

## LANGUAGE, POWER AND IDENTITY; SECRET LANGUAGE OF INDONESIAN ARAB WOMEN IN SOLO, INDONESIA

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### **Abstract**

*This research aims to explain the emergence of the language of a community that can be said to be unique and creative, i.e. the secret language that has been used by Arab women in Solo City, Central Java, Indonesia, since three decades ago and is still used today. This secret language does not give priority to the meaning process, but only to the speech inserted by the letter 'F' so that if spoken it is difficult to be understood by people who do not understand the use of this language. Bourdieu's linguistic habitus theory is used as a conceptual framework. The research method is qualitative with sociolinguistic approach. The data was collected based on participant observation, interviews and documentation. The results showed that the intention of Arab women in the Solo in using secret language between the old generation and the current generation is different. The older generation used the secret language primarily as a form of resistance and self-expression of the strong secular tradition of their era. The current generation uses secret the language as a form of group existence, for the strengthening of identity and business interests. However, the purpose of using this secret language by all generations has the*

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*same goal, that is, for certain conversations that they do not want understood by others around them.*

**Keywords:** *women's secret language, sociolinguistics, linguistic habitus*

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## **Introduction**

Language is an important component of one's identity. Language is also one component of culture. According to Fong 2004(in Priandono 2016: 174), language is not only useful as a means of communication, but also as an indicator of a speaker's identity, and that identity is communicated through messages during interaction. Language is the key to the heart of a culture. Language functions in cultural identity because language is the symbol of the group. When one speaks the same language, it is an identity sign of group and relationship (Ting-Toomey, 1999 in Priandono, 2016: 174).

The Arabs in Solo are descendants of the Arabian father's line of Hadramaut and the Javanese mother's path. Acculturation process has occurred over a long period because Solo Arab women in everyday social interaction use mixture of Indonesian language, Javanese, and sometimes Arab-Javanese language. The intense association between the Arab descents and the condition of Solo City that is very thick in its language and Javanese culture has resulted in a unique language, which is a mixture of Arabic, Javanese, and Indonesian. Javanese and Arabic cultures are equally patriarchal with women being subservient to males.

The identity of Arab women in social interaction has some differences, with regard to the position of women in relation to their Arab fellow men and non-Arab people. The identity of Arab women is shaped by the cultural situation within the Arab ethnic group. The cultural situation in a cultural group or ethnic group can be seen from the communicative behavior of members of that culture. Kuswarno (2008: 8) states that every society will have its own communication system, so automatically for the sake of survival every society can shape its culture.

Women's interaction and communication with men is somewhat limited-women's opinions in the social domain are rarely heard. Therefore, Arab women in Solo improvise in communicating, i.e. by using various secret languages. This secret code is one form of expression of Arab women to confirm their existence in the environment / community. Sociolinguistics views language studies as being a social symptom that influences the use of language with social factors such as, social status, education level, age, gender, economic level and situational factors. Fishman said sociolinguistic is "the study of the characteristics of language varieties, characteristics of their functions, and the characteristics of the speakers as these three constantly interact, change, and influence one another within a speech community" ( Fishman (1972:4)

In a speech society that feels subordinate and marginalized, language variation is used as a way of showing its existence. Solo Arab women use the secret language/secret code that they created together and which is understood only by the Arab female community in Solo. In addition to creating variations of the language, Arab women from the generation of the 1940s whose social life was very limited poured their agitation through poetry or prose. Creativity usually appears when someone is in a state of oppression.

Based on the description of the research background, the researchers intend to describe and explain the secret language used by the Solo Arab women in communicating with their fellow Arab women and to find out the purpose and the objective of using the secret language.

The identity of women in social positions in interacting and communicating with Arabs in Solo is another aspect that researcher will study. For purposes of analysis, the researcher uses the communication theory of identity.

