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Language, gender and identities in political life
A case study from Malaysia

Louise Mullany and Melissa Yoong

Introduction

Researchers investigating gender identities in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have stressed the need for the field to become more diverse by investigating cultural contexts outside the Western world (McElhinny 2008; Mills and Mullany 2011). With the exception of a handful of studies (Kaur 2005; Yoong 2017), there is little work on language and gender identities in Malaysia. Our decision to focus on the Malaysian political domain is motivated by the continued lack of women in positions of political power in the country. Latest figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2015) show that Malaysia is ranked 113th out of 190 countries for the overall percentage of women in parliament. The current world average is 21.8 per cent – in Malaysia, it is 10.4 per cent.

An applied linguistics analysis can investigate how negative gender identity constructions, created and maintained through the language of the mass media, can be a contributing factor to the complex problem of the lack of women in positions of political power. Researchers have argued that investigations of ‘women’s media(ted) representation’ are needed (Adcock 2010: 136), as the media play such a significant role in shaping and influencing contemporary politics. The UN Secretary-General (2010) reported that voters of both sexes prefer to elect men due to the prevalence of gender stereotypes, including those perpetuated by the media, and deeply ingrained beliefs against the ability of women to lead.

There are clear echoes of the ‘double-bind’ in such negative findings: researchers have found that women who occupy professional roles are often deemed as unsuitable if they display characteristics that are perceived to be too feminine, but they are also negatively evaluated if they display characteristics that are judged as too stereotypically masculine (see Mullany 2007; Baxter 2011). In Malaysia, ‘the widespread stereotyping of women as followers and supporters rather than leaders’ has significantly reduced women’s opportunities ‘to develop their leadership and decision-making skills in the public domain’ (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 2004: 24); the media continue to be a critical source of these gender stereotypes.

Constitutionally democratic, Malaysia has an ethnicised political system where ethnic considerations dominate political and electoral processes (Saravanamuttu 2001).
Demographically, Malays constitute the majority of the population (63.1 per cent), followed by Chinese (24.6 per cent) and Indian (7.3 per cent) minorities (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2013). Strengthened by ethnic polarisation in a political system which accommodates ethnic-based demands (Ng et al. 2006), Barisan Nasional (BN), a 13-member coalition of mostly ethnic-based and regional parties, including the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), has retained parliamentary control since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957.

The alternative to BN during the 13th Malaysian General Election held in 2013 was the multi-ethnic opposition coalition Pakatan Raykat (PR), comprising the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People’s Justice Party (PKR) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Known for a more inclusive approach to politics (Schafer and Holst 2013), it gained 50.9 per cent of the popular vote in the 2013 General Election. However, it lost overall, as it gained only 40 per cent of the parliamentary seats (Boo 2014a).

In this chapter, we focus on a high-profile case from May 2014. Female candidate Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud was elected as the parliamentary candidate for the DAP in a by-election in the constituency of Teluk Intan. She faced male candidate Mah Siew Keong, the president of Gerakan, a non-ethnic-based, though predominantly Chinese, party of the BN coalition. We analyse data from two online media sources published at various stages of the two-week by-election campaign. We examine the ways in which Dyana constructs her own identities in online media sources authored by herself, alongside the manner in which journalists construct her identities. The analysis will demonstrate how gender and professional identity categories intersect with age, race, religion and sexuality to create particularly powerful subject positions, with the overarching aim of influencing the readers of these data sources, some of whom will be part of the voting public.

In the subsequent section, we provide an overview of the theoretical perspectives on language and identity that inform our case study. The methodology section then outlines the significance of Dyana’s gender, race, religion and age within the Malaysian socio-political context, before defining the data set and our analytical approach. This is followed by a detailed lexico-grammatical analysis and discussion of the linguistic constructions of Dyana’s identity and the influence this plays in her campaign to become an MP.

