

## Amplifying Voices: Gender Dynamics in Malaysian Politicians’ Strategic Use of Boosters on Podcasts

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### ABSTRACT

*The strategic use of language in political discourse is crucial to shaping public perception and influence, especially in intercultural communication contexts. This study examines the use of boosters—linguistic devices that enhance persuasiveness and assertiveness to convey authority and credibility—by Malaysian politicians during podcast interviews. Drawing on Demir’s (2017) categorisation framework, this discourse-pragmatic analysis identifies the types of boosters used in podcast discourse and examines gender variations across one male and one female politician. The findings reveal that while both male and female politicians exhibit broad shared patterns in the employment of boosters, distinct differences emerge in the specific types of boosters preferred by each gender. These findings suggest that the employment of boosters by individuals in positions of power is influenced by a confluence of factors, including prevailing societal norms and expectations, individual rhetorical styles, and unique personal experiences. This study further demonstrates the critical role of linguistic boosters, highlighting their complex interplay with gender dynamics and power structures in the contemporary multicultural Malaysian political landscape.*

*Keywords: linguistic boosters; gender dynamics; discourse pragmatics; podcast; intercultural communication*

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, political communication has shifted from institutional contexts such as parliamentary debates, official government statements, or formal media interviews into more informal, conversational digital spaces (Rasul et al., 2025) such as podcasts. According to Mavrodieva (2025), podcasts are no longer just an extension of radio but have evolved into a ‘parallel platform’ for disseminating information (p.37). Podcasts have emerged as a prominent platform for politicians to engage audiences in dialogic interactions, offering them greater

rhetorical flexibility due to the conversational format. Additionally, podcasts create a private audio space that promotes parasocial relationships between the speaker and the listener (Mavrodieva, 2025). In the context of political discourse, this direct and personal relationship makes it possible for politicians to include natural speech and storytelling patterns that resonate with listeners, which in turn shifts the listener's perception of these politicians from distant officials to familiar individuals (Lisu, 2025). Political podcasts bypass the editorial gatekeeping of traditional media, allowing politicians to project a sense of authenticity through direct, unmediated engagement with the audience (Newman et al., 2024). All these factors make podcasts a particularly interesting site for examining how politicians construct their stance and authority through language.

One important linguistic resource is metadiscourse, which Hyland (2017) defines as the use of linguistic elements to enhance audience and reader comprehension by explicitly addressing their needs and expectations. The actual markers can only be identified through contextual analysis (Hyland, 2005). He divides metadiscourse into two main categories: interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers. While the interactive category addresses audience awareness by explaining strategies for organising discourse, the interactional dimension centres on the author's or speaker's voice and personality to foster solidarity with readers or the audience (Hyland, 2005). Boosters fall under the interactional dimension, as they are linguistic markers that strengthen claims, reflect confidence, and enhance persuasiveness. Mirzapour and Rasekh Mahand (2012, p. 120) added that “boosters are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements” as well as to show involvement with the audience. In political discourse, boosters play a crucial role, especially in legitimising policy positions, asserting leadership, and managing ideological alignment with audiences (Raza et al., 2025).

However, the use of boosters is not merely rhetorical. Instead, it is also socially embedded and influenced by gender. While foundational studies, such as those by Holmes (1990), have highlighted that gendered speech is a product of socialised differences, contemporary research has shifted towards a performative paradigm (Butler, 2006), in which gender is conceptualised as interactionally achieved rather than as fixed attributes. From this perspective, boosters can be understood as resources for stance-taking, where speakers negotiate authority and credibility in gendered ways. Previous studies examining the role of gender in booster use (Ahmed et al., 2023; Holmes, 1990) have shown that men deploy boosters more frequently than women. However, this pattern has been observed largely in Western, scripted political genres such as parliamentary debates (Dichoso et al., 2022) and campaign speeches (Ali et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2021). Two issues, therefore, remain open. First, whether existing booster frameworks, which are developed largely for academic texts, can adequately capture how political stance is constructed in the unscripted, conversational, dialogic environment of a podcast interview. Second, whether Western gendered patterns extend to Malaysian frontbenchers, who must deal with competing pressures: traditional cultural and religious norms that demand deference (Othman et al., 2023; Rajaratnam & De Rycker, 2018) and the assertiveness expected of frontbench politicians; hence, the following are the objectives of the present study:

1. To identify the types of boosters used by Malaysian politicians in podcast discourse.
2. To compare the patterns of boosters used by male and female Malaysian politicians.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Boosters primarily intensify the meaning of the words they accompany and stress the importance of the statement. Hyland (1998) states that academics employ boosters to emphasise the strength of commitment to a proposition, persuading others of their knowledge and the logical force of their argument. Similarly, according to Dontcheva-Navrátilová (2016), boosters help assert claims more authoritatively, thereby convincing the audience of the validity of the scholarly argument. In political discourse, Carrió-Pastor and Albalat-Mascarell (2023), who examined boosters in campaign debates over the Brexit referendum, claim that boosters help speakers present themselves credibly in political debates. Their finding is congruent with Jovic et al.'s (2023) argument that boosters generate resonance in persuasive speeches. According to Mokhtar et al. (2021), by reinforcing statements, the audience can potentially be persuaded by the heightened emotional and intellectual presentation of arguments. Halomoan (2024) highlights how boosters intensify confidence and authority in presidential debates, making the arguments sound stronger. Words like ‘absolutely’ or ‘clearly’ convey confidence, determination, and authority, which give the audience a sense of assurance. Nonetheless, while the strategic use of boosters can enhance persuasiveness or make a narrative more engaging, it is important to employ them judiciously to avoid overemphasis or loss of credibility (Carrió-Pastor & Albalat-Mascarell, 2023) and a one-dimensional argument (Ali et al., 2020). Briefly, boosters function as linguistic markers that add emphasis, strengthen claims, reflect confidence, provide clarity, and enhance persuasiveness and enthusiasm. Table 1 shows previous attempts to build an analytical framework for categorising boosters.

TABLE 1. Available Frameworks for Categorising Boosters

| No. | Name         | Year | Categories                                       | Examples                                                                            |
|-----|--------------|------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Quirk et al. | 1985 | Emphasisers                                      | <i>actually; certainly; definitely; plainly</i>                                     |
|     |              |      | Amplifiers                                       | <i>completely; strongly; absolutely</i>                                             |
| 2.  | Vasilleva    | 2001 | Adjectival and adverbial phrases                 | <i>it is clear that; clearly; obviously</i>                                         |
|     |              |      | Strong modality                                  | <i>must; shall; should</i>                                                          |
|     |              |      | Lexical verbs signalling high level of certainty | <i>believe; know; show</i>                                                          |
| 3.  | Hinkle       | 2005 | Amplifiers                                       | <i>altogether; amazingly; downright</i>                                             |
|     |              |      | Emphatics                                        | <i>indeed; total; no way</i>                                                        |
|     |              |      | Universal and Negative Pronouns                  | <i>all; everybody; nothing</i>                                                      |
| 4.  | Pho          | 2008 | Grammatical subjects                             | <i>experts agree; results indicate</i>                                              |
|     |              |      | Modal auxiliaries and semi-modal verbs           | <i>must; have to</i>                                                                |
|     |              |      | Epistemic adjectives, adverbs, and nouns         | <i>key factor; crucial criteria</i>                                                 |
|     |              |      | Attitudinal adjectives, adverbs, and nouns       | <i>valuable insights; novel approach</i>                                            |
|     |              |      | Verb tense and aspect                            | Present Perfect Tense for Ongoing Relevance: The result <i>has been</i> consistent. |
|     |              |      | Voice                                            | <i>Data were collected; we argue</i>                                                |
|     |              |      | Self-reference words                             | <i>I suggest; we propose.</i>                                                       |
|     |              |      | Reporting verbs                                  | <i>the analysis reveals; the authors argue</i>                                      |
|     |              |      | That-complement clauses                          | <i>it is clear that...; the result demonstrates that...</i>                         |
| 5.  | Demir        | 2017 | Modal boosters                                   | <i>must; need to; will; have-has to; be to infinitive</i>                           |
|     |              |      | Verbal boosters                                  | <i>ascertain; assure; convince; prove; substantiate</i>                             |
|     |              |      | Adjectival boosters                              | <i>absolute; adorable; alluring; assiduous; apparent</i>                            |
|     |              |      | Adverbial boosters                               | <i>accurately, admirably, assertively, blatantly, categorically</i>                 |
|     |              |      | Quantifiers/determiners                          | <i>many; much; a great amount</i>                                                   |
|     |              |      | Noun boosters                                    | <i>certitude; corroboration; eternity; plethora; proof</i>                          |

Analysis of the available frameworks shows that while they share many similarities, they differ in focus and complexity. Most models overlap significantly but use different labels (e.g., verbal boosters and reporting verbs). Some models, such as those by Quirk et al. (1985) and Hinkel (2005), focus on the functions of boosters. Others, such as Demir (2017), explore grammatical variations and provide a detailed breakdown of boosters across various parts of speech. Vassileva (2001), who emphasises modality and lexical verbs, also adds syntactic layers (adjectival and adverbial phrases). Hinkel (2005) includes unique categories, such as universal and negative pronouns, thereby further broadening the concept. Pho (2008), on the other hand, offers a complex analysis by incorporating grammatical voice, tense, and self-reference. This study employs Demir's (2017) eclectic framework for analysis, as it provides a detailed categorisation applicable to various contexts.

