about in contrast to the IKIM column.

The heading of the Marina op-ed “Mysterious people in need of rules” provides the opening move to her argument that the people whom others claim will be confused do not, in her opinion, exist and are therefore mysterious. This mysteriousness is reinforced in the sub-heading with a reference to “faceless strangers we have yet to meet.” The sub-headline states:

[MM-06-01-2010] There will be those who will be *confused*, others who will act without restraint, rampaging freely and causing havoc ... they are faceless strangers we have yet to meet.

In her editorial, she argues:

[MM-06-01-2010] I don’t understand what is so edifying about claiming that we are always weak and easily *confused*. How do we on the one hand claim a superior position for our faith when at the same time we admit that we can be so easily influenced? Are the fortifications that we built for ourselves in our hearts and consciences so fragile?

In the above excerpt, the claimant Marina Mahathir questions the claims of two groups of agents, namely, Malaysians and Muslims, who are susceptible to cognitive disequilibrium. It is noteworthy that Marina presents her argument in the first person, *I don’t understand ...*, which situates her op-ed in sharp contrast to IKIM. It is important for her to establish individual agency capable of articulating or producing opinion regarding Islam in contrast to the normative position. This is apparent in her question expressed rhetorically, elsewhere in the text “Funny, doesn’t it say in the Quran that we all have to answer for ourselves eventually?”

It is equally noteworthy to underscore that Marina shifts between two subject positions: (i) *I*, as an individual capable of speaking about Islamic matters and (ii) *we*, as the Muslim community of which she is a member. This shift between *I* and *we*

makes the act of representation more complex. What is particularly at stake here is not only who is speaking for whom; but also that the normative ways of representing the Muslims in the country is questionable, as expressed in the following excerpt:

[MM-06-01-2010] Yet, if we polled every single person to ask if they felt *confused*, they would deny it. Thus, on whose behalf do we bust our guts for in these issues?

Another op-ed writer, Azmi Sharom, a law lecturer in a public university, presents arguments similar to Marina's. He asserts that

[AS-21-01-2010] there is ... the argument that if Muslims see Allah being used by non-Muslims they will get awfully *confused* and in their simple-mindedness, they will become Christians. People who make this argument can't have very high regard for Malay intelligence. Rather insulting, I think.

In the axiomatic form of Tobin (1990), a linguistic analysis of the above excerpt reveals the presence of multiple claims and claimants. The three claimants are, author Azmi Sharom, unidentified Muslims, and unidentified Christians. But what are the claims? The first claim is that Muslims would suffer cognitive disequilibrium if certain agents, i.e., non-Muslims, engage in a particular social practice, i.e., using the term Allah. This cognitive disequilibrium, according to the state-supported normative view, has severe consequences for Muslims as they "in their simple-mindedness," which is possibly a "side effect" of being confused, would renounce their faith and undergo religious conversion. Such a position, Azmi claims, is firstly, an insult to the Malays; secondly, it is a remote possibility, because in Malaysia, conversion of Muslims into another religion (i.e., apostasy) is a legal offence (e.g., the apostasy case of Lina Joy; Kirby, 2008). Therefore, the precise nature of disequilibrium, in line with the dictionary meaning, is not present in the above example. Considering the socio-political backdrop of Malaysia, such a use can rather be interpreted as ideologically motivated.

In his next use of *confusion* from the same op-ed, Azmi implores the Muslim community and the leadership to consider if they can really be confused by the use of just one word, i.e., Allah by the non-Muslims:

[AS-21-01-2010] The Muslim community, particularly the leadership, must ask itself: Is the way Islam is taught in this country so weak that Muslims can get easily *confused* by just one word?

There are two ways of interpreting the above excerpt. First, as an example of irony where the author demands the leaders to explain why they elevate such petty issues as grave and significant unless the question is politically motivated. On the other hand, if the text is read as a "true" interrogative, it articulates a serious question on the mode of teaching of Islam in the country. Hence, it is crucial to understand how someone uses certain linguistic expressions in a context of utterance. The interpretation of the message conveyed by the author of the above op-ed depends

on whether one reads it as an irony or a “true” interrogative instead of a rhetorical question, for instance.

