

CHAPTER 1 VOICES OF CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE RESEARCH

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental medium for human experience, functioning not only as a system of signs and rules but also as a foundation for cognitive processes, social engagement, and the development of both individual and collective identity. Halliday (1978) described language as a social semiotic, a resource for meaning-making that is inherently linked to its context and use. As such, the study of language is in essence interdisciplinary, intersecting with fields such as linguistics, education, sociology, psychology, political science, and cultural studies. To study language, therefore, is to engage in a fundamentally interdisciplinary endeavour, listening to a complex chorus of voices that narrate the human experience. This undertaking necessitates us to navigate between micro-level analysis of phonetic nuances or syntactic structures and macro-level examinations of how discourse shapes power, ideology, and public opinion. *Voices in Language Research* acknowledges this complexity by presenting a range of empirical and theoretical contributions that highlight various approaches to contemporary social, educational, and political issues through the lens of language research. By assembling work that spans the computational analysis of large corpora, the critical dissection of media texts, innovative

pedagogical experiments, and sensitive explorations of learner affect, this volume aims to foreground the multiplicity of “voices” that constitute the dynamic field of language studies today.

The title of this book, *Voices in Language Research*, is deliberately chosen to signal its central thematic and methodological commitments. The plural “voices” operates on several interconnected levels. First, it recognises the varied backgrounds of the contributors, who are researchers with different areas of expertise and perspectives focusing on common issues associated with language usage. Second, and more importantly, it refers to the multiplicity of voices that constitute the data of language research. These voices are present in both public and political arenas, reflected in the structured rhetoric of political speeches (Charteris-Black, 2018); they are also professional and mediated, as journalists and institutions report on crises and contribute to the construction of national identity (Poole & Williamson, 2023).

In addition, they have pedagogical roles via the interactions between teachers and students in both physical and virtual classrooms; they are technological, shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Furthermore, these voices may be deeply personal and at times silenced, represented in narratives concerning anxiety, trauma, and efforts towards motivation. And finally, by attending to this plurality of voices, this volume argues for an inclusive approach to language research that values both quantitative patterns and qualitative depth, aligning with the principles of mixed methods research as outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). Specifically, this volume highlights the intricate interplay between linguistic form and social function, demonstrating how different methodological paradigms from the quantitative rigour of corpus linguistics to the qualitative depth of discourse analysis (DA) and the blended insights of mixed methods, collectively enrich our understanding of language as a social practice.

This introductory chapter serves as a map that provides an overview of the topics addressed in this volume. It describes the central themes linking the subsequent ten chapters in this volume, outlines the logical

structure of the volume from theoretical foundations to applied contexts, and highlights the use of multiple methodological approaches in the field. Finally, the chapter discusses the significance of the Malaysian context and suggests areas for future research.

1.2 ORGANISING THE VOICES

The ten chapters in this volume are organised into four thematic clusters representing different areas of current language research: (1) Theoretical and methodological foundations, (2) Language in the public sphere, (3) Innovation and challenge in language pedagogy, and (4) The affective dimensions of language learning and research.

The four clusters are not merely thematic but also theoretical and methodological, reflecting a conscious movement from theoretical and methodological foundation to the analyses of “big data” and concluding with the “thick description” of qualitative inquiry (Geertz, 1973). This arrangement allows the volume to showcase how language operates across different scales of social life, from the macro-dynamics of public discourse to the micro-dynamics of classroom interaction and individual psychology.

1.2.1 Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

The volume begins with two chapters that establish a foundation for subsequent applied studies through critical theoretical and methodological reflection. This volume opens with Chapter 2: Phoneme awareness in early reading by Zuraidah Mohd Don, a fitting chapter that offers a thoughtful theoretical critique. It challenges a fundamental division in research on reading, which echoes concerns raised by scholars about the “phonological core” deficit in dyslexia. The chapter argues that the inconsistent definitions of core concepts like phoneme and phonological awareness have weakened the theoretical foundation of reading research. This critique is timely, as it engages directly with the ongoing science of reading debate, which calls for a consolidation of evidence from linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience to inform teaching practice. This chapter suggests that reading difficulties