

HOW WOMEN ADDRESS THEIR SPOUSES: A CURRENT TREND IN PRONOUN USAGE

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to investigate the choice of address terms by Malay women from different social status and discusses its sociolinguistic implications in the present society of Malaysia. It scrutinises the different patterns of address terms used by Malay women in addressing their spouses in three specific contexts; when they are alone, in the presence of others and in the formal settings namely workplaces and meetings. The study employs a descriptive qualitative research approach. However, there are some percentages used to support the findings. The choices of address forms were gathered through a social class questionnaire answered by 97 female participants stratified to upper-middle, middle and lower-middle classes. The findings suggest that among Malay women in the upper-middle class, the preferred address terms for their husbands is the English second person singular “you”. This choice is clearly influenced by the prestige received by the English language in Malaysia. The terms of endearment become the second opted terms of address in addressing the significant others among women in the upper-middle class. Meanwhile, the majority of the participants stratified in middle and lower-middle social classes revealed a preference for using kinship terms. Sociolinguistically, the kinship terms use among spouses in Malay culture flourish the intimacy, closeness and affection, and a high level of respect toward the addressee. The results of this study will redound to the benefit of linguistic communities in particular sociolinguists and Malay language learners by providing an understanding of the current trend in pronoun usage among women in the Malay culture.

KEYWORDS: address terms, culture, language, power and solidarity, normativity

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CÓMO LAS MUJERES SE DIRIGEN A SUS ESPOSOS: UNA TENDENCIA ACTUAL EN EL USO DE LOS TRATAMIENTOS PERSONALES

RESUMEN: Este estudio investiga la variación de los tratamientos personales de las mujeres de diferentes estatus sociales y discute sus implicaciones sociolingüísticas en la sociedad actual de Malasia. El trabajo examina las diferentes formas de tratamiento que utilizan las mujeres para dirigirse a sus parejas en tres contextos específicos en particular: cuando están solas, en presencia de otros, y en entornos formales, a saber; lugares de trabajo y reuniones. El estudio emplea un enfoque descriptivo-cualitativo, aunque existen algunos porcentajes utilizados para justificar los resultados. Las elecciones de los tratamientos se realizaron a través de un cuestionario de clase social respondido por 97 participantes femeninas estratificadas en las clases media-alta, media y media-baja. Los resultados sugieren que, entre las mujeres malayas de la clase media-alta, los tratamientos preferidos para sus esposos son la segunda persona del singular en inglés, "you". Esta opción está claramente influenciada por el prestigio otorgado a la lengua inglesa en Malasia. La segunda forma de tratamientos preferida entre las mujeres de clase media-alta son los términos afectuosos. Mientras tanto, la mayoría de las participantes estratificadas en las clases media y media-baja revelaron una preferencia por el uso de términos de parentesco. Sociolingüísticamente, los términos de parentesco utilizados entre los cónyuges en la cultura malaya florecen en la intimidad, la cercanía y el afecto, conllevando un alto nivel de respeto hacia el destinatario. Los resultados de este estudio redundarán en beneficio de las comunidades lingüísticas, en particular los sociolingüistas y los estudiantes de la lengua malaya, al proporcionar una comprensión de la tendencia actual en el uso de los pronombres entre las mujeres en esta cultura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: tratamientos, cultura, idioma, poder y solidaridad, normatividad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Address form is an indispensable part of effective communication. In general, every language has its own address system, and if not used appropriately by the speakers, it can suggest misleading ideas about the culture and in some cases, it can impede communication with speakers of the target language (Kumar Bhatt, 2012). In principle, there are general rules for address forms. However, because address forms are a social phenomenon (Philipsen & Huspek, 1985), it varies on different occasions, and the rules do not always take effect (Yang, 2010).

On the other hand, address forms can also be seen as crucial elements in understanding a certain culture. As reported by previous researchers (Afful, 2007; Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan & Mohd Romzi Ramli, 2015; Norrby and Warren, 2012; Nurenzia Yannuar, Emalia Iragiliati & Evynurul Laily Zen, 2017), the usage of address forms defines the speakers' cultural values, and at the same time represent the speakers' perception of each other's social relationships.