Apart from the Allah controversy, the lexical item *confusion* and its variants also occurred in reference to the interpretation of Islam and Quranic injunction. They appeared under two categories: (1) Islamic theology and (2) Sharia Law or Islamic jurisprudence. While IKIM published their normative views in both the categories of theology and Sharia Law, the alternative interpretation to IKIM only occurs in the latter category, i.e., Islamic jurisprudence.

Islamic Theology

When IKIM interpreted Islam, several presuppositions made by the author, involving different concepts and positions in Islam, remained unexplained. This is because the opinion pieces were intended, primarily, for the Muslims who share common assumptions, if not a common register. The observation is evident in the following excerpts:

[SB-11-08-2009] *Confusion* and error in knowledge of Islam, as a religion and a civilization, are more harmful to Muslims than mere ignorance.

[SB-11-08-2009] Indeed, it is easier to teach a person who is aware of his ignorance than a person in error ... This is because although the latter is in error about a certain matter, he does not acknowledge his ignorance of it. Satisfied with his condition, the *confused* person thinks and claims he knows, whereas in reality he does not know and only has a clouded mind.

In the first example, the claimant, Sani Badron, postulates that the state of being in cognitive disequilibrium compared to being in the state of ignorance is more harmful for the Muslims. His claim is that “distorted” knowledge (or *confusion*) is more dangerous than the absence of knowledge (or ignorance). He explains it further in the second occurrence of *confusion* where he states that although the individual in cognitive disequilibrium thinks and claims that he knows, he is either devoid of knowledge or has distorted knowledge. This assertion raises a further question: what is the origin of *confusion*? When a person is identified as confused, is it because other people see him as confused? To explain this problem of *confusion* we may draw on Reisigl and Wodak’s (2009) rendition of Lacan’s (2000) concept of “misrecognition” in the field of psychoanalysis. The Lacanian argument is that misrecognition takes place as social agents use a language based on their specific knowledge of that language. It is possible that specific knowledge is limited and thus encompasses partial knowledge of a phenomenon under construction, leading eventually to a condition called *confusion*. The normative argument that Sani Badron, the writer, sought to establish was framed in the sub-heading of the article. This is similar to the earlier example of IKIM views on the Allah controversy, mentioned above. The sub-heading, which establishes the stance for the reading of the IKIM article, states:

[SB-11-08-2009] True understanding of the Quran cannot be possessed by the one with neither intellectual nor spiritual prerequisites, let alone the one who is impudent and insolent of religion.

The adjective “true” influences the reading of four other lexical items in the excerpt: intellectual, spiritual, impudent, and insolent. The implication is that those who are intellectual and spiritual are able to decipher the true understanding of the Quran, while those who are impudent and insolent of religion are unable to. Thus, the author implies that the readers accept the arguments he offers as intellectual, spiritual, not impudent and insolent of religion. He offers a “true” understanding of the Quran which does not result in *confusion*, as is evident in the following telling excerpt:

[SB-11-08-2009] Intellectual arrogance and obstinacy stem from *confusion* and error in knowledge, leading to the tendency to challenge, belittle, and reject legitimate views of knowledgeable experts on Islam ... This is what we call “learned *confusion*,” where stubbornness and stupidity are twins ... The mind’s efforts in seeking true knowledge face various epistemological stumbling blocks. Since these pitfalls function as the causes of *confusion*, we must be really clear of those sources of error, which must be avoided for us to steer clear of error and *confusion*.

It is noteworthy that the word *confusion* co-occurs with error and is framed in opposition to “true” knowledge and the “legitimate views of knowledgeable experts on Islam.” He attempts to build a dichotomy between *our* true knowledge and *their* distorted knowledge characterized by arrogance, obstinacy, stubbornness, and stupidity. Another author from IKIM, Wan Azhar, refers to true knowledge besides claiming that the normative stance must exercise authority. The author states,

[WAWA-01-12-2009] At the end, *all must abide by the truth*, i.e. *the most convincing and authoritative position* ... And those who claim themselves as religious scholars must be careful not to *confuse* the public with petty and trivial things. (emphasis added)

The above statement articulates a normative position in its most simplistic form. The author is urging the social agents, those who claim themselves as religious scholars, not to push the public into a state of cognitive disequilibrium. It is understood that “the public,” is an unidentified common noun and that includes everyone in a society. In order to stop the society from being in disarray, the authority deems it necessary to control the dissemination of discourse produced by the “false” scholars. The author suggests that while certain scholars possess true knowledge, false scholars *confuse* people. As a fellow of IKIM and a religious scholar, the author ostensibly belongs to the category of true scholars, thus building a dichotomy of *us* versus *them*.

