

**GENDER DIFFERENCES: THE ATTITUDE DIFFERENCES OF MALAY MALE  
AND FEMALE STUDENTS TOWARDS THE USE OF SWEAR WORDS**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

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## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini telah dijalankan untuk melihat perbezaan tanggapan pelajar lelaki dan wanita Melayu terhadap penggunaan bahasa menyumpah. Responden terdiri dari tigabelas orang pelajar lelaki dan tigabelas orang pelajar wanita dari Univerisiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris berumur antara dua puluh hingga dua puluh tiga tahun. Responden terdiri dari pelajar-pelajar yang mengikuti kursus-kursus Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Sains Sukan, Pengajian Bahasa Melayu and Perakaunan. Kaedah kuantitatif dan kualitatif telah digunakan. Statistik descriptif dalam bentuk kekerapan dan peratusan digunakan untuk melapurkan hasil dapatan and kaedah analisa kandungan yang dicadangkan oleh Fraenkel & Wallen (2003) telah diguna pakai. Hasil kajian menunjukkan pelajar wanita hanya menggunakan perkataan menyumpah secara negative manakala pelajar lelaki menggunakannya secara negatif dan positif. Kedua-dua jantina berpendapat pengaruh persekitaran, media masa dan norma hidup merupakan fator-faktor yang mempengaruhi penggunaan perkataan menyumpah. Gerak tubuh (termasuk riak wajah serta pergerakan badan) mereka menunjukkan sama ada mereka bersetuju atau tidak dengan penggunaan perkataan menyumpah. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan golongan remaja lebih kerap mengguna perkatan berbentuk menyumpah berbanding dengan lain-lain peringkat umur. Selain itu, penggunaan perkataan berbentuk menyumpah digunakan secara meluas dan ia telah menjadi kebiasaan bagi golongan muda di Malaysia.

## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the attitude differences of Malay male and female students towards the use of swear words. The respondents consist of thirteen male and thirteen female Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris students aged between twenty and twenty three majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Sport Science, Malay studies and Accounting. The quantitative and qualitative analyses were used in this study. The descriptive statistics is used to report the frequency and percentages and the content analysis suggested by Fraenkel & Wallen (2003) was employed. The findings of this study indicate that the female students tend to use swear words negatively while the male students used it both negatively and positively. Both male and female students feel that factors such as environmental influences, the media and the norm encouraged the use of swearwords. Their approval and disapproval of the use of swear words are visible in their non-verbal language (gesture, facial expressions and body movements). The findings of this study also indicate that teenagers tend to use swear words more than any other age group and that swearing has become a form of habit among young Malaysians.

