

Scripting the Silent War: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Passive-Aggressive Marital Conflict in Malay Television Dramas

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100103>

Received: 09 July 2026; Accepted: 14 July 2026; Published: 05 August 2026

ABSTRACT

The Malay community is known to value culture and courtesy especially in their daily conversations and interactions which consequently leads to the adoption of covert confrontation including in the marriage context. As a result, the marital conflict frequently manifests through a passive-aggressive communication pattern. Despite the vast research done on marital conflict, a large body of research traditionally focuses on overt verbal abuse resulting in the under-examination of covert marital conflict like passive-aggressive language use to control or manipulate spouses. This paper explores the linguistic weaponisation of indirectness to understand how passive-aggressive language is used in the context of Malay marriage to manipulate domestic situations. As Malay television dramas act as a cultural reflection of the real-world Malay households, this paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and pragmatics specifically Impoliteness Theory by Jonathan Culpeper (2011) to unearth the passive-aggressive language features like innuendo and mock politeness in the scripted dialogues. The findings are expected to reveal the use of passive-aggressive language in Malay marital settings while maintaining plausible deniability in the name of cultural indirectness. This paper helps to establish a wider literature of covert confrontation in the private domestic discourse specifically in the context of Malay households.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Passive-Aggressive Language, Impoliteness Theory, Malay Television Dramas, Malay Marital Conflicts

INTRODUCTION

In the scene of Southeast Asia, specifically within the Malay community and culture, language acts more than a tool for everyday exchange, rather it is a well-thought instrument that helps establish courtesy and relational harmony among individuals. The Malay community deploys collectivist communication patterns in their everyday exchange to preserve and prioritise harmony that is heavily emphasised by its culture. This is in accordance to Kim (2017) and Kelly (2021) who assert that one's communication manners is deeply intertwined with his cultures. This communication pattern has subconsciously become the cultural blueprint which dictates the marital communication patterns between husband and wife. Whenever there are conflicts present or arise, spouses are conditioned to avoid overt language use like shouting to prevent interpersonal friction. They tend to reject communications or conflicts that will openly intrude or negatively impact the communicators (Yuan et al., 2021). Instead, covert language which acts as linguistic buffers like innuendo and mock politeness is deployed to mask the severity of the conflicts to what is culturally accepted by the community.

Despite the vast studies of marital conflict being conducted in the landscape of sociolinguistic, the literature is heavily drawn towards overt conflict like verbal abuse. This is considered as more Western centric due to its directness in its communication styles (Nishimura et al., 2008). As a result, the covert language pattern that is heavily used in the Asian's marital conflict remains under-examined and underrepresented. Hence, limited number of studies have emerged to address this gap. In communities that highly value collectivist communication patterns like Malay community, the portrayal of dominance and control through direct language is minimal as opposed to the Western community. Instead, Malay community opts for "silent war" that is deemed appropriate

and culturally accepted. Therefore, the conflicts are often reflected through passive-aggressive language use and its impact is often invisible to outsiders. Despite its lesser visibility; nevertheless, it acts as a pertinent tool in controlling and demonstrating power in a marriage. In order to decode and capture these features, scripted dialogues in television dramas are of importance to act as the cultural mirror in the Malay marital community as it heavily reflects the societal communication and captures the covert marital dominance.

This concept paper plays an important role to provide a different angle to understand how power conflict is shown and represented in the Asian especially high-context covert Malay marriage. Through this study, the understanding of how power is negotiated and demonstrated is expanded beyond the usual overt definitions of disagreement and conflicts in marriage. The primary focus of this concept paper is to investigate the use of passive-aggressive language in the Malay marital conflicts to show domestic dominance, with the two following specific objectives.

1. To identify the specific linguistic strategies (eg: innuendos and mock politeness) used to execute passive-aggressive in scripted Malay television dramas.
2. To analyse how passive-aggressive linguistics structures are used to show manipulation and dominance over spouses during marital conflicts.

This study yields pertinent information regarding the linguistic strategies used and the way they are executed to show dominance in marriage which helps marriage counsellors and social advocates to recognise the marital power play and manipulation beyond the traditional manners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indirect Language Use and Power Dynamics in Malay Marital Context

Language and society are highly intertwined where it mirrors the community's culture deeply. In many Southeast Asia countries, the language used embodies deep cultural values which showcases politeness, courtesy and harmony. Within the Southeast Asia linguistic traditions, specifically Malay, communication is bound by the socio-cultural environment that heavily emphasises on preserving harmony, maintaining face, and defusing tension (Ismail, 2024). Despite so, a rising number of contemporary critical sociolinguistic studies has found that these strategies are subverted to enact dominance instead to show pure politeness. Within the Malay domestic setting, marital conflict is hardly an explicit outburst (Lee et.al, 2013; Kim, Park & Windsor 2012); instead, it is mediated by subtle linguistic choices which mirror the power dominance in the household.