Communication theory of identity there are three cultural contexts: Individual, communal and public. According to this theory, identity is the primary link between individuals and society and communication is the link that allows this relationship to occur. Of course, identity is a "code" that defines one's membership in a diverse community. The code here consists of symbols, such as clothing and possessions; and words, such as the self-description or objects that are usually said and the meaning of the words (In Littlejohn & Foss, 2014: 131)

## **Literature Review**

### ***Language and Identity***

Language is a cultural product; therefore, it cannot be separated from its social context. Bourdieu in the book *Language and Symbolic Power* criticizes the existence of a formal language or pure language. He objected, for example, to the separation between *langue* and *parole* by Saussure. He never thought that formal language existed. It is always a complex social process linked to local history and social processes (Jenkins, 2004: 235).

Language is used as the formation of group identity. This identity is expected to serve as a representation. Social identity is defined by the category of oneself / others. This category is determined by the behavior of individuals on the will of the community. In addition, the choice of linguistic variants also plays an important role in shaping the identity. Language is one form of identity, both personal and group identity. Group identity is usually formed through social interaction/conflict. This conflict also involves the conflict of linguistic usage. The linguistic conflict here means the use of identity labels assigned to the group itself as well as to other groups (Didin, 2011).

Pierre Bourdieu gives another term, *habitus linguistic*. *Habitus linguistic* is a cultural tendency to say certain things, as a specific linguistic competence to say something 'right' and the social capacity to use that competence appropriately. This *habitus* is planted from childhood with rebuke and prohibition if we speak improperly in certain situations, whether at home, or at school for example (Jenkins, 2004: 237)

The ability to speak in accordance with the conditions and capacities then becomes the competence. This competence is needed in the social context, and in practice it cannot be separated from the mastery of a language and also the mastery of the use of language in a socially acceptable situation. In other words, it is the ability to speak in accordance with one's social class (Jenkins, 2004: 237).

Arab women in Solo have the competence in developing a creative language, i.e. a secret language and linguistic social code related to taboo culture in expressing certain words, such as mentioning organs of both female and male organs.

### ***Language as an Expression***

In the philosophy of language, there is a notion that states that language is essentially a means of expression. This thought was developed by the Prague group (Prague school). This group has never limited the language, and the language does not have to have a deductive formal system. Its famous proponent was is Trubetzkoy, who studied the relationship between what is called speech and speech structure. According to him, language is essentially a physical substance in the form of speech sounds that can be heard by humans. (Kaelan, 1998: 277).

As a form of alternative expression, a secret language or code appears spontaneously in certain groups, as in the case of Arab women in Solo. They feel the need to express themselves and creatively formed their own language which is understood only by the group of Arab women in Solo. This expression can also be said to be a form of resistance.

### ***Resistance through a secret language***

Resistance is essentially a defensive relationship with cultural power adapted by subordinate social forces in situations in which the forms of cultural power arise from a source that is clearly experienced as something external and other factors (Bennet, 1998 in Barker 2004: 359). It can be argued that resistance arises from power relations and subordination in which the dominating culture seeks to force itself on subordinate culture arbitrarily. The term used to refer to this type of secret language is argot; it is a language spoken by a subcultural group that determines the group's boundaries (Jandt, 2013:367). The secret language used by the Solo Arab women is a spontaneous reaction that is essentially defensive against the helplessness of women in the Arab culture which is rooted in the patriarchal culture. This is what is said to be resistance as a mechanism for defense and self-existence. The authors see the form of Solo Arab women's resistance through creative communication that only the women can use it and understand the purpose of the conversation. This secret language can be regarded as the power of resistance of Solo women in the name of gender solidarity.

### **Methodology**

The type of this research is a descriptive qualitative research with sociolinguistic approach. Qualitative research, according to Irawan, "is an 'intersubjective' truth – it is not the truth built on the relation of various factors that work together, such as the culture and unique traits of human individuals" (Irawan, 2006: 4). While, in Sociolinguistics a variety of languages exist in the society. What happens to the society's language diversity is not uncontrolled or free variation, but is always related to the social context. (Jupriono, 2010: 33).