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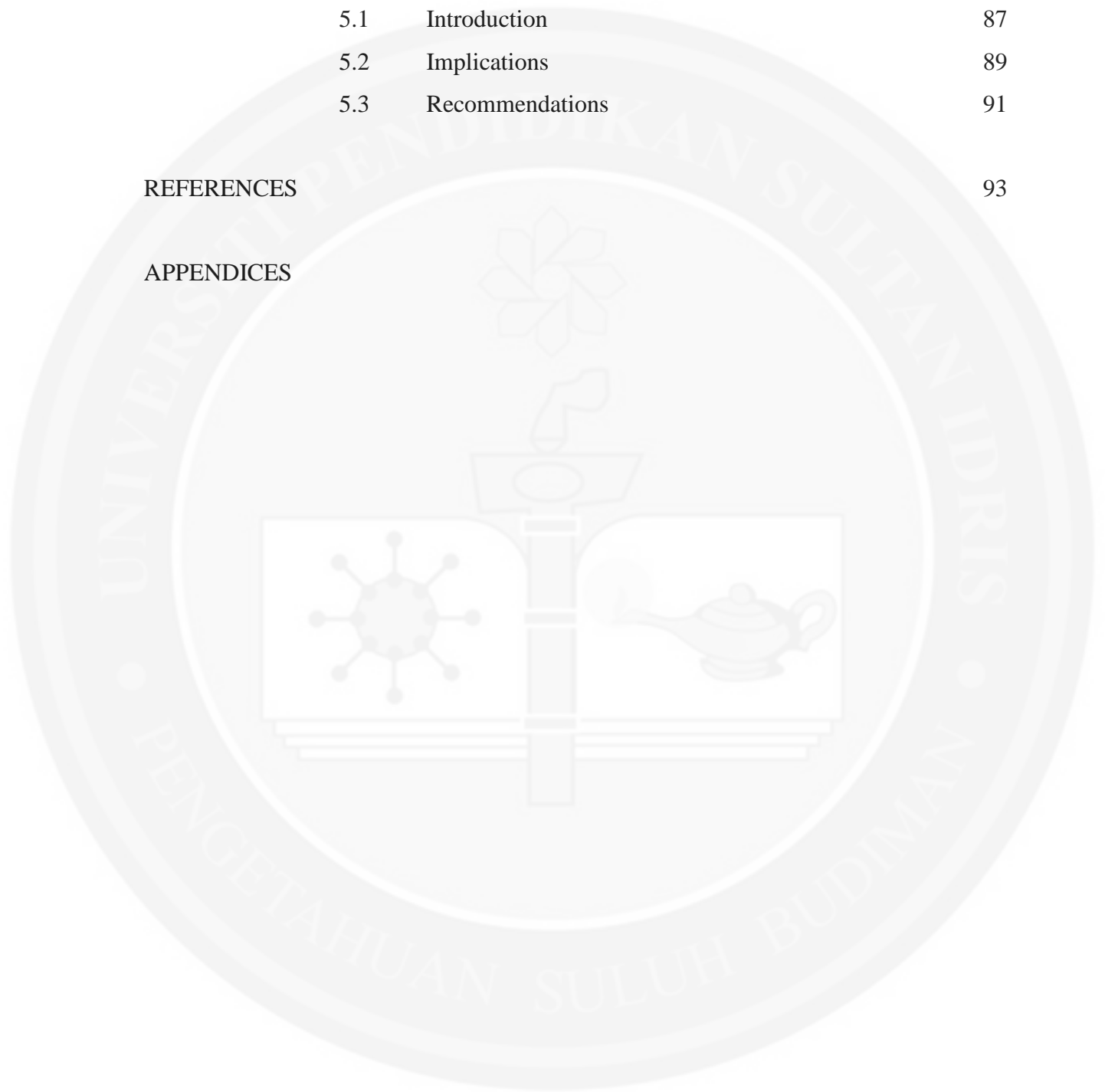
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

Research on gender and language has gained so much interest over the years. This realization has encouraged Clive Grey who has been teaching courses on gender linked language variation (for over five years) to document and update the findings and works of various writers and researchers over the last twenty five years. Grey wrote a paper in 1993 and had to update the text in 1996 when he noted that there is still an abundance of reference which could be included in his compilation of references. This illustrates that the issue of gender and language still received much attention by researchers of sociolinguistics.

The discussion on sexism in the English language has always taken centre stage. Spender (1980) claims that the English vocabulary has been designed to construct a sexist male supremacy. He maintains that English is a man's language and he justified his claims by saying that books and dictionaries are written by men, they wrote and

declare what is good and bad literature and historically they are the only writers who received recognition.

Many other articles continue to highlight the sexist nature of the English language. Selveira (1980) investigates the way in which the male is treated as the norm in the English classification systems. Additionally, Beardsley (1981) and Duran (1981) called for sex neutral vocabulary to be introduced into speech.

The notion that men speak an entirely different language from women first came into being in the works of Chamberlain (1912). However, it is always assumed that the investigation and identification of the difference between the speech of the opposite sexes dates back only from the 1970's. Trudgill (1974) studied the sociolinguistic variation of men and women in Norwich, England and his work on gender linked variation in language later paved the way for further research in Britain.

Another highly influential writer during the 70's was Robin Lakoff. In her book *Language and women's place*, Lakoff (cited in McKay and Homberger, 1996) claims that stronger expletives are reserved for men and the weaker expletives are reserved for women. She wrote that women's speech is more polite than men's, trivial topics are reserved for women and that women use "empty" adjectives (such as adorable, charming, divine, nice). Lakoff continues that women use tag questions more than men ("The weather is really nice today, isn't it?") and that they tend to use question intonation in statements to express uncertainty (My name is Tammy?). She maintains that women speak in "italics" (use intensifiers more than men) and they use hedges more than men (it's kinda nice). Lakoff also affirms that women use hyper-correct grammar and they don't tell jokes.