Since Malay culture depends heavily on preserving harmony, this has turned its politeness and indirectness into a mechanism of covert hegemony. According to Choo, Ng and Cheong (2024), the domestic distribution of power in many Malay households often signifies authority to a dominant spouse which consequently affects the conversational aspects like conflict resolution styles. Therefore, a dominant spouse in Malay household tends to utilise covert communication styles instead of overt verbal aggression that is culturally deemed as impolite. This has also led to the weaponisation of indirectness and passive-aggressive language use to exert emotional and psychological control while superficially maintaining the cultural expectation of being polite.

Besides that, the idea of covert exertion of power is heavily influenced by a shared cultural script where a study conducted by (Kim, Park & Windsor, 2013) shows that the marital dominance is portrayed through linguistic maneuvers that take advantage of cultural expectation. As direct confrontation is strongly discouraged, the submissive partner in the domestic setting is often forced to decode hostile language use that is disguised under the 'polite' statements. By filtering dominance through the socially acceptable indirect language, a passive-aggressive language use and power imbalance within the Malay marriage have quietly emerged and yet remained hidden from the public scrutiny of the reality.

The Pragmatics of Covert Aggression

Indirectness is theoretically known as an empathetic way of minimising face-threats. However, in an imbalance scale of domestic power, indirectness is intentionally used by the more dominant spouse to exert psychological impact (Lee et al., 2013). In the context of Malay domestic discourse, indirectness often manifests itself through localised pragmatics phenomena like innuendo and mock politeness. These strategies function by exploiting conversational maxims to deliver a critical blow under a disguise.

This manipulative process is perfectly projected by Jonathan Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory specifically mock politeness. Culpeper (2011) mentions that impoliteness is done deliberately when polite linguistics forms used by the speaker mismatched with the hostile context of the situation. In the Malay context, *perli* is one of the examples of mock politeness. According to Yin and Zhou (2019), mock politeness happens when the literal words are polite, but the pragmatic force is face-attacking. Nevertheless, in order to ensure the impoliteness is understood, there must be a shared contextual knowledge between the couple.

In addition, innuendo is commonly known as "off-record" face threatening acts. As direct confrontation is frowned upon in the Malay culture, dominant spouse tends to use *sindir* to voice dissatisfaction or complain without the need to take up the ownership of the conflict. Through the use of innuendo, the speaker can easily avoid the responsibility when their spouse responds negatively to them by simply accusing them of being oversensitive. This is supported by Diaz-Perez (2020) where the avoidance of responsibility can be achieved by falling back to its literal meaning. This often leads to emotional labour of the subordinate partner as they are constantly trying to decode hostile undertones. Through the analysis of scripted interactions in Malay television dramas, this paper will map out how innuendo and mock politeness transition from an innocent cultural into a tool of psychological control in the Malay domestic context.

Cultural Reflection of Marital Relationship via Malay Television Scripted Dramas

Mass media plays a pivotal role in critical studies. As supported by Fairclough (2010), the use of mass media not only helps to mirror a culture; but also, to reflect societal norms and ideologies. Therefore, mass media like scripted television dramas reflect real life experience as the scripts and scenes are drawn from existing relational scripts that are embedded within the community to ensure authenticity and relatability to their target audience. Studies conducted by Dai, Kasimon and Ang (2024); Chan, Nagaraj and Freeman (2021) posit that the use of scripted television dramas is able to allow the investigation of a particular culture successfully due to its rich linguistic representations of a community's interactions. Therefore, it allows the understanding of a private domestic interaction that is otherwise remains unseen from the public eyes.

In the Malaysian context, television dramas provide the perfect access to social realities and familial issues as well as expectations. This is supported by Pawanteh (2014) where localised television drama series are said to be heavily packed with cultural anxieties and gender dynamics in a domestic context. In many popular Malay television dramas, the depiction of marital conflict is represented through constant psychological tension including covert aggression. As supported by Dai, Kasimon, and Ang (2024) media discourse allows an ideal baseline to investigate the real culture of a community. Hence, the use of passive-aggressive language like indirectness and impoliteness are reflected through television dramas as the scripts deliberately highlight the use of these linguistic features to depict the domestic dominance.