#### BOOSTERS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

Past studies (e.g., Holmes, 1990; Mokhtar et al., 2021) have often found that males tend to use boosters more frequently to assert dominance, confidence, and authority. This aligns with the traditional gender roles that expect men to be more assertive and authoritative (Valsecchi et al., 2023). Women, on the other hand, prefer to mitigate the force of their claims by hedging. They foster a collaborative, conversational style that aligns with traditional roles, such as politeness (Holmes, 1990). According to Lakoff (1973), linguistic choices can reflect societal power dynamics, implying that language is not innately gendered but signals various degrees of involvement or power. This notion posits that female politicians employ inclusive language to fulfil societal expectations of collaboration while operating within the confines of their prescribed social roles.

These gendered communication patterns are further accentuated within the Malaysian socio-political context. While rapidly modernising, Malaysians generally operate within a framework of traditional gender roles shaped by cultural and religious norms (Rajaratnam & De Rycker, 2018). This tension between traditional values and evolving societal norms directly impacts how women in politics are perceived and how they present themselves. Othman et al. (2023) examined the challenges faced by female leaders in the Malaysian public sector and identified themes associated with gender stereotypes, social roles, and male management models. They argue that Malaysians view leadership roles involving decision-making as less suitable for women. This pressure can manifest in women's language choices, leading to a more cautious, less assertive communication style, even when occupying positions of power. This observation aligns with Lakoff's (1973) assertion that language choices can reflect societal power dynamics, suggesting that women might adopt certain linguistic strategies to manage the complexities of a male-dominated political sphere.

#### BOOSTERS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The strategic use of boosters has been documented in various political contexts. For instance, Ali et al. (2020) identified metadiscourse markers in Benazir Bhutto's speeches based on Hyland's (1996) framework. They discovered that Bhutto predominantly used boosters to boast about her personal and party achievements. Factual information was amplified with boosters to remove doubts. Boosters also helped her emphasise or intensify matters of her choice. The study, nonetheless, does not compare Bhutto's discourse to that of other political leaders, making it challenging to determine whether her use of boosters was typical of political rhetoric in Pakistan.

Furthermore, the study was corpus-assisted and relied heavily on frequency counts. It provided a less qualitative understanding of how boosters shape meaning or audience perception across different contexts. Similarly, Joseph et al.'s (2021) study on women's language features used by Kamala Harris in the 2020 vice presidential debate is limited to Kamala Harris in a single discussion. Thus, the conclusions may not apply to other female politicians. The reliance on a single debate setting limits broader application without comparing Harris's language to her opponents'. Their findings, however, suggest that Kamala Harris strategically balanced women's language features with assertive speech patterns to convey both authority and confidence befitting her political leadership role. Unlike studies by Ali et al. (2020) and Joseph et al. (2021), Surtikanti et al. (2023) examined the functions of boosters, comparing two politicians in the first American presidential debate (Donald Trump and Joe Biden) in 2020. Their findings indicate that the candidates primarily utilised several intensifiers, including 'force indication', 'source tagging', 'accentuating', and 'solidarity markers'. These boosters were used to emphasise the strength of past deeds, criticise past policies to promote specific proposals, expose repetitive emotional expressions, and seek solidarity in the thesis stage. Meanwhile, in the argument stage, boosters were employed to articulate offensive and defensive arguments. The study's comparative method provides breadth, yet the emphasis remains on formal debate settings. In another study, Kusumawati et al. (2021) examined the use of hedges and boosters by Trump and Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential debates. The study reveals that Trump used boosters to demonstrate authority and decisiveness, while hedges were used by Clinton to soften claims. This finding is consistent with a more recent study by Halomoan (2024), which confirmed that Donald Trump again favoured boosters for the same reason.

While past studies have shown common patterns and valuable insights into booster use in traditional political discourse, the rise of podcasts as a platform for political commentary necessitates further investigation into how these dynamics manifest in this more informal and conversational setting. Advancing from this point, the present study examines the different types of boosters used in podcasts, comparing male and female Malaysian politicians. Studies on podcasts are essential as they not only highlight the functions of boosters in media discourse but also help promote solidarity and engagement with audiences in conversational settings. Furthermore, examining Malaysian politicians' use of boosters across genders in podcasts would yield valuable insights into the varied applications of interactional strategies and their implications for understanding gender dynamics in political communication.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative case-study design within a qualitative, discourse-pragmatic approach to investigate the use of linguistic boosters by selected Malaysian politicians on the popular podcast channel, Mamak Sessions by JinnyboyTV Hangouts, which features guests discussing a wide range of topics. The selected episodes consist of individual interview sessions with each politician, allowing for a focused analysis of their respective communication styles. Consistent with the case study tradition (Yin, 2018), the study prioritises analytical depth over breadth. As a discourse-pragmatic investigation, the analysis focuses on fine-grained, contextual interpretation, rather than systematic quantification or distributional measurement. Comparable studies have likewise relied on small, focused datasets of one to four political figures (Ali et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2021; Surtikanti et al., 2022; Raza et al., 2025). Table 2 summarises the dataset.