To establish authority and demonstrate expertise, IKIM writers use religious registers, which can be interpreted as a device to engage the community they theologize for. For instance,

[SB-14-04-2009] We are referring to subtle, masquerading deviations which seek to undermine the teachings of the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*), and those of his Companions (*athar*) – all of which constitute Islamic religious tradition (*naql*). Knowledge of *i'tiqad*, which is obligatory to pursue, refers to knowledge that is sufficient to eliminate doubt and *confusion* concerning religious beliefs throughout one's life.

In the above excerpt, the author claims that possession of knowledge of *I'tiqad* (tr. knowledge concerning faith) by Muslims will be sufficient to eliminate any form of cognitive disequilibrium. The author also argues in the same article that such knowledge should be based on the “true intention of traditions,” which may not be obtained from scholars who are “rigid traditionalists” or “excessive rationalists” as they tend to produce “misleading rhetoric” that “may *confuse* people in general.” The author acknowledges that religious scholars fall into different categories; hence, the multiplicity of the positions they articulate can, in his opinion, create or cause *confusion*.

Islamic Legal System

Our data suggests similarities in argumentation in the area of Islamic theology and Islamic legal system. There are similarities in terms of lexical items, as well as the use of dichotomous categories (i.e., A opposed to B) to distinguish a normative position from a non-normative one. Here is an example:

[MAA-22-12-2009] Some of our *modern* ulama, according to al-Attas, are to be blamed for not teaching people properly, so sometimes there is injustice... This is due to *wrong* teaching and *misunderstanding*, and this can be corrected by *re-educating* the Muslims *properly*, not by declaring *equality* and trying to follow the *West*. We can't abolish any law that is clearly stated in the Quran. This is, sadly, the state of affairs of the Muslims, who have generally become *ignorant* and *confused*. As a result, false leaders thrive among them.

The author constructs a dichotomy between Islamic Sharia Law and Civil Law (in the guise of the West). The linking of “the west” with lexical items of “modern,” and “equality” serves a rhetorical purpose to malign the “modern *ulamas*” (tr. religious scholars) that spread *confusion*. The author also argues that there is an absence of knowledge among the Muslim community regarding Islamic jurisprudence. This absence of knowledge makes the community vulnerable to the interpretation by the “modern *ulamas*” causing *confusion*. In other words, the ones holding a counter position are deemed *confused*.

Another fellow from IKIM takes the argument a little further and claims that Islamic

Sharia Law is not meant only for the Muslims, but also for the non-Muslims. This claim should be explained to the citizens of the nation-state so that the Constitution does not stand as an obstacle to the implementation of the Sharia Law for everyone in the country. The author states,

[WAWA-17-03-2009] The general public is under the impression that Islamic law is strictly meant for Muslims. This is not the case in all situations because non-Muslims could seek justice from Sharia courts during the reign of various Muslim rulers. If this has happened in history, it can still take place today and in the future. Our esteemed Constitution, various other Acts of Parliament and state enactments contribute to the *confusion* by putting forth some legal obstacles concerning the application of Islamic law towards non-Muslims.

In the above excerpt, Wan Azhar postulates that the Constitution and its various Acts contribute towards causing cognitive disequilibrium as they present legal obstacles to the application of the Islamic law on non-Muslims. To legitimize the case for Islamic law, even to the extent of overriding the Constitution, he makes a reference to a non-specific historical past (“during the reign of various Muslim rulers”). His argument is that if it was possible to implement the Law in the past, it is also possible at the present. The problem with this argument is, the author does not provide specific evidence from the historical past but merely alludes to it. A further flaw in his argument is that he equates the “subjects” of various Muslim rulers to the “citizens” of modern nation-states whose rights and obligations to the state are hardly comparable. Thus, his claim that the Constitution of a modern nation-state may cause *confusion* is premised on certain realities that might be consistent only with an Islamic worldview.