Overview

Theorising identities

In this chapter, we move away from analysing gender in isolation from other identity categories. Earlier research on language and gender identities has been critiqued for foregrounding gender as the most salient variable, with other potentially relevant social identity categories pushed into the background (see Mills and Mullany 2011). Instead, a much broader analysis of different intersecting identity features, which may be relevant at any one time, are analysed (see Block and Corona, this volume). In particular, we focus on the interplay between gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and religion.

The approach we take to conceptualising identities is informed by the social constructionist approach to gender, namely that gender relations are socially constructed and upheld by powerful gender ideologies in any given society. These gender ideologies are created and maintained by power relations that have become naturalised – the core idea of Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony.
These power relations dictate a set of gendered norms and expectations that govern how women and men are evaluated within the societies in question. This is often referred to as ‘the gender order’ (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Jones, this volume), where certain ways of talking and acting are associated with cultural capital for women and men (Bourdieu 1999).

We are also influenced by Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004, 2010) complementary approach, that identity is manifested through language, rather than pre-existent to language. A key principle in their work is the notion of indexicality, namely that language use is indexicalised with ideological beliefs, structures and values, i.e. the gender order. It is through these deeply ingrained beliefs, structures and values that gender inequality is constructed and maintained. This approach is valuable for identifying and examining how mass media discourses can create and maintain deeply ingrained beliefs, structures and values surrounding gender in the society under scrutiny.

We examine how gendered and professional identities are manifested through online media language, using linguistic analysis to critique discourses that ‘systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women’ (Lazar 2005: 5). Marra and Angouri (2011) point out that Bucholtz and Hall’s approach is advantageous when thinking about professional identity construction as it brings together the dynamic relationship between the self and society that has remained central to a constructionist understanding of identity. They cite Goffman to emphasise the important relationship between identity and self; of particular relevance to our case study is their emphasis on ideology, audience and role performance. They argue that the ‘credibility of role performance relies on an audience’s understanding of the acceptable/expected spectrum of performances and an individual’s manner in enacting these’ (Marra and Angouri 2011: 4). Arguably, what media producers are attempting during any election campaign is to tap into their intended audiences’ understanding of the acceptable and expected spectrum of performances of political candidates and then endorse or critique these, depending upon the media source’s ideological stance and the wider sociocultural practices operating where the media texts are produced.

Within language and gender studies, it has become commonly established practice to follow Foucault’s (1972: 49) definition of discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ in order to produce analyses of dominant gendered discourses that operate at an overarching, societal level (Sunderland 2004; Mullany 2007; Baxter 2011). By producing a political critique of gendered social practice and gender relations, the ultimate research goal is to bring about social transformation (Lazar 2005).

**Identities, the professions and media discourse**

Researchers including Iyer (2009) and Lazar (2009) have conducted feminist work examining gendered identity constructions in the discourses of the mass media in non-Western contexts. Iyer’s study examines how the professional identities of successful women entrepreneurs are constructed. She analyses a range of dominant discourses in Indian media sources to highlight multiple subject positions, including the dominant discourses of patriarchy and femininity, as well as resistant discourses signalling that more positive social change is taking place. Lazar (2009) examines a dominant discourse of ‘entitled femininity’ in Singaporean media texts, emergent from the global neoliberal discourse of post-feminism. She makes a convincing case for the problematised nature of this discourse, which propagates the view that women can ‘have it all’ by working hard and celebrating being a woman through consumerism of beauty products.

It is well established that dominant discourses of femininity have been increasingly constructed in visual terms, with an ever stronger focus on the body (Jeffries 2007). Professional
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women often experience a tension between their sense of gendered (sexual) embodiment and their professional identity constructions, and the gendered body can be a significant obstacle for professional women to overcome. This is particularly the case in male-dominated professions such as politics (Mullany forthcoming).

In a review of studies of women’s political representation in locations including India, South Africa, North America and Australia, Adcock (2010: 140) reports ‘significant similarities in patterns of mediation (albeit inflected by cultural differences). Findings suggest female politicians often receive less coverage and are more likely to be described in gendered, sexualised, sex-stereotyped or negative terms than male counterparts.’