Montgomery, (1986) explains that Lakoff's claims on women's interactional styles were made purely based on her observation and intuitions. Despite this, her work has resulted in many researchers developing immense interest and empirical studies were conducted to investigate her claims. One of the areas investigated was on the use of swear words or expletives. Beiley & Time (1976) and Staley (1978) investigated the use of expletives and found that they are more commonly used in men's speech. Interest in Lakoff's work also prompted Gomm (1981) to examine the differences in swearing across the sexes.

Montgomery, (1986) like Lakoff, maintains that women tend to use less taboo words and more euphemisms. Researchers such as Beiley & Time (1976), Staley (1978) and Gomm (1981) have conducted empirical studies to investigate the use of expletives between the two sexes and most studies have proven Lakoff's and Montgomery's claims to be true. Literature has shown that studies of this nature were mostly conducted in the west and as such their findings might not be indicative of the use of swear words by both sexes in other regions. Such research is obviously lacking in other parts of the world.

The same could be said about Malaysia, and in view of this, the researcher took up the study to investigate the attitude differences of Malay males and female students at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, towards the use of swear words within the Malaysian society. This study is also concerned with why expletives are used in speech acts and the influence of culture, society, socio-economic-status and education on the use of swear words within the Malaysian society.

## 1.2 Background of the study.

Coates, (cited in Montgomery, 1986) claims that “Speech is an act of identity; when we speak, one of the things we do is identify ourselves as male or female”. Montgomery (1986) asserts that when the discussion on the issue of language and society arises, it is often said that there is a basic differences between the language of men and women. She went on to say that there is a common belief that women are less aggressive, they talk more than men and are inclined to gossips. However, they are more conservative in their speech and are concerned with matters of correctness. Additionally, there were also claims that women are more polite in their speech and that they tend to use less taboo words and more euphemisms.

This last claim has gained support from other researchers. Salami & Awolowo, (2006) wrote that since women’s language is deemed to be more polite and more refined, the use of vulgar language is often less associated with them. Additionally, Gramley and Patzol (cited in Salami & Awolowo, 2006) noted that a number of studies showed that men are more inclined than women to use obscene expressions. Key (1975) contends that all kinds of restrictions and limitations are imposed on a female’s linguistic habits to ensure her femininity. Not only are they forbidden to swear or use coarse language, the opposite sex must not swear in her presence.

Wilson (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/swearing.htm/printable>), finds that the western society basically perceives the use of expletives as more appropriate for men than for women. She maintains that women who swear appear to disrespect more societal taboos than men who swear. Society tends to judge them more harshly than men for their use of expletives.

Despite its negative connotation, DuFrene & Lehman (2002) assert that the public use of profane and obscene language is increasing in the American society. This could be true because Fetto (2003) affirms that, of the seven sins covered in a survey by American Demographics, which include lying, drinking, gambling, gossiping, smoking, watching pornography and swearing, it is found that Americans most frequently engage in the art of swearing. Debra Reimer, Executive Director of the *Kids Action Program*, claims that we pretend we are shocked at the use of profanity by children when we know that they frequently hear barrages of swear words in movies, TV sitcoms and their peers (Bennet, 2006).

Aitchison (2006) claims that swearing amongst kids is so rampant that it has now become a part of the teen culture. She further claims that a new phenomenon has now surface in some increasingly informal society where some older people have started to swear in order to be considered friendlier.

Reviews of literature has shown that the use of expletives, and profanity in any culture be it the west or the east is forbidden. Nevertheless, it is still used extensively. Why is this so? Studies need to be conducted to facilitate us into understanding why swearing is prevalent in most societies despite its negative connotation especially so in the Malaysian society.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Every language and culture has its own swear words. Although regarded a taboo in nearly every culture, people use them instead of avoiding them. In the western English-

speaking world, people from every race, class and level of education swear (<http://people.howstuffworks.com/swearing.htm>). The use of foul language has become so common that most people do not think twice before using it (O' Connor, 1999).