TABLE 2. Sample of Study

| No. | Episode | Length  | Invited Politician                                             | Date Uploaded on YouTube | Content Highlights                                                                                        |
|-----|---------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1   | 126     | 1:06:01 | Hannah Yeoh<br>Birth Date: January 9, 1979                     | October 19, 2020         | Youth Political Awareness; Generational Differences; Peer Pressure and Social Media; Personal Anecdotes   |
| 2   | 108     | 1:53:03 | Ahmad Fahmi bin Mohamed Fadzil<br>Birth Date: February 4, 1981 | November 6, 2022         | Contemporary Media Landscape Complexity; Malaysia's Political Turmoil; Youth Activism; Personal Anecdotes |

Hannah Yeoh (henceforth Hannah) is a member of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a Member of Parliament for Segambut, Kuala Lumpur. A lawyer by profession, she has served as the Deputy Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development (2018 - 2020) and the Minister of Youth and Sports (2022 - 2025). She currently serves as the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Federal Territories). Datuk Ahmad Fahmi Mohamed Fadzil (henceforth Fahmi), a trained engineer, is affiliated with the People's Justice Party (*Parti Keadilan Rakyat*—PKR). He is currently the Member of Parliament for Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur, and the Minister of Communications and Digital. Note that DAP and PKR are component parties of the political coalition Alliance of Hope (*Pakatan Harapan*—PH), which partly forms the current national unity government (Moten, 2023). By examining politicians from different parties within the same ruling coalition, the study aims to capture a range of voices within Malaysian political discourse while controlling for potential gender variations arising from oppositional stances. The two politicians and episodes were selected through purposive sampling against criteria developed to isolate gender as the primary variable. The two episodes satisfied all of the following criteria, forming the dataset:

- sitting Members of Parliament with frontbench experience at the federal level
- component parties of the same governing coalition (*Pakatan Harapan*)
- urban Kuala Lumpur constituencies
- close age cohort (born 1979 and 1981)
- single-guest episode, long-form (over one hour), unscripted interviews on the same podcast show (Mamak Sessions by JinnyboyTV Hangouts)
- comparable topic range

The podcast transcripts were downloaded from *NoteGPT AI* (YouTube transcript generator). They were manually verified to ensure transcription accuracy and contextual integrity. The analysis followed a systematic approach guided by the research objectives of identifying and comparing linguistic boosters employed by the selected Malaysian politicians across genders. Drawing upon Demir's (2017) taxonomy of boosters (see Table 1), the transcripts were subjected to contextual analysis, focusing on linguistic markers of persuasion, authority, argumentation, and identity construction. The findings were contextualised within the broader Malaysian socio-political landscape, intercultural context, and gender dynamics, acknowledging the potential implications of linguistic analysis in public discourse. Two researchers coded the transcripts using a scheme based on Demir's (2017) taxonomy, with rules for handling ambiguity. 20% of each transcript was first coded as a pilot sample. Borderline cases were resolved using co-text and context. The full dataset was then coded, and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. These discussions also reveal several limitations of the framework, which are reported alongside the findings rather than treated separately. A third researcher with a background

in discourse pragmatics reviewed a sample of the coded work as a peer-checking step. The meaning of a booster lies in the context and cannot be reduced to a simple count (Morse, 2015). Therefore, following Lincoln and Guba (1985), the study conducted these checks alongside an audit trail of coding decisions, rather than presenting a numerical inter-coder reliability score.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in two subsections: the types of boosters used by Malaysian politicians and the comparison of boosters used across genders.

### TYPES OF BOOSTERS USED IN PODCASTS

This section presents the identification work on boosters based on Demir's (2017) framework. The analysis presents two illustrative examples of boosters from each of the six identified categories.

#### MODAL BOOSTERS

- Excerpt 1: I then **have to** make sure that in every district, every rural area, and every place there is a secondary  
Hannah school available for kids to go to school.
- Excerpt 2: When it comes to, you know, making sure that, uh, there's no abuse of power, it... it **must...** we **must**  
Fahmi have some firm action taken by the executive, and those who lead the executive **must** be, um, the paragons of that virtue.

In Excerpt 1, Hannah expresses her stance on aligning policy decisions with societal realities, citing child marriage in Malaysia as an example. While acknowledging the public's online campaign with the hashtag #girlsbelongtoschool, she highlights the limitations of digital activism in addressing the complexities of the issue on the ground, particularly in rural areas. She explains the discrepancy between the country's legal definition of a child (under 18) and the reality of compulsory formal education, which ends at age 12. Hence, the modal verb *have to* is used to underscore her conviction that prioritising infrastructural support (secondary schools) should come before enacting legal changes to extend compulsory formal education to complete secondary schooling. It emphasises her calculated approach to educational reform by aligning policy with resource allocations.