The issue of the comparability of the two legal systems is also addressed in controversies involving religious conversion. The debate in the newspapers has focused on custody rights of children: when one of the parents converts to Islam, does the non-Muslim parent have the custody rights over the children? The debate over custody rights has been problematized as a structural issue involving two competing legal systems: Islamic (Sharia) and Civil Law. Here is a view from an op-ed by IKIM,

[ZK-08-09-2009] As different family laws apply to different communities within the same national legal system, by right, there should be minimal inter-relationship. However, on the few occasions that they intersect, there is much *confusion* and tension is created.

In the above excerpt, the author suggests that when a particular legal domain (i.e., Family Law) is governed by two opposing legal systems, i.e., Islamic Law and Civil Law, this may cause cognitive disequilibrium. The intersection of two value systems – one supported by religion, and the other by secular reason – results, according

to the author, not just in legal conflicts, but in a state of *confusion*. IKIM writers contend that *confusion* may arise not only because of contradictions between legal systems, but also because of statements made by persons in authority, like cabinet ministers. Thus, Wan Azhar, the IKIM writer states:

[WAWA-18-08-2009] The long existing misunderstanding over the religious status of minors resurfaced when an ill-informed Cabinet minister announced that the religion of minors from non-Muslim parents, upon the conversion of any of the parents to Islam, remains in the religion under which the marriage was solemnized. Such a statement contradicts the Federal Constitution and some religious positions. It worsens the *confusion* among the people and draws criticisms from both Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the above statement, the state of *confusion* occurs because of the opinion stated by a cabinet minister, which the author labels as, being “ill-informed,” while no specific evidence has been cited for this ill-informed stance. The writer states that the minister’s opinion “contradicts” the federal constitution and “some religious positions,” and hence, causes *confusion*. This claim is not supported by any specific articles of the Constitution but is solely premised on Islamic positions advocated by Islamic authorities. On the other hand, Zainah Anwar who represents the NGO Sisters in Islam problematizes the issue of religious conversion by foregrounding the Federal Constitution. In her column, Zainah states,

[ZA-03-05-2009] Article 12 (4) must also be read with Article 8 (2), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender. Read together with the Guardianship of Infants Act, which recognises that both parents have equal right of guardianship to their children, a persuasive argument can be made that the consent of both parents is needed to change the religion of the children. The Federal Court judgment was criticised for its failure to read laws holistically and the confusion it caused over jurisdiction ... In the above statement, cognitive disequilibrium occurs because of the inability to read different provisions within the Federal Constitution or other laws in the light of the Constitution. This is a sharp contrast to the use of the term *confusion* by IKIM writers, who attribute *confusion* to an inability to understand Islamic legal provisions.

Having established the reason for the state of *confusion* Zainah Anwar proposes a way to resolve the contradictions:

[ZA-03-05-2009]...What is clear is that at all levels, be it Constitutional, Islamic juristic principles, and lived realities, the solution to the conundrum can be found. But politics, ideology, and *confusion* between personal faith and public policy got in the way. When conflicts arising out of conversion, freedom of religion, moral policing, women’s rights, and human rights are viewed only through the religious prism and therefore must be decided

according to sharia law, it makes the search for solutions even more complicated.

In the above statement, Zainah claims that cognitive disequilibrium occurs when the social domains of personal faith and public policy get into each other's way. While Zainah Anwar's assertion is that these two social domains (i.e., personal faith and public policy) should not be seen as interconnected; Islam does not distinguish between the two. In fact, Zainah's version of Islam distinguishes between public and private domains, a separation not endorsed by IKIM. In the above examples, where *confusion* occurs, the lexical item has been problematized differently by different agents based on their premises and vantage points. Hence, a linguistic analysis of *confusion* alone may not capture the multitude of nuances implied through the messages. While the invariant meaning of *confusion* (i.e., cognitive disequilibrium) is a useful starting point to see the link across the messages, it is imperative that we study individual messages in their specific discursive contexts.

Discussion

The above analysis has provided a close reading of the use of the term *confusion* and its variants in newspaper opinion editorials about various religious controversies in Malaysia. Our objective for explaining the role of this lexical item that surfaced within a specific discursive field was that *confusion* is more than a lexical item. As it is evident in the data, different individuals used the word to convey different messages about the state of being confused. The invariant meaning, a state of "cognitive disequilibrium," was present in all the examples, however, in a nuanced form in individual instances. Besides, what caused cognitive disequilibrium was different for the agents holding normative or non-normative positions.