Lakoff (cited in McKay and Homberger, 1996), Montgomery, (1986), Beiley & Time (1976), Staley (1978) and Gomm (1981) maintain that women tend to use less taboo words and more euphemisms. Bayard and Krishnayya, (2001) found that although males tend to swear slightly more than females, there is little differences in the strength of swear words used by them.

Why does people use swear words? What are some of the factors that have propelled them into using swear words despite the negative stigma that is attached to it? How did society perceive swearing and how did society regard people who use swear words or expletives? A lot of research has been conducted in the west pertaining to issues on the use of swear words or expletives. However, there is no record of such studies being conducted in Malaysia. The curiosity of the researcher has thus led her to investigate the attitude differences of the Malay male and female students at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak towards the use of swear words in the Malaysian society.

## 1.4 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are as follow:

1. To investigate how male and female Malay students differ in the use of swear words (Research Question 1).

2. To find out and document factors which may encourage the use of swear words in the Malaysia society (Research Question 2).
3. To document the approval and disapproval of both male and female Malay students on the use of swear words via the observation of their body language (gesture, facial expressions and body movements) (Research Question 3).
4. To document the attitude differences of both males and females towards the use of swear words or expletives (Research Question 4).
5. To find out the possibilities of the Malaysian society using swear words for positive reasons (Research Question 4).

### **1.5 Research Questions**

This study is conducted to answer the following Research Questions.

- i. How does the use of swear words differ between males and females?
- ii. What are the factors that influence the use of swear words?
- iii. What are the students' non-verbal reactions (body language) towards the use of swear words?
- iv. How do male and female students perceive the use of swear words?

### **1.6 Significance of the study**

Society can sometimes be very bias when dealing with linguistic issues. The use of certain language is often associated with culture, socio economic status and social status.



The same can be said with the use of swear words, which is perceived as a taboo and forbidden by most cultures. If it is so wrong to use swear words, why then do people swear despite the negative stigma that is attached to it? This is an interesting trend which needs to be investigated.

The researcher is aware that the use of swear words is a taboo and it could be a sensitive issue to study. But researchers should be encouraged to conduct more research on this topic and explore the possibilities of using swear words or expletives for positive purposes such as identity construction and kinship or solidarity, contrary to common belief that swearing is merely obscenities which reflect one's position in society.

## **1.7 Definition of terms**

In this section, the researcher has defined some of the terms which she has used in this study.

### **1.7.1 Culture**

Whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society (Wardhough, 1993). A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves, (Goodenough, cited in Wardhough, 1993).

### **1.7.2 Expletives**

Refers to rude words or expressions such as damn when one is excited, annoyed or in pain.

### **1.7.3 Gender**

Refers to maleness or femaleness. The term is also used to distinguish sex related differences on the basis of their socio-cultural behaviour, including speech (Holmes, 2001). In this study, gender focuses on contrast between the features of men and women's speech.

### **1.7.4 Obscenity**

Behaviours, art or language that is sexually offensive and often offends or shocks people.

### **1.7.5 Profane**

Behaviour shows disrespect for a religion or religious icons and belief.

### **1.7.6 Profanity**

An act that shows disrespect for a religion or religious beliefs. Profanity or bad words include swear word, curse word, cuss word, dirty word, or collectively foul, bad or strong language ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swear words](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swear_words)).

### **1.7.7 Swear words**

Words which are considered to be rude or offensive. Normally used when people are angry.

### **1.7.8 Taboo**

A Polynesian language which originally refers to persons, activities (including speech), or things which are prohibited. After it is borrowed into English, it refers to activities and speech which are avoided or banned by social custom on grounds of morality or bad taste (Salzmann, 2004).