Excerpt 2 reveals Fahmi's strong stance on ethical leadership in combating corruption and abuse of power. His use of the modal booster *must* serves beyond mere suggestions and signifies moral imperatives for future conduct. It highlights his conviction that firm action is an absolute necessity. The repetition of *must* also promotes a sense of urgency and reflects his determination to combat corruption.

#### VERBAL BOOSTERS

- Excerpt 3: And so for as long as I'm needed now, I, I'm there, I better work and, and **make sure** I do my best.  
Hannah
- Excerpt 4: Although some people would say, although some people say 'debat bukan budaya kita, budaya  
Fahmi kita budaya rasuah', no, I don't think so. I **disagree** with that. I **disagree** with that.

Excerpt 3 presents Hannah's reaction to the question of whether she finds her political commitment to be fulfilling. In her response, she affirms that she finds it satisfying, emphasising her role in influencing policymaking and serving the needy as her source of satisfaction. She asserts her determination to serve her constituents to the best of her ability for as long as they require her leadership, using the verbal booster—*make sure*. Her lexical choice underlines her proactive dedication to serving efficiently.

Fahmi, in Excerpt 4, presents a contrast between two perspectives on Malaysian culture: one that rejects debate and another that acknowledges corruption as ingrained. He counters the negative, cynical view by employing the verbal booster *disagree* to revise the narrative surrounding Malaysian culture into one that values intellectual discourse. The repetition amplifies his argument and underscores his belief in the power of open dialogue.

#### ADJECTIVAL BOOSTERS

Excerpt 5: But you know, today we are *so dependent* on WhatsApp. We don't know how life will be without  
Hannah WhatsApp. How to work without WhatsApp, right? But yeah.

Excerpt 6: And there's this very interesting thing said by this, uh, blogger named Hishammuddin Rais. He is a  
Fahmi legendary figure in the kind of, like, social activism circles; uh, he used to, you know, be part of University Malaya's student activism movement, and he ran away; he was a *lifelong avowed* Marxist.

Excerpt 5 offers insight into Hannah's observation of technological advancement and the generational gap. She employs the adjectival booster *dependent* to emphasise the extent to which our contemporary society relies on WhatsApp for communication. Note that in this instance, she amplifies it further by using the intensifier *so* (an adverb of degree) to exaggerate the magnitude of dependence on the application. This strategy persuades her podcast listeners to also reflect on the potential implications of technological dependence.

The compound adjectival booster *lifelong avowed*, used by Fahmi in Excerpt 6, underscores the strong association of Hishammuddin Rais, a Malaysian political activist, with Marxism. *Lifelong* describes Hishammuddin's deeply ingrained ideological stance, which has shaped his worldview. *Avowed*, on the other hand, presents his public assertion of his alignment with Marxist ideology. Together, these modifiers paint a significant image of Hishammuddin as a credible figure within the political circle. The adjectival booster serves to highlight the authority of the political figure discussed rather than Fahmi himself.

#### ADVERBIAL BOOSTERS

Excerpt 7: And, and so I think I've learnt over the years, uh, not to take things so seriously, uh, *especially* online  
Hannah comments.

Excerpt 8: ... and, and today when we're recording... this is November 3, and it's three weeks, three and a half weeks  
Fahmi since the dissolution of Parliament, and you *barely* see any BN flags.

The adverbial booster, *especially* in Excerpt 7, underlines a particular type of negativity—online comments—that Hannah has learnt to manage as a politician. It highlights that online comments should be treated differently from other forms of negative criticism due to their potential anonymity and harshness. She emphasises the heightened emotional impact of hurtful online

remarks and reminds herself (and persuades the listeners) to acknowledge the negativity and develop a coping mechanism to prioritise mental well-being.

Excerpt 8 shows Fahmi's use of the adverbial booster *barely*. It is used to highlight the striking contrast in the Barisan Nasional (BN) political coalition's presence between previous elections and the 2022 election. *Barely* emphasises the scarcity of BN flags—a typical indicator of political campaigning—that implies a potential decline in community support. It further intensifies uncertainty surrounding the 2022 election.

#### QUANTIFIERS/ DETERMINERS

Excerpt 9: Hannah And I've learnt, you know, you've got to be kind to yourself. And **a lot of** young people are so harsh on themselves, yeah.

Excerpt 10: Fahmi Right, yeah, I use because that's, that's all I could raise last time around, but, but, you know, you see, like, people with, with huge billboards and **many, many, many** billboards and then, like, ad spaces, and who's paying for all of these?

In Excerpt 9, Hannah shares her personal experience of dealing with academic pressure, discovering her strengths, and forging her career path. It exemplifies her attempt to generalise about young Malaysians as overly critical. This is done by using the booster *a lot of* (indefinite quantifier) to amplify her observation and reflection on the prevalence of self-criticism among the younger generation. It emphasises her claim, underscoring its ubiquity and subtly advocating a shift in mindset towards self-kindness. Accordingly, the listeners may reflect on their pattern of self-criticism and be persuaded to adopt a more compassionate approach to their personal growth.