Within Western contexts, researchers, including Walsh (2001) and Shaw (2006), have documented numerous examples of how women politicians are evaluated first and foremost on mass media appraisals of their bodies and physical appearances rather than on their professional identities in terms of job role performance – the norm for their male counterparts and the norm for the successful role construction of being an effective politician. Wodak (2005) examines how gender identities are constructed, achieved and orientated in the European Parliament (EP). She observes three successful role constructions that women politicians can adopt: the ‘assertive activist’, the ‘expert’ and ‘positive difference’/’special bird’ (2005: 106). She argues that the EP provides a flexible political sphere as it is loosely organised, making it more open in comparison with other political systems.

In our analysis, we will focus on dominant and resistant discourses and examine the multiple identity categories that emerge. Drawing on Butler (1993), Jeffries (2007: 21) argues that ‘every reference to the body will construct the body in some way’. Identifying dominant discourses of the body presents an effective means of analysing identity constructions and constructions of the self that affect women politicians in the Malaysian political context. By focusing on Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, we will produce an analysis of how these dominant discourses affect the construction of her professional identity.

Methodology

We take a case study approach to analysing how Dyana was represented by online media outlets during the May 2014 by-election, as well as examining how she constructed her own identities. The analysis demonstrates that gender does not exist in a vacuum. Dyana’s gender identity is represented in a way that simultaneously provides evidence of ideological positioning based on other salient aspects of her identity including race, religion, sexuality and age.

Malays who join the DAP, such as Dyana, tend to have their loyalty to their race and religion questioned because of the party’s socialist roots, as well as the general perception that the DAP is a Chinese-centric party (Zubaidah 2014) despite its ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ slogan and the fact that it has fielded non-Chinese candidates in past elections (Lam 2014). If Dyana won, she would have been the DAP’s first Malay woman MP and she would have defeated the ethnically Chinese president of a predominantly Chinese party in a Chinese-majority constituency (Chinese 42 per cent; Malay 38 per cent; Indian 19 per cent). This would have been a significant moment in a country with a long history of communal politics.

By standing for political office, Dyana was not adhering to the traditional prescription of female roles taken by Malay women. Since the end of World War II, women have actively participated in Malaysian (then, Malayan) politics, particularly through their involvement in the women’s wings of political parties. Nevertheless, in post-independent Malaysia, such wings have occupied a subordinate status. The role of women politicians has mainly been to serve the
interests of the parent party (Ng et al. 2006). In order to maintain political power, members of the women’s wing of UMNO, Wanita UMNO, would engage

the cultural approach of spreading goodwill through house-to-house visits to build rapport between local party members and the village community. Wanita UMNO members say they have to consistently project a caring face by visiting households for weddings, funerals, births and numerous other social events.

(Ibid.: 89)

Islam is the official religion of the state, with Article 160 of the Constitution defining Malays as Muslim. Due to the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia, coupled with the Asian values/anti-Westernisation rhetoric commonly employed since the mid-1990s (Ng et al. 2006), women’s bodies have become a visible ethno-religious symbol of the Malay-Muslim community: ‘the embodied markers of boundaries that ideally guard against the intrusions of other races’ (Ong 1995: 159). This includes adopting the veil and covering one’s awrat (parts of the body required by Islam to be concealed). By not wearing a veil, Dyana does not conform to the ‘hyper-ethnicised feminine identity (the veiled, modest, maternal Malay-Muslim woman)’ (Ng et al. 2006: 23) that has taken pre-eminence over other ‘legitimate’ socially valued identities among Malay-Muslim women since the global revivalist Islamic movement in the 1970s, so much so that to not adopt this identity has become a limited option for many Malay women.

Nevertheless, Dyana was not the first non-veiled Malay-Muslim woman to stand for election. Her novelty also lay in her age: she was 27, while her male opponent was 53. In Malaysia, young women have been largely overlooked in politics. UMNO’s young women’s wing, Puteri UMNO, which literally translates as UMNO’s Princesses, was formed in 2001 to mobilise Malay women under 40 into the party (Ng et al. 2006). However, it is still dubbed the ‘baby wing’ – it is not taken seriously by the party or the media. Members are evaluated based on their youth and looks and criticised for not ‘maintaining a reasonable body weight [which] is important for those in the public eye’ (Tan 2014a: 2). Within such a gendered political context, Dyana’s candidature was seen as progressive by many media commentators.