The writers who wrote from a normative position (such as, the writers from IKIM) tended to produce "law-like" statements (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) as if the arguments were irrefutable. On the contrary, those who argued against the normative view (such as, the columnists Zainah Anwar, Marina Mahathir and Azmi Sharom) produced a critique of that normative position often questioning their irrefutable status.

In this context, the question arises: how does one argue for or against an Islamic normative view within an Islamic polity? For those who wrote from a normative position, *confusion* arose from the author's perception that the readers would be unable to distinguish between "correct" and "incorrect" interpretations *within* the discursive space of religion (Islam). On the other hand, for those who argued against the normative view, the debate was a means to occupy the discursive space of Malay Muslim identity from a secular position. Thus, when discussing the issue of custody rights of children following the religious conversion of one of the parents, IKIM writers drew solely on religious authorities to make their case; while, writers like Zainah Anwar argued about the discrepancy between the constitution and religious

precepts. In other words, for IKIM writers, *confusion* occurs when individuals are unable to grasp the religious doctrines governing the issue; while, for writers taking non-normative position, *confusion* occurs, when religious precepts contradict constitutional, human rights and other secular arguments. Thus it is apparent that the non-normative arguments are premised on a separation between *church and state* (in this case, Islam and the State); while this separation does not hold for normative arguments. The analysis of data supported that the term *confusion* served as an ideological tool to further the agenda of the agents or the body of authority that they represented. The non-normative understanding of the normative use of *confusion* is that the lexical item could also construct ideological threats. For instance, once a particular position was constructed as having the potential to *confuse*, it followed that others must be protected from experiencing such *confusion*. As the columnist Marina Mahathir suggested,

[MM-11-11-2009] By invoking the age-old argument of protecting the Muslim community in Malaysia from *confusion*, these groups have exposed their inability to grasp the spirit of Islam and have only created a hole for them to hide in every time they are intellectually challenged.

By characterizing the other as confused the label *confusion* serves to exclude the other. The purpose is not just to exclude the other but to establish them as the most viable alternative within a space of contestation. The data shows that the contestation is between Islamists (those who primarily uphold Islamic Legal precepts or Sharia) and nationalists (those who primarily uphold the Federal Constitution) who may have different political faiths. One must not forget that the above arguments have been contextualized within a polity where the newspaper industry is mostly state-owned or owned by individuals close to the state (Nain, 2002). Hence, there is a possibility that the newspaper may act as one of the “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 2008). There are also legal provisions, (e.g., The Printing Presses Act Malaysia, 1984) that make Malaysian newspapers authoritarian (Azizuddin, 2005). The question then arises: how is it possible that non-normative authors were allowed to articulate their positions vis-à-vis the normative authors? One of the reasons could be that the new media, e.g., Facebook and Twitter, has made this broadening up possible. As the new media can “bypass” censorship, it compels the mainstream newspapers to accommodate topics considered “off-limits” previously (Bose, 2010). Moreover, with globalization, national media agencies may come under increasing scrutiny from international watchdog organizations; hence, local newspapers tend to allow space for non-normative voices to be heard. Thus, there is not only a mere presence of normative and non-normative positions in the mainstream newspapers; but also contestation between the positions.

Note

1. The Columbia School (CS) of linguistics was originally called Form-Content Analysis and

is based on three seminal articles (Diver 1963, 1964a-b). Selected monographs, anthologies and relevant articles include, Contini-Morava (1989), Contini-Morava & Goldberg (1995), Contini-Morava & Tobin (2000), Contini-Morava et.al (2004), Davis et.al., (2004), Diver (1969, 1974, 1979), García (1975), Gorup (1987), Huffman (1997, 2001), Huffman & Davis (2010), Kirsner (1979), Klein-Andreu (1983), Reid (1991), Reid et.al. (2002), Tobin (1990, 1993, 1994/1995). There is a webpage supported by the Columbia School Linguistic Society (www.csling.org) which provides a short theoretical sketch and a more extensive CS bibliography.

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