Levinson (1983: 54) argues that "the single most obvious way in which the relationship between language and context is reflected in the structure of languages themselves is through the phenomenon of deixis". This study, however, only focuses

on the social deixis which includes terms of address and honorifics. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the type of second person address forms used by the Malay Malaysian women from various social classes (upper, middle-upper, and lower social class) to address their significant others in a range of situations. The study also examines the social factors influencing the respondents' choices of address forms.

2. MALAYSIAN CULTURE AND ADDRESS FORMS

Malaysia is renowned as a multicultural and multi-ethnic country. In 2017, the nation's population is estimated at 32.0 million that comprises of three dominant ethnic groups namely Malay (68.8%), Chinese (23.2%) and Indians (7%) while the remaining 1% fall under the minority group. According to DeVito (2008), Malaysians belong to "the high-ambiguity-tolerant culture" and normally such people "don't feel threatened by unknown situation" (DeVito, 2008: 39). Nevertheless, various studies have shown that Malaysians are indirect and particular with hierarchies (David, 2002; Shanmuganathan, 2003; David and Kuang, 2005; Kuang, David and Lau, 2013), hence the use of address forms in communicative situations, particularly in the Malay culture, are perceived as a method to mitigate face threats and power (Radiah Yusoff, 2007; Kuang, Jawakhir and Dhanapal, 2012).

Malaysians, in general, consider their titles and honorifics in high regard and follow a particular protocol to ensure they are used accurately. Different titles are ranked in order of importance; however, these are exempted if the person's position or public person outranks his title. In the communicative situation in Malaysia, there are a variety of second person address terms used in formal situations, for example, *encik* [Mr.], *cik* [Ms.], *tuan* [sir], *puan* [madam], *anda* [you.formal], etc. This is different compared to English which uses 'you' in both formal oral and written communicative situations such as in job interviews, formal debates, formal letters, advertisements, etc. This could be attributed to the neutrality of the term 'you' which can be directed to anyone irrespective of their social position, rank, social distance or relationship, or age. Although *anda*, the equivalent to "you" in English, is also used to indicate respect or high regard towards someone in the Malay language, it is more frequently used in written form such as in newspapers, magazines, and announcements in business circles or offices. In formal oral communicative situations, it is more customary to use professional titles such as *doktor* [doctor], *cikgu* [teacher], *Yang Berhormat* [The Honourable] and other equivalent honorifics.

Nor Shahila Mansor (2018) in her study on terms of address used by university students to address their family members revealed that for some Malay young adults, kinship terms were much more preferred over other address forms. Although adults tend to use pronouns when addressing family members who are younger, the younger family members would reciprocate by addressing the adults using kinship terms. In other words, there is no reciprocal *pronoun-pronoun*, but instead *kinship terms-pronoun* as the common practice in communication between youths and adults in the Malay family.

Different communication styles are also attributed to differing sociocultural expectations and varying abilities and interactional patterns. This according to Tannen (1993) applies particularly in communication between men and women. In the Malay language, address forms are asymmetrical hence different terms are used to address male and female interlocutors. For instance, a man is commonly addressed using the term *encik* [Mr.] irrespective of age or social status. However, for women, there are at least two forms of address namely *cik* [Miss] which is used to address an unmarried woman while *puan* [Mrs.] is used to address a woman who is married. Another noteworthy emerging trend related to addressing other women particularly by those working at in-service counters, including online businesses, is the use of terms of endearment either in Malay or English. The most common terms of endearment in Malay are *sayang* [dear] and *kesayangan* [my love], and in English such as “dear”, “sweetheart”, “honey” and “love” are often used interchangeably to address potential female customers.

Previous studies suggested that terms of address for women differ in different cultures with some address forms in a particular culture noting a higher level of respect towards women compared to other (Yang, 2010). In an American society, women, regardless of age, are often addressed with less respect and nonreciprocal endearment compared to men. This suggests that women may be generally held with less respect compared to men. On the contrary, terms of endearment used towards women in the Malay culture, are perceived as a sign of politeness, solidarity and to create an immediate intimacy among interlocutors. According to Kummer (2006), the element of politeness can be considered as a diplomatic strategy of communication aimed at building and sustaining lasting relationships. However, Haugh (2006) argues that what is interpreted as ‘polite’ varies across societies, and for this reason, different people have different ways of expressing politeness.