In order to examine these issues further, data was collected from two online media sources between 15 and 31 May 2014. Dyana’s by-election candidature was officially announced on 17 May 2014 for the by-election on 31 May. However, as rumours that Dyana would be the DAP candidate grew, she became the topic of news stories on online media, so we broadened the start date of the data collection to 15 May.

The decision to examine online media was motivated by the fact that some of the most significant issues relating to Dyana’s identity constructions as a suitable professional to stand for political office emerged online. It was also chosen as detailed linguistic analysis of gender identity constructions in online media is an important yet currently under-researched area of investigation. The first data source is The Star Online. The Star is the most visited Internet news portal in Malaysia across all languages, with 1.07 million visitors a month (Kuppusamy 2013). The Star’s print edition and its exact digital replica are the most widely read mainstream English language news source in the country (Mahpar 2014). Therefore, the news articles in The Star arguably play an influential role in constructing the identities of women politicians for public consumption. The second data source is The Rocket, the official online news portal of the DAP. It contains articles on national issues and events as well as opinion pieces by members of the
party, including articles purporting to be written by Dyana. This provided the opportunity to analyse how Dyana constructed her identities during the by-election.

*The Star*’s main shareholder is the Malaysian Chinese Association (*Malaysian Insider* 2010) – one of the largest parties in the ruling BN coalition. The contrast between this media outlet and *The Rocket* provides an opportunity to assess how the two media sources represent Dyana’s identities from opposing sides of the political spectrum.

We take a multilayered approach to examining how text producers construct identity categories and subject positions in Malaysian political media texts, by focusing on the following:

1. The media’s construction of Dyana’s identity through journalists’ linguistic representations and evaluations of her;
2. Dyana’s self-construction of her own identity via:
   a. Her personal writing published in *The Rocket*;
   b. Her reported speech (strategically) selected by media text-producers.

It is highly likely that her entries for *The Rocket* were authored in close conjunction with political script-writers and heavily edited/controlled. However, they are very clearly presented in the public domain as her own ‘personal’ views and reflections upon her own identity construction; as such, they are valuable data sources to include.

**The data**

**The bikini scandal**

We begin our analysis by focusing on the first incident to arise during the 17-day data collection period: the emergence of an online smear campaign. As rumours about Dyana’s candidature were circulating (before she had been officially announced as the DAP candidate), this smear campaign began. The campaign and the linguistic strategies that emerged in Dyana’s reactions to it raise a series of important issues surrounding dominant discourses of gender, sexuality and the body in Malaysian society, as well as simultaneously commenting on the intersection of the crucially important social identity variables of race and religion.

The smear campaign consisted of a poster with a head and shoulders photograph of Dyana on the left-hand side, juxtaposed with a photograph of a woman in a pink bikini on the right-hand side. No text accompanied the image, but the clear message was that the woman in the bikini, who bears a passing physical resemblance to Dyana, actually was Dyana. The poster first entered the public domain via Facebook, though the identity of the author of the original posting was never found. The poster image quickly went viral on social media. It immediately placed Dyana’s character as a Malay-Muslim woman in question, since to wear a bikini – a Western garment that exposes the awrat – can be perceived as a rejection of the moral imperative to embody the values of race and religion, and was presumably aimed to discredit her as a suitable candidate to hold political office. The woman in the bikini in the photograph was soon identified as Filipina actress Pauleen Luna (Ng 2014). However, the smear campaign continued, and these photos were found during the campaign at a mosque as well as scattered in two Malay villages in the Teluk Intan constituency (Ahmad Fazlan Shah 2014; Boo 2014b).

Extract 1 documents Dyana’s account in *The Rocket* of what happened as rumours of her candidature emerged:
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Extract 1

My personal details were misused. My phone number was distributed and I have since been the target of hundreds of lewd messages. Another thing I have realised – Malaysian society is misogynistic!