The repetition of the indefinite quantifier *many* in Excerpt 10, used descriptively and emotionally, heightens suspicion about the lavish election campaigns. It visually illustrates the scale of the campaign and conveys doubt about the source of funding. Fahmi's powerful rhetorical choice effectively describes an uneven battlefield, raising concerns about fairness and transparency in election campaign funding.

#### NOUN BOOSTERS

Excerpt 11: Hannah So it's not really just about announcing or making a cool policy. Can the rest of Malaysia catch up, and that's our **duty**!

Excerpt 12: Fahmi Yeah, okay, yeah, yeah, so, so it's, it's going well, I think, um, and when we launched our manifesto, our action plan for GE15, Syed Sadiq, uh, Amira, um, and the top leadership of MUDA were there. Yeah, previously, a lot of the **brouhaha** often revolved around seats.

In Excerpt 11, Hannah explains that before raising the minimum marriage age and making secondary education compulsory, the government has a responsibility to ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place. Only by building enough secondary schools in rural areas can Malaysians realistically comply with such policies. She then concludes that ensuring this readiness is 'our *duty*'. The noun booster *duty* frames the action as a non-negotiable obligation, not optional. It intensifies the illocutionary force, signalling a collective commitment.

In Excerpt 12, Fahmi explains the allocation of seats for the 15th General Election (GE15). The use of the noun booster *brouhaha* in this context captures the intense confusion and conflict during seat negotiations with MUDA (a political party). It creates a contrast in his overall

message—acknowledging past turmoil and highlighting optimism surrounding the electoral cooperation between PH and MUDA.

Overall, while Demir's (2017) lexical framework for identifying boosters is useful, it has several limitations in categorising boosters within the podcasts. Firstly, determining whether a booster is an adverb or a quantifier can be tricky. For example, the booster *most* in '*most important*' should be labelled as an adverbial booster instead of a quantifier, as it intensifies the adjective instead of quantifying a noun, as in '*most people*'. In another example, the categorisation overlooks the combined pragmatic function of boosters (multi-word constructions). The booster *bare* in '*bare minimum*' is identified separately as an adjectival booster instead of a quantifier, while *minimum* is coded as a noun booster. However, together, the phrase can be coded as a compound booster that conveys a singular, intensified meaning of the absolute lowest amount possible. Other instances of compound boosters include '*can actually*', '*most important*', and '*very overwhelming*'. In addition, the pronouns *everything* and *everybody* are coded as quantifiers, as they are the closest fit for expressing totality. The booster *no* in '*no choice*' is coded as a determiner, as it intensifies the word '*choice*', implying a lack of alternatives and a sense of obligation.

Apart from categorising issues, the framework mainly identifies individual lexical items as boosters; however, it overlooks the pragmatic function of certain idiomatic and phrasal expressions. Idiomatic expressions such as '*make sure*' and '*in control*' function pragmatically to amplify stances but fall outside of the scope of the framework. Other examples, such as '*a lot of*' and '*so much*', also function as boosters (indefinite quantifiers). '*At the end of the day*', '*the mother of all (scammers)*', '*the father of all (scammers)*', and '*no rhyme or reason*' are idiomatic expressions that uniquely function as boosters. Their meanings are non-compositional, as they cannot be interpreted straightforwardly based on the literal meanings of the constituent words. Another interesting booster discovered in the data is the excessive use of *you know*. Note that although the expression is considered a booster, context and tone play a crucial role in determining whether it is merely a conversational filler, an indication of uncertainty (hedging device) or an emphasis (booster) to ensure that the listeners are following their line of argument, as exemplified in Excerpt 13.

Excerpt 13: Yeah, because, ***you know***, you can be earning a big salary, but if you are depressed every morning  
Hannah going to work and you don't like the colleagues that you are, the office, the work that you're doing, then there's no point.

Similarly, at the phrasal level, phrases like '*everything else*' and '*at least*' that intensify the politicians' opinions cannot be captured by the framework. This suggests that a comprehensive analysis of boosters must extend beyond individual words and word categories to consider phrasal and idiomatic constructions. A pragmatic approach that accounts for the dynamics of language and context would better capture the full range of boosting strategies politicians use to amplify their stances.

In addition to phrases and idiomatic expressions, the study discovers that phrase repetitions can also be coded as boosters, as shown in Excerpts 14–16.

Excerpt 14: So there are about four or five things; essentially, ***it's about*** the cost of living, ***it's about*** education,  
Fahmi ***it's about*** better pay, ***it's about*** housing, ***it's about*** public transport. You know, and also obviously ***it's about*** the environment, right?