DISCUSSION

Linguistics Strategies of Passive Aggression in Scripted Television Dramas

This part of the discussion focuses on identifying and categorising the covert aggression of linguistic markers that are embedded in the selected scripted Malay television drama. By utilising Jonathan Culpeper's (2011) Impoliteness Theory, the analysis evaluates how scripted television dramas project and manipulate perceived politeness to execute face-threatening acts that are hidden from the public eyes. The discussion extracts the use of innuendo and mock politeness in the dramas to demonstrate the use of ironic lexical choices and excessive compliments which turn into psychological weapons. As mentioned by Diaz-Perez (2020), the linguistic surface

remains polite; however, the scripts show the underlying pragmatic force that serves as a critical blow to the less dominant partner.

Apart from ironic lexical choices, non-verbal cues and minimal linguistic strategies also serve as tools to demonstrate covert hostility and aggression. This shows that the more dominant partner deliberately controls the conversation by breaking down the communication through the use of strategic silence which causes anxiety among the spouse. This scenario is supported by Lee et al., (2013) who mentioned the use of prolonged pauses and uncooperative responses to exert force from the dominant spouse to the receiving spouse. This unspoken and covert aggression carries as much aggression and insults as compared to an overt aggression in marital conflicts.

The Use of Linguistic Structures to Show Manipulation and Dominance in Marital Conflicts

This section examines how passive aggressive dialogues in the scripted television dramas are actively weaponised by the fictional characters to assert domestic dominance during marital conflicts. The dialogues portrayed by the fictional character explains how the subtle conversational maneuvers depict a broader ideological and gendered power imbalance within the household. The discussion analyses the ways the dominant partner uses mock politeness to often achieve the domestic agenda and enforce behavioural compliance without resorting to overt aggression that are socially frowned upon. According to (Antasari, 2021), domestic discourse is one of the primary sites which showcases power and identity that is worth discovering despite being constantly being overlooked. The subtle hints given by the dominant partner is sufficient to control the conversations and establish a domestic control over the household (Kim, Park & Windsor, 2013) which depicts the passive-aggressive language use while maintaining the domestic hegemony.

Besides, this section of discussion also portrays the importance of cultural paradox of how the societal mandate to maintain harmony is used to secure plausible deniability by the dominate partner. This paper argues that while the traditional politeness theory acts to save the hearer's face; on the other hand, covert aggression does the opposite and protects the speaker's face instead. The use of indirect barbs by the fictional characters demonstrates the way the dominant partner maintains an unassailable defensive exit. The dominant partner can simply choose to gaslight their submissive partner who tries to address the hostility by retreating to the literal meaning of the words and claiming the partner for being oversensitive. This is supported by (Noor, Alam and Khan, 2026) where gaslighting is one of the characteristics of a dominant partner in a high context community. Therefore, the submissive partner in the marital context remains trapped in a discursive paradox of breaking the cultural norms of politeness and harmony.

CONCLUSION

This concept paper establishes a robust framework to investigate the "silent war" of passive-aggressive marital conflict in the Malay context that often stays invisible and hidden from the public eyes. By focusing on the context within the Malay marital setting, it draws the attention away from the commonly addressed Eurocentric overt models of domestic conflict. Instead, it pays attention to the high context collectivist society that emphasises on keeping harmony and courtesy, but conflicts are often presented in the form covert manner and passive-aggression. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as well as Jonathan Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory, it shows that the cultural mandates in the Malay community can be structurally hijacked through the use of innuendo and mock politeness which causes severe psychological control and dominance instead of visible abuse on the submissive partner while maintaining plausible deniability.

Furthermore, the use of Malay television dramas as a cultural mirror provides an accurate and invaluable portrayal of the Malay's communication templates. Despite so, to further allow true depth of this phenomenon requires real world application which involves the interviews and discourse tracking of real-life Malay couples. Therefore, this concept paper serves as the blueprint to future studies that are more comprehensive in investigating the use of passive-aggressive language in marital setting to portray dominance. Unlocking and understanding these linguistic features are of utmost importance to expand on the literature as well as to equip the marriage counsellors and social advocates with the appropriate knowledge to handle and dismantle the invisible psychological abuse that often stay hidden beneath the mask of cultural politeness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank everyone who generously shared their time and perspectives during the conceptualisation of this paper.

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