This research data was collected over a period of almost one year in 2017 through participant observation, video and audio recording, and completed with field notes. Interviews with four Arab women in Solo were used to strengthen the data.

### **Result and Discussion**

#### ***Creative Communication of Arab Women in Solo***

Language also acts as a gender identity, so women and men's languages differ mainly in word choices. In addition, language has several variations related to culture. Therefore, the Arab women of Solo have variations in the language. Arab ethnic women in Solo are

adept at coding in everyday conversations, such as the F-worded speech language. Some refer to this language as a ‘*wolak-walik*’ or *fill-in-for language*.

**Table 1 - Some examples of secret languages / inserts F**

Secret Language	Bahasa Indonesia	English
ma-fa-nga-fan	Makan	Eat
mi-fi-nu-fum	Minum	drink
ma-fan-di-fi	Mandi	take a bath
ma-fa-la-fam	Malam	night
ja-fa-nga-fan	Jangan	do not
Tifidufur	Tidur	sleep
Lafarifi	Lari	run
Mafahafal	Mahal	expensive
Mufurafah	Murah	cheap
Bafandefel	Bandel	naughty
Sufusafah	Susah	difficult
Dafatefeng	Datang	come/come in
Difiafam	Diam	Silent
Pefergifi	Pergi	Go
Afayafah	Ayah	Father
Ifubufu	Ibu	Mother
dan lain-lain	dan lain-lain	etc.

In a long conversation, the women can do it quickly. The beginning of using this secret language was in order to say something either confidential or secret that aims at not being recognized by speakers from different ethnic groups or others.

The secret code is also widely used in business with others. In the event of bargaining or negotiation, it can be assured that the use of this secret code by the ethnic Arabs will conceal the secret of the conversation. For example, in bargaining in the market if the price is felt to be too expensive then the fellow Arabs will code with the secret language, using words like:

1. *"Jafangan difi befelifi, difi tofokofo sefebefelafah lefebifih rofosifis"* which means, do not buy the goods; they are cheaper in the next store.
2. *"Hafatifi lafa-afat ngofomofong difi defepafan difiafa"* means be careful not to speak in front of him.
3. *"A-B-A-H sufudafah tifidufur, kifitafa bifisafa pefergifi"* Dad is asleep, we can go now.

The secret code is also used as an expression when they are insinuating or talking about others around them. Based on the observation in the field, only women are proficient in using the secret code. Women have their own language that men, husbands, fathers, and male friends do not understand what is being said. Based on the researchers’ study and the interviews with the Solo Arab community, the start of this secret language is unknown. As some informants say:

*"Since I was a teenager I have used ‘walik-walik’ (the term used for the fill-in-for language). We use this language if the content is not meant to be*

*understood by a third person, or to insinuate people around. Besides, we (old Arab women) were confined and cannot get along with others freely, so our fellow sisters used this language if our father was around, so that he did not understand what we were talking about. The emergence of the idea of using this secret code could be a form of resistance to a tradition we considered to be confined."*<sup>5</sup>

*The generations born in the 60s to 80s who also use the cipher or secret language have a somewhat different reason from the generations born in the era of the 30s-50s. It is different because their parents are not as old-fashioned as they used to be. The use of the secret code is limited to their daily interaction, especially at school. The intention of using the cipher is the same, which is, to avoid being understood by others around them, especially those who are non-Arab ethnic schoolmates. I know and can use this secret language, well, spontaneously and originally from daily interaction at school.*<sup>6</sup>

*"I often use the secret language in business, especially when making a transaction or a bargain. In my school, my friends and I use the cipher to talk about the teachers with the intention that our teachers do not know what the conversation is about. I started using it like in junior high school. My friends use it, and we can do it naturally."*<sup>7</sup>

Another interesting finding is that there is a family of 10 children and the father is originally an Arab. They have a secret code that their father does not understand. In front of their father they call Abah, but when talking with their sisters, they say abah with the spelling A-B-A-H. The word is coded when they are talking about something that they do not want it to be known by their father or as a code when their father comes. Each family has its own way of communicating by using a particular term. However, to their mother, the children of Arab ethnic do not use this cipher. In fact, sometimes the mother and her children use it together in communicating, so the father does not understand.