Excerpt 15: And sometimes people are afraid: if I speak out, then other people are going to turn on me because  
Fahmi everyone's going to say, *Why are you* stopping the gravy train? *Why are you* not in? *Why are you* like not one with the cool kids? Oh, you're so 'pembarris'. Oh, you're so... and then you 'kena titik', and then you're dead, right?

Excerpt 16: I can say this now... what I call, uh, when BN announced their, their list of candidates, it was like a  
Fahmi 'pancung berjemaah', a [inaudible] of, uh, *cleansing, cleansing, cleansing*.

By repeating phrases, politicians can emphasise their key points, evoke emotional responses, persuade their listeners, and make their points more memorable by creating a sense of urgency, disbelief, or momentum and reinforcing their reasoning. These demonstrate another limitation of the analytical framework.

Additionally, Fahmi's use of interjections like *Wow!* (conveying astonishment) and *Right!* (signalling agreement) adds a layer of complexity to the analysis of boosters in his speech. Although they are not typically considered in the traditional description of boosters, we argue that the pragmatic functions of interjections align with those of amplifying emotions. Such expressive intensifiers are context-dependent boosters and should be considered in any attempt to analyse emotional dynamics in conversations.

#### GENDER COMPARISON IN THE USE OF BOOSTERS BY MALAYSIAN POLITICIANS

Boosters, functioning as interactional metadiscourse markers, are words or phrases used to convey the attitude, opinion, certainty, or relation of the speakers to the audience, helping to guide how a message should be understood and making conversation more engaging and persuasive (Hyland, 2005). Notably, the findings from the podcast conversation analysis show that the use of boosters is not always persuasive and can, at times, limit the expression of diverse opinions; it also serves to promote audience engagement and a sense of agreement, connection, and understanding between the speaker and the audience.

The linguistic analysis of the politicians' interactions reveals distinct patterns in their use of boosters, reflecting differences in conversational style, assertiveness, and rhetorical strategies, all while manoeuvring the subtleties of intercultural communication within Malaysia's diverse society. Overall, Hannah's use of boosters reveals a conversational (Holmes, 1990) yet assertive style. This can be observed in her use of modalities such as *have to*, *must*, and *make sure*, which emphasise necessity, obligation, and assurance. This obligation is further intensified by the noun boosters, such as *duty* and *luxury*. Here, nouns, rather than the more typical adverbs or adjectives, elevate the action from a policy option to a binding, non-negotiable responsibility and signal a strong commitment to the proposition. Such boosters strengthen her voice and convey certainty while her language remains approachable and conversational rather than aggressive (Hyland, 2005). Hannah also conveys certainty and emphasises totality, as in *always*, *best*, and *everything*. Her attempts to amplify statements are observed in her use of *really*, *very*, and *so much*. She also expresses her emotions through emotionally charged words like *harsh*, *stressed-out*, and *excited*—conveying vulnerability, empathy, and emotional depth. All of these suggest her focus on engaging with people's experiences, struggles, and emotions, making herself relatable. She strategically balances women's language features with assertive speech patterns, similar to those of Kamala Harris in her vice-presidential debate (Joseph et al., 2021). This communication style fits women's language descriptions, which are interpersonal and relation-oriented (Holmes, 1990), and supports

the argument that social expectations and gender affect a person's language choices (Lakoff, 1973).

Fahmi, on the other hand, seems more formal and policy-driven. Although similar to Hannah in his use of modality, the overall tone is more authoritative, emphasising obligation and action, which reflects the traditional expectations of male assertiveness in leadership communication (Valsecchi et al., 2023). His stances focus on overcoming obstacles and addressing corruption and the opposition. These are apparent in his lexical choices, such as *repealing*, *kill*, and *sabotage*. He also emphasises significance by highlighting extremes, as in *greatest*, *key*, and *most*. In addition, Fahmi uses repetition as a booster to intensify meaning and create emotional emphasis, as in “many, many, many billboards” and “cleansing, cleansing, cleansing,” which heighten the urgency and seriousness of an issue and make his argument more memorable. A striking characteristic of Fahmi's language compared to Hannah's is his employment of complex and historical references to frame his arguments, such as *hegemony*, *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and *fundamentalism*, which indicate a more intellectual or academic approach to expressing his stances. Even so, he still draws the audience in with engagement markers such as “you know” and “you see,” which help him sound more natural and accessible in the podcast setting. Hence, his strategies demonstrate his authority (Holmes, 1990; Mokhtar et al., 2021) and his determination to confront issues close to the establishment of PKR itself.