(Dyana Sofya 2014)

Dyana places herself in the subject position of a victim of harassment and she evaluates this experience using the adjective ‘misogynistic’. As this politically loaded term is clearly intertextually linked to resistant, feminist discourses, she is arguably attempting to construct a subject position that aligns her with a feminist identity, potentially building solidarity with women voters by signalling awareness of gender politics and the struggles faced by women across Malaysian society.

Extract 2

To tarnish my image further, there appears to be a photo of me allegedly wearing a bikini. While I think the Pinay actress in question is very attractive, I feel this really displays the level of guttural politics that our opponents would go to, especially against a female. Guys, please grow up.

(Dyana Sofya 2014)

In Extract 2 from later in the same Rocket article, Dyana distances herself from the photograph and constructs a ‘good Malay-Muslim woman’ identity in several ways. The strategic choice of the verb ‘appears’ and adverb ‘allegedly’ convey the implicature that she has not seen the photograph, reinforcing that this has nothing to do with her. In addition, this hedged expression – with reference to the photo – is not thematised. Instead, it is the dependent clause containing the claim that she has been a victim that is foregrounded. By explicitly commenting on the attractiveness of the ‘Pinay actress’, she indirectly establishes that it is the actress and not her in the photograph.

There are multiple issues at play here in terms of her presentation of self for her audience. Even as she dissociates herself from the overt, Westernised sexuality presented in the photo, Dyana seems to be simultaneously constituting a Westernised post-feminist identity via the dependent clause ‘While I think the Pinay actress in question is very attractive’. In the West, post-feminist rhetoric represents female sexualisation as ‘liberation from repressive societal codes’ (Duits and Van Zoonen 2006: 112) and a form of empowerment even when this sexualisation is defined from the perspective of the heterosexual male (Redfern and Aune 2010). In her positive appraisal of Luna’s exposed body via the postmodifier ‘very attractive’, she adopts the male gaze. Lesbianism is illegal in Malaysia, so a reading of same-sex attraction is highly improbable. She participates in the public scrutiny and evaluation of the objectified female body, constructing a self that is not prudish or opposed to bodily display (Attwood 2011; Press 2011).

The experienced ‘gentleman’ versus ‘beauty’ and youth

The second area that we focus on is a recurrent theme throughout the rest of the campaign. The identities of the two candidates were polarised by media text producers in terms of the older age and experience of Mah versus Dyana’s youth and beauty. This can be observed through the dominant discourses of the body and the dominant discourses of femininity. To demonstrate
how these subject positions are constructed, we analyse how journalists create these identity categories through specific linguistic choices and how Dyana responded to the construction of a heteronormative gendered ‘beauty’ identity.

Extract 3

Age versus looks in bellwether polls

The camera loves Dyana Sofya. Her photograph was on the front pages of all the Chinese newspapers and she looked good in every single picture. The DAP candidate is definitely the prettiest face to ever appear in DAP ... She is only 27, a lawyer and a relative greenhorn.

(Tan 2014b)

The headline in The Star in Extract 3 immediately polarises ‘age’ and ‘looks’, where the two nouns are adopted as terms of reference, drawing on the audience’s shared knowledge of Mah and Dyana respectively. Dyana’s age is further emphasised by the descriptions of her as ‘only 27’ and ‘a relative greenhorn’, a term of reference chosen to indicate directly her lack of experience, despite being a political secretary for a prominent leader of the DAP for a number of years. This gives rise to the implicature that, since experience and youth are in direct opposition with each other, Dyana cannot possess both.

Further, the repeated emphasis on her looks and beauty sets the tone for the rest of the article, which constructs a youthful, pretty – and consequently – inexperienced and heavily feminised position for Dyana. The opening declarative ‘The camera loves Dyana Sofya’ invites readers to partake in the photographer’s gaze of Dyana’s body, the object of voyeuristic scrutiny, assessed positively via the verbal phrase ‘looked good in every single picture’. This evaluation of her physical appearance, reinforced by the adverb ‘definitely’ and superlative ‘prettiest’, is followed by the metonymic use of ‘face’, constituting Dyana as a disembodied body part rather than a whole person.