Another secret language often used by Arab women in Solo is to play a word based on events or phenomena so that words that are considered vulgar or impolite are sounded fair, so they do not hesitate to say it. Solo Arab women are taught not to talk about things that are not polite, or even considered taboo, like saying the body organs of women and men or talking about sex. Based on this cultural background, the creativity of Arab women in saying a word or phrase that is considered taboo arises, for example as follows:

BH (a bra) = Burhanudin Harahap (a name of a man originated from *Batak*)  
Buah dada (breasts) = Loha / Ami Said  
Hamlah (sound like a name of a girl) = pregnant, etc.

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<sup>5</sup> An interview with Mrs. Titik, July 2017

<sup>6</sup> An interview with Maria, July 2017

<sup>7</sup> An interview with Inayah, July 2017

Here are the examples of sentences used in this certain context: You saw that your friend's bra is visible, but she did not realize it, so to let her know then you would use the following secret codes:

*"Look. I can see your Burhanudin Harahap..."*

*"Your Ami Said is being apparent. Please wear your Burhanudin Harahap properly."*

*"Mom, please give me some money to buy Burhanudin Harahap."*

### ***Secret Language as Strengthening Solo Arab Women Identity***

Referring to the theory of social practice of Bourdieu, there are two dimensions. They are the internalization process experienced by social actors and the disclosure of everything that has been internalized that becomes parts of the actor himself. Internalization experienced by the actor is based on the life experience inherent in the actors that Bourdieu referred to as '*habitus*' in various arenas. Therefore, each actor's practice is the product of interaction between *habitus* and arena. Hence, the arena has its own rules, so each actor must be able to fight in the arena.

Solo Arab women in everyday social practices of interaction and communication feel the need to maintain their existence in the arena by using the language as a strategy to maintain their existence. Solo Arab women in defending their true identity produce or create a form of spoken language which is a secret language or a secret code, where only women groups understand the purpose and meaning.

The type of the secret language of the Solo Arab women is to use everyday language they normally use, but the language is modified in such a way by adding an insert of the letter '*F*' in each word so that it brings up a new language type. Based on the researchers' observations and interviews in the field, this secret language has emerged since their grandmothers', but no one knows when exactly. This secret language is strangely not coming through the process of learning or not taught by hereditary, rather it has just happened as a matter of course. It has become a Solo Arab woman's *habitus* and been internalized. Each generation is automatically capable and adept at using this secret language. Researchers also observed that in the event of Arab female teenagers' *arisan* (a kind of rotating savings scheme in an Indonesian community) their conversation was interspersed with the use of this secret language. The researchers asked where they learned this language, and they came with the same answer as follows:

*"We did not learn this. We just heard from our mothers or sisters and friends at school, so we automatically understand and are able to speak this language."*

Unconsciously Solo Arab women have been doing this resistance by using this secret language. The limitation of the capital<sup>8</sup> in the arena of the lives of the actors – Solo Arab women – makes them seek other capital. The economic capital and social capital are

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu explains the capital in social practice theory as "... a set of energy (in a form of what has been materialized or certainly formed) that if used personally or exclusively (like used as authorized capital by agents), so it is completely possible to provide social energy that is alive and real..."

more commonly owned by men, so the efforts of these women are to strengthen their existence by using ‘cultural capital’<sup>9</sup>.

Cultural capital in the form of a secret language in Solo Arab women is useful in showing the existence in the social arena of the society, and this language capital has the power to the arena utilized by the Solo Arab women to maintain their existence in the arena and strengthen their position in the arena of social life. The Solo Arab women use the secret language as a form of resistance to traditions that they consider to be confined, as an expression and self-existence, and as an ethnocentric form to other sexes and other groups.