The similarities in the politicians' use of boosters can be explained by their close age gap, PH's coalition dynamics, and the priorities of PH's urban constituents. Firstly, although the politicians' distinct demographic cohorts—Generation X and Millennials—do not fully account for the overall similarities in their booster patterns, their close age difference (1979 and 1981) provides a better explanation, as they fall on either side of the Generation X-Millennial divide. Hence, they share overlapping formative experiences in their political journey, leading to similar patterns. Secondly, the similarities in the overall pattern of boosters used by them may also be explained by the coalition of their parties (DAP and PKR) within Pakatan Harapan. This influences their rhetorical strategies for advancing their shared political agendas, such as democratic reform, social justice, and good governance. Another explanation for the similarities may be the fact that both politicians operate within the urban and cultural landscape of Kuala Lumpur. Their constituencies (Segambut and Lembah Pantai), characterised by the diversity of ethnicities and socioeconomic makeup, share similar urban resident concerns. This shared context leads to comparable use of boosters to amplify their stances and persuade their urban voters. Taken together, these shared influences suggest that the way the two politicians use boosters may be shaped by their professional political roles and communication environments rather than by their gender.

Individual variation, rather than political context alone, best explains the distinct ways Hannah and Fahmi employ boosters in their communication. Hannah relies on data and policy to establish her credibility in a male-dominated political arena. This is consistent with Ali et al.'s (2020) work, in which they discovered that Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's former prime minister, amplified factual information to dispel doubts. Additionally, boosters help Hannah to emphasise or intensify matters of her choice. She understands societal expectations of her role as a female leader and cautiously words her stances for fear of negative judgments (Norasmah Othman et al., 2023) and backlash from her voters and podcast listeners. Her cautious approach may stem, in part, from her legal background. Hannah was raised in Subang Jaya in a middle-class family, which may partly explain her communication style. Fahmi, on the other hand, was raised in a more privileged family whose parents were high-ranking government officials. He was also driven by

PKR's initial struggles that were closely tied to the reformist movement. Hence, he is less pressured to prove his credibility, which gives him the flexibility to be creative and even risky by using humour and evocative language, as evident in his elaborate metaphors and dramatic phrasing—*filled with gusto, apocryphally, and diatribic harangue*. It may also stem from his passion for the performing arts, which highly value dramatic flair. This form of persuasive language helps enhance his emotional appeal and intellectual engagement, and this is consistent with Jovic et al.'s (2023) argument that persuasive language can have such effects. His listeners and voters may be entertained and influenced by the compelling delivery of heightened emotional and intellectual presentation of arguments (Mokhtar et al., 2021). However, the drawback of his stylistic choice is that it can obscure the clarity of his arguments to many Malaysian listeners with limited English language proficiency, underscoring a key challenge in effective intercultural communication in a multilingual nation.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the high-context nature of Malaysian communication, which typically prioritises indirectness, harmony, and politeness, the informal context of a podcast show allows for more expressive communication, fostering better engagement with hosts and the audience when expressing a stance.

The analysis reveals distinct communication patterns between the female and male politicians. The female politician adopts a more personal and emotive style, employing everyday language and expressing vulnerability to convey a nurturing, protective stance. In contrast, the male politician leans towards a formal, intellectual discourse, referencing broader societal structures and emphasising his expertise. These differences are evident in their use of boosters: the female politician uses them to foster connection, highlighting shared struggles and daily challenges, while the male politician prioritises demonstrating control, action, and higher-order thinking, aligning with traditional leadership expectations. While both utilise intensifiers, the female politician incorporates them conversationally, whereas the male politician employs them to assert intellectualism and reinforce an assertive, action-oriented stance.

As an in-depth case study, this analysis prioritises analytical depth over breadth, and the patterns identified should be read as analytically rather than statistically generalisable. Expanding on the findings of this study, future research should consider broadening the scope of analysis. Future analyses of conversational political genres may benefit from adopting a more pragmatically oriented framework rather than relying solely on one lexical taxonomy. Beyond the analytical framework, future work could study a larger sample of Malaysian politicians, representing a wider array of political parties and individuals with varying experiences across Malaysia's ethnically and culturally diverse landscape. Future studies can also employ larger and more diverse datasets involving political figures across multiple Southeast Asian countries to provide a more comprehensive representation of regional political discourse practices. Additionally, expanding the study beyond podcasts to include political speeches and interviews could provide a deeper understanding of language strategies in various political communication contexts, revealing how intercultural communicative competence is demonstrated across platforms. Finally, including an analysis of audience reception by considering factors such as gender and age group could provide further interpretive accounts of how different demographics perceive and respond to the boosters employed by politicians.

The findings highlight the significance of rhetorical strategies, media literacy and personalised communication training within the context of Malaysian politics, thereby contributing to the broader field of intercultural communication studies. By increasing public awareness of the persuasive language techniques utilised by politicians, particularly the use of linguistic boosters to establish authority and credibility, citizens can develop a more critical and informed approach to political discourse. Furthermore, tailored communication training can help politicians improve their language skills, ensuring their messages are persuasive, authentic and aligned with the complex societal and gender norms in Malaysia. This comprehensive approach can promote more inclusive political participation and enhance transparency in the strategic use of language in shaping public opinion across a diverse national landscape.

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