Positioning her professional identity as ‘a lawyer’ between her age and the noun ‘greenhorn’ downplays her professional status, burying it between descriptors of youth and inexperience. Mah has yet to be mentioned explicitly, but already these strategies work to position him as the stronger candidate.

Extract 4

Can Mah reverse the tide? Will he be able to persuade the voters to fall in love with him again even as everyone rushes to have a close-up look at his sweet young thing of a rival?

(Tan 2014b)

In Extract 4 from later in the same Star article, the verbal phrase ‘fall in love with him again’ infers that voters had fallen in love with Dyana instead. The presupposition that this is due to Dyana’s looks rather than her professional capabilities is built into the proposition in the dependent clause ‘even as everyone rushes to have a close-up look at his sweet young thing of a rival’. The verb ‘rushes’ connotes excessive emotionalism, strongly implying that Dyana’s popularity is not based on reason. The diminutive ‘sweet young thing’ further objectifies her and damages her credibility as a worthy opponent.

The title of The Star article in Extract 5, with its wordplay on ‘huff’, ‘puff’ and ‘wolf’, makes intertextual reference to a children’s fairytale:
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**Extract 5**

**Dyana does not huff and puff about wolf whistles**

Although DAP’s young and pretty Dyana Sofya gets wolf whistles when she hits the 
ceramah trail, she is not slighted by this type of attention. ‘I think voters are smart enough 
to know what I can deliver rather than to focus on my looks,’ said the Teluk Intan parlia-
mentary candidate.

*(The Star 2014)*

Arguably this opening wordplay trivialises the whole news item, marking it out as humor-
ous ‘soft’ news (Bell 1991), as opposed to an opportunity for Dyana’s political identity to be 
discussed through what she actually says in terms of political policies on her *ceramah* trail or an 
opportunity to produce a critique of catcalling. Again, the premodifiers ‘young’ and ‘pretty’ 
objectify her, drawing on dominant discourses of femininity and the body in terms of youth and 
beauty. Her gendered body is foregrounded, instead of any focus on a professional identity con-
struction. There is inclusion of a direct quotation from Dyana, which at least gives her a voice. 
She attempts to flatter her voting public, describing them as ‘smart’, and downplays the effect of 
the catcalling, claiming that it will have no effect on how seriously she is taken.

In Extract 6, from another article from *The Star*, a range of dominant discourses of femininity 
can be observed:

**Extract 6**

She used to love hanging out with her friends for a drink after work and going shopping. 
She is eloquent, has a ready smile and, most of all, is a good listener as she went about 
fielding questions from the journalists.

*(Foong and Loh 2014)*

Dyana is first aligned with a stereotypical feminine identity through the verb phrase ‘going 
shopping’, drawing on a discourse of consumer femininity. The next sentence also appears 
to evaluate Dyana positively, but both verb phrases ‘has a ready smile’ and ‘is a good listener’ 
indirectly index gendered discourse styles. They are a key part of the dominant discourse of 
femininity, namely that women are stereotypically supportive conversationalists who listen well 
and smile at appropriate places. This sits in direct opposition to the interactional expectations of 
political discourse, where assertive, competitive, stereotypically masculine speech patterns are 
the norm. While it could be argued that being a good listener is a desirable quality for politicians 
when communicating with the public, in this case Dyana is complimented for listening well to 
questions posed by the media, not for her answers, which are not mentioned. Moreover, the 
adjective phrase ‘most of all’ re-emphasises her listening rather than oratory skills, positioning 
her as a passive subject.

The final extract is taken from *The Star* on the day of the by-election:

**Extract 7**

Barisan Nasional’s 53-year-old Mah, who is also Gerakan president, versus DAP’s 26-year-
old Dyana, in today’s Teluk Intan parliamentary by-election, dubbed by some as beauty 
versus gentleman.