### **1.7.9 Socialisation**

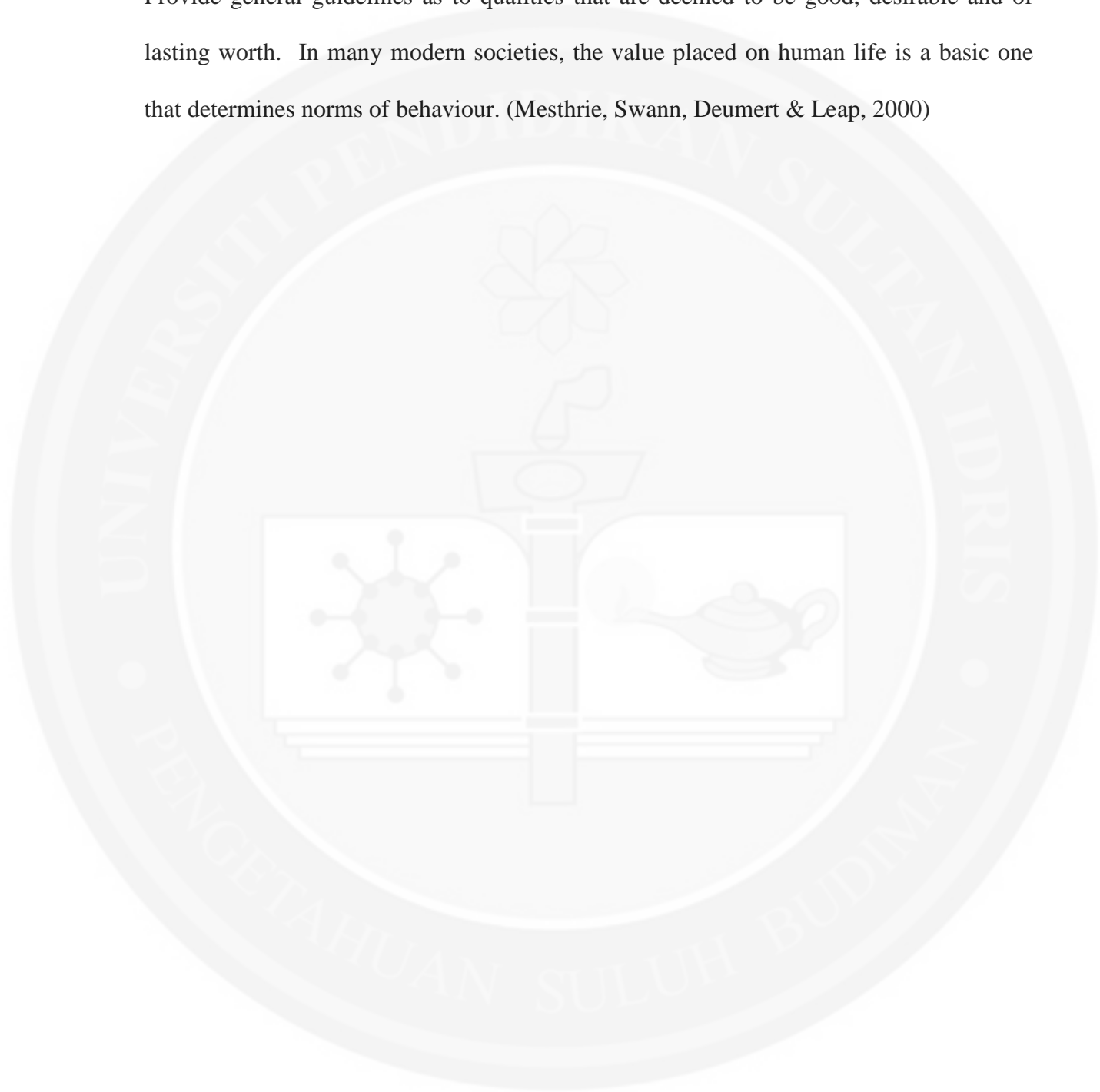
Refers to the process through which people learn the culture of their society. Primary socialisation takes place in childhood, usually within the family. The peer group is also an important reference group in transmitting social and linguistic behaviour (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap 2000)

### **1.7.10 Norms**

According to Haralambos & Holborn (cited in Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap, 2000), a norm is a specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in particular situations.

### 1.7.11 Values

Provide general guidelines as to qualities that are deemed to be good, desirable and of lasting worth. In many modern societies, the value placed on human life is a basic one that determines norms of behaviour. (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap, 2000)



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

*“people are the same all over the world”, yet there are obvious differences.  
(Seelye,1984).*

One of the questions which are often asked when discussing the issue on language and gender is, “Do men and women speak differently?”. Holmes (2001) and numerous observers (Wardhaugh, 1993) affirmed that they certainly do. The awareness of the contrast between women and men’s language is vital for this study for it does not only explain the linguistic behaviour of both sexes, but it would also help the researcher to find answers to the four research questions which have been put forward in Chapter 1.