It is natural and has become humanized that if self-expression is hampered, and the communication is not running ideally, the existence of equality and freedom in communicating and openness in conveying all issues concerning social life in a person or in social groups is needed. In this case, Arab women especially in Solo are looking for a solution using their own capital that is the secret language.

**Table 2 - Use of secret Code in Solo Arab Women Group**

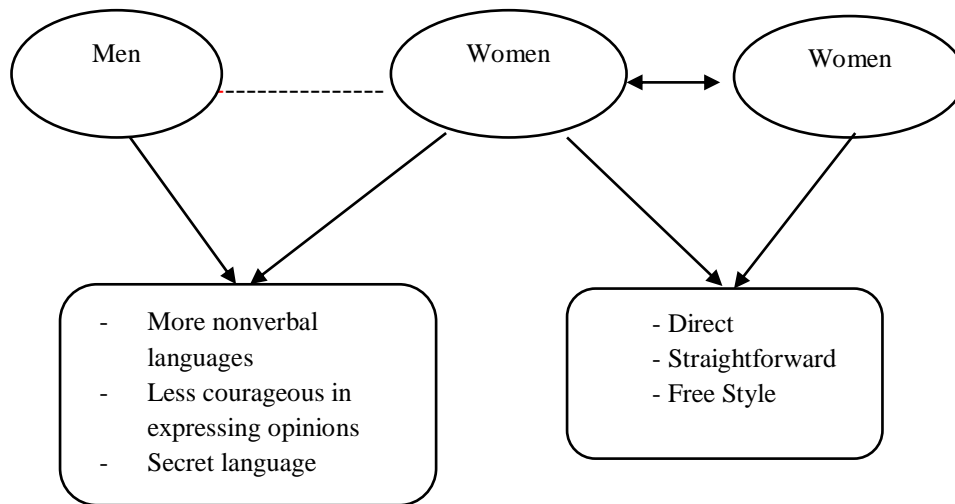
<b>Generation / Year of Birth</b>	<b>Secret Code as</b>	<b>Purpose and Objectives</b>
30-50	Self-Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a form of resistance to the seclusion tradition which they consider to be confined</li> <li>- the conversation is unknown to others they do not want the person to know</li> </ul>
60-80	Ethnic Strengthening (Identity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- forms of ethnocentrism against other ethnic and other sexes</li> <li>- business interests</li> <li>- discussions not known to other groups (confidential) including the husband</li> </ul>
90 above	Style / Trend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- just show the existence of the group</li> <li>- discussions not known to other groups (confidential) including the husband</li> </ul>

The existence of the development of communications technology is very possible change in the pattern of communication of a person or group of people. Arab milenial ethnic women also make the transformation of communication according to the times. This issue is interesting to investigate further with different topics. Based on the analysis of the results of research on the language of Arab women in the city of Solo, it can be modeled communication patterns between women and men and between women and women as follows.

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu explains that cultural capital is as the actor’s complication of materials considered has high prestige, knowledge and skills officially accredited, and habits (fashion style, way of speaking, appetite, typical body gestures, etc.) that is a manifestation of the agents’ objective position.





**Figure 1**  
**Model Pattern of Arab ethnic communication**

### Conclusion

Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that Arab women use the secret language as one strategy to strengthen their personal and group identity. Living in an environment that strongly holds a taboo culture, especially like in mentioning certain words such as female or male body organs, Arab women have instinctively created new words whose meaning refers to the intended word. This is what Bourdieu calls the linguistic *habitus*, so Arab women have the competence to play the words so that those originally considered taboo have come to appear reasonable.

In addition to the practice of linguistic *habitus*, Arab Solo women are creative in making variations of 'F-inserted' language in that their conversation is aimed at not being understood by others and so that they do not know what is being discussed. This is what they call it the Secret language. Their purpose and intention in using the secret language is as a form of resistance to the patriarchal environment and as a form of personal and group existence.

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