*(Foong 2014)*
The first contrastive structure represents Mah as the more experienced candidate: explicit references to their ages place Dyana in a weaker position in terms of professional experience, and the referent ‘Gerakan president’ highlights Mah’s powerful political position, constructing him as an established leader with a strong professional identity. No professional identity category is used for Dyana. Additionally, the dichotomous phrase ‘beauty versus gentleman’ evaluates Dyana purely on her physical appearance, constituting her within the dominant male view of femininity. Mah is defined by the directly indexicalised gendered term ‘gentleman’, one with clear connotations of respectability and an entitlement to deference. The pronoun ‘some’ is a strategic use of vague language, so the author of this asymmetrical dichotomy remains ambiguous. Taken together, these strategies all convey Mah as the stronger contender.

Discussion

Although the by-election results were very close, Dyana lost what had been a safe DAP seat to Mah, who won by 238 votes. Just a year before, when Mah had also stood, the DAP had won by 7,313 votes. The successful DAP candidate on that occasion, Seah Leong Peng (whose death caused the by-election), was male, aged 48 and ethnically Chinese. Given these figures, it seems highly likely that Dyana’s gender, age and ethno-religious identity worked against her, and that the mass media’s negative construction of Dyana’s gendered identity may well have played an influential role in affecting voters’ choice in terms of candidate preference. In this section, we will first discuss how Dyana is represented by journalists in online media texts, before evaluating how she herself ‘chooses’ (we assume, jointly with her political script-writing team) to construct her identity as a young, female, Malay-Muslim lawyer who is aiming to increase her professional identity portfolio by becoming a member of the Malaysian parliament.

Our analysis of the extracts from *The Star* demonstrates how Dyana’s gender is consistently foregrounded, in conjunction with a focus on her age, her body/appearance, her inexperience and her heterosexual desirability. In contrast, Mah is portrayed as the reliable, experienced choice, with the most desirable political qualities. His professional qualifications are highlighted, whereas Dyana’s status as a lawyer and her previous political experience are either ignored or backgrounded by textual positioning. The male-as-norm discourse is clearly evident (Mullany 2011): Mah is presented as the candidate whose identity corresponds most closely with the expected professional identity construction of a successful politician, whereas Dyana is regarded as a novelty. In relation to the dominant discourses of the body, the representations of Dyana’s beauty and attractiveness are, at a superficial level, presented as compliments. However, these are powerful ideological devices that serve to undermine her as a professional while simultaneously drawing attention away from her political policies, focusing instead on the personal, sexual and trivial. These portrayals of Dyana’s identity in Malaysia’s most popular English language newspaper accord with the broader, worldwide patterns identified by Adcock (2010), that women politicians are described in gendered, sexualised and sex-stereotyped terms compared with their male counterparts.

While the overwhelming focus on Dyana’s youth and bodily appearance trivialises her professional identity as a serious candidate, age and sexuality are not the only significant sites of identity construction in this case study. The analysis demonstrates how gender also intersects with ethnicity and religion to create particularly powerful subject positions. The whole by-election was overshadowed by the smear campaign aimed to discredit Dyana’s identity as a Malay-Muslim. The online platform of *The Rocket* provided her with space to articulate resistance and conceptualise her identity in alternative ways. As demonstrated in Extracts 1 and 2,
Dyana’s linguistically constructed self-identity displays multiple facets, a move which can arguably be interpreted as evidence of political shrewdness.

On the one hand, she distances herself from the overt sexuality in the photograph to manifest a ‘good Malay-Muslim woman’ identity, which is crucial since there is a large Malay-Muslim population (38 per cent) in Teluk Intan, a fact that very likely motivated the bikini scandal. On the other hand, due to the multiracial composition of Teluk Intan, it is equally important to avoid being perceived as conservative while doing so, which she achieves by drawing on feminist and post-feminist discourses. Despite growing criticism by certain Malay-Muslim groups that feminism is anti-Islam (Zurairi 2013; Syed Jamal 2014), Islamic feminism is a growing political force in Malaysia (Segran 2013), so presenting herself as a Muslim feminist allows Dyana to leverage on the movement’s ‘progressive’ image. However, a great deal of time is spent responding to negative gendered and sexualised portrayals of herself as a young Malay-Muslim woman, instead of constructing a legitimate political identity.