In order to find out about the attitude differences of the respondents who had taken part in this study, the researcher will discuss issues which are relevant; such as language and its uses, the differences between men and women’s language, culture, taboo

and euphemism, swear language as well as the attitude of the westerners and other communities pertaining to ‘bad language.’

## 2.2 Uses of language

*Confucius observed that “By nature men are nearly alike; by practice they get to be wide apart.*

(Seelye, 1984).

If language use is what is performed by a speaker, then it can be regarded as a form of social behaviour or a choice of a certain form of social behaviour. These social behaviours then are influenced by factors such as personal, social and culture. For instance, if we are provoked, we have certain choices which we could take such as making menacing gestures or saying “I’ll hit you if you don’t stop doing that!”. The gestures which are non-linguistic or a direct physical action and the warning, which involved speech are both social behaviours (Wallwork, 1978).

By using the non-linguistic and linguistic choices, we are using language to mean and what we can do with language is our capacity to mean (Wallwork, 1978). Behaviour is the art of performing something and language (a kind of behaviour) is used to mean something. In theory, language is infinitely extensible but the choices which can be made available to a speaker or a group of speakers, may at any time be limited. In other words, the meaning potential of a language may be infinite but its usage potential may be restricted due to the cultural, sub-cultural and individual environment and experience of a speaker (Wallwork, 1978).

How language is utilized is determined by the situation in which it is used and we have the ability to change and switch our language uses accordingly. Who the speakers and listeners are, the relationship between them and the situation they are in will influence the language use. Additionally, other factors such as where the language is used, the topic discussed and the time it is used is also relevant. For instance, talking in a church is different from talking at home or in a restaurant. The same applies to talking about work, social gossip and discussion on intellectual issues. Furthermore language use also varies depending on chronological time such as this year, last year, a century ago and time in the sense of occasion – a party, a funeral or an unsocial time such as in the middle of the night (Wallwork, 1978).

As mentioned above, language could be non-linguistic and/or linguistic in nature and the use of either one or both, mean something. The use of non-linguistic or the silent language is important in interaction, thus the researcher will discuss it next.

### **2.3 Kinesics : The silent language**

Kinesics is the study of body motion which include eye contact, facial expressions, gazing, postures, touching and proxemics (Chaika, 1994). Like speech, silent language is used to illustrate interest, politeness, submission, approval, or disapproval. Although humans are said to share a range of gestures and body movements, each social group may have different rules for using them to some extent (Chaika, 1994).

Hall and Kendon (cited in Chaika, 1994) assert that communication is not achieved by voice alone; it includes posture, gesture, facial expression, gaze, even how

we space ourselves relative to others. In fact, it is extremely difficult to talk without using body motion and facial expression. Charles Darwin (cited in Chaika, 1994) felt that human's significant movement are the traces of biologically useful movements which later became naturally linked to emotional experience. For instance, the pushing away movement of the hand accompanying a negative response, may be viewed as the sign of actually pushing away a danger.

There seem to be certain facial expressions, gestures and body motions that basically mean the same things in all cultures. For example the brief raising of the eyebrow indicates recognition, but in many human cultures, it may also indicate sexual desire or invitation. This raising of the eyebrows action is also used for flirting in many cultures. Universally, eyebrow lifting means 'yes' to social contact, sexual or not (Chaika, 1994).

When comparing American college students to the Fore tribesmen in New Guinea who has no contacts with Westerners whatsoever, Ekman and Friesen (cited in Chaika, 1994), found that there is great similarity in displaying specific emotions by facial expression. When each group looked at pictures of the other one and was asked if the faces were happy, sad, disgusted, surprised or fearful they found that both the Fore and the Americans made similar judgments. Since people could recognize emotions on the faces of people from other cultures, Ekman and Friesen concluded that specific facial expressions are associated with particular emotions for all human beings.

The use of body movements to mean 'yes' and 'no' is also quite widespread. In addition to the nodding and head-shaking, the rising of the eyebrows and frowning could also be associated with positive and negative gestures. Chaika (1994), claims that similar