After the by-election, it was argued that religion and race had played a significant role in the DAP’s loss. In a generally unpopular move among the country’s non-Muslims, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which was part of the PR coalition during the by-election, had proposed to implement hudud, the Islamic penal code, in Kelantan, a northern state in Malaysia. Dyana’s public declaration that she would vote against the implementation of hudud, despite being Muslim, may not have lessened the DAP’s supporters’ increasing discomfort with the party’s alliance with PAS. The Islamic party, however, attributed her loss to her ethnicity, claiming that Chinese voters had preferred a Chinese candidate.

**Issues for applied linguistics**

The approach that we have taken here has a set of emancipatory aims, and this accords well with definitions of applied linguistics as a discipline designed to intervene, in this case in issues of professional identity construction (see Sarangi 2006). We have shown how an analysis of the multiple identity constructions of Dyana can be seen to have played a role in her failure to win a parliamentary seat. An applied linguistics analysis can reveal the specific linguistic mechanisms by which such damaging stereotypes and male-as-norm discourses, where women are seen as interlopers at best, are held in place by powerful ideological assumptions.

We argue that our case study has demonstrated a need for social transformation in terms of a democratisation of linguistic representations of identity in mediated political discourse. The fact that our findings accord with those from numerous countries worldwide (Adcock 2010) highlights that this is not a problem specific to Malaysia, but one that intersects with a more global pattern of complex gender politics. As applied linguists, we can play a role in attempting to bring about social change by raising awareness of these damaging discourses and by arguing that women candidates should not be focalised through their gender, through sexualisation or through the management and presentation of their bodies. Equal space should be given to political candidates of any gender to construct professional credentials and focus instead on political policies.

**Summary**

In this chapter we addressed the question of whether the language used in media discourse affects the very low numbers of women being elected to political positions in Malaysian politics.
The analysis focused on a recent by-election with two candidates, one female and one male. Analysing data taken from online media texts, we highlighted how constructions of gender identities intersect with a range of other relevant social identity categories including age, sexuality, ethnicity and religion at various points by text-producers.

We produced a detailed analysis of a range of discourses, including dominant discourses of the body, dominant discourses of femininity, and the ‘male-as-norm’ discourse, as well as resistant discourses, including feminist discourses. Our analysis demonstrated how Mah was constructed as the serious candidate, whereas Dyana’s professional identity was diminished by focusing on her body and appearance, alongside dominant discourses of femininity focusing on trivial, non-political topics, including those of consumer femininity. Even where there were resistant discourses invoked by Dyana herself, these were in response to her positioning as a sexualised, gendered object. The usefulness of this analysis in terms of attempting to bring about social transformation via applied linguistics research was also discussed and evaluated.

Related topics
Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and ethnic identity; Identity in post-colonial contexts; Language and religious identities; Language and gender identities; Constructing age identity: the case of Mexican EFL learners; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homomasculine identity; Intersectionality in language and identity research; Language and identity research in online environments: a multimodal ethnographic perspective; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading
Lazar, M.M. (ed.) (2005). Feminist critical discourse analysis. Basingstoke: Palgrave. (This volume brings together empirical studies from a range of countries and institutional settings exploring the complex ways gender hegemony is discursively reinforced and challenged.)
Yoong, M. (forthcoming). ‘Men and women on air: gender stereotypes in humour sequences in a Malaysian radio phone-in programme’, Gender and Language, 11(1). (This article demonstrates how the use of humour in a Malaysian radio phone-in programme can uphold hegemonic power relations as well as repackage traditional stereotypes in innovative ways.)

References
Adcock, C. (2010). ‘The politician, the wife, the citizen, and her newspaper’, Feminist Media Studies, 10(2): 135–159.


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