Politeness is one of the key elements in the value system of many cultures and plays an important role not only in our daily life but also in effective communication (Yen Tran, 2010). In order to maintain communication and establish social coordination, behaviours and words need to be adjusted accordingly (Janney and Arndt, 1992; Yen Tran, 2010). A respectful attitude, the use of appropriate language between interlocutors which also involves the selection of suitable address forms are essential in order to show politeness. Hence, several sociolinguistic factors such as age differences, social positions, social contexts, intimacy and type of relationships between the speaker and the hearer are indispensable elements that need a serious attention in order to perform a polite conversation.

Similarly, given the rich system of personal pronouns and patterns of address that varies depending on the perceived status of the interlocutors as evidenced in the Malay language, it is fundamental for the interlocutors to know their respective statuses, whether they are of equal or non-equal status, if they were to use the Malay pronouns correctly (Thurgood, 1999). This knowledge acts as a guideline for choosing the appropriate terms of address to demonstrate respect and politeness in conversations among speakers.

According to Fasold (1990), in general, there are two main patterns of address forms and they are name usage and second-person pronoun. In Malay culture, women do not often address or refer to their significant other by their first names but rather by some other forms of address such as kinship terms, pet names and endearments. This gesture implies what can be interpreted as an unequal and distant relationship or social structure. In the Malay society, husbands are considered social superiors hence, as wives, Malay women are expected to defer to their spouses. This deference, among other practices, is realised in the usage of address terms. Kinship terms, pet names or endearments coined by the wife contribute to shaping the status of Malay women in general and reinforce her subordinate position within their household. In other words, societal beliefs and structure, impose an implicit constraint to the use of first names in addressing or referring to husbands.

3. METHODOLOGY

Ninety-seven women aged between 30-50 years old living in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor participated in this study. Most of the participants work in academic institutions and government agencies such as public hospitals and home affairs. To acquire participants for this study, the researcher approached them personally and asked for collaboration. There was no prerequisite for participating in the study and, as a result of this, 97 participants volunteered to take part.

The data for this study was collected through the distribution of a two-part questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire is intended to gather information regarding the participants' social class. Although determining an individual's social class is an intricate process, Milroy (1980) stated that a person could be categorized by quantifiable elements such as income, education, occupation, residence or lifestyle. This is also supported by Broom et al. (1968) and Ray (1971) who considered occupation, education and income as determining factors to social class. Taking these suggestions into consideration, additional questions relating to the participants' level of education, range of income, occupation, and lifestyle were included in the questionnaire. Based on the data gathered, participants were stratified into upper-middle, middle and lower-middle classes. The respondents were informed that they could return the questionnaire anonymously.

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate the second person form of address they would use when addressing their significant others under three specific situations: 1) when they're alone; 2) in the presence of others such as children, parents, friends and colleagues, etc.; and 3) in a formal setting such as the workplace or during meetings. In order to limit any instances of problematic or uncertain usage, options of form of address commonly used between Malay women such as Kin Term (KT), Short Name (SN), Pronoun (Pr.), Pet Name (PN) and Mixed Category (MC) were provided in this section. The MC refers to the combination of two forms of address, for instance, KT+SN, KT+PN or any other combinations. Participants may also choose Not Available (NA) in situations not-applicable to them.

For instance, the respondents are from the lower class and have never attended any formal events such as a work meeting together with their spouse and are unsure of the form of address that should be used should they happen to attend it together. To ensure that the data collected are comprehensive and clear, the respondents were allowed to list more than one form of address if necessary and were also encouraged to explain the reason for their choices.

Completed questionnaires returned to the researcher were analysed and the respondents were stratified based on the information provided about their lifestyles, level of education, occupation, and income range. In the final stage, the patterns of address forms for each social class were identified and listed in the heterogeneous groups.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper investigates the choice of the address forms used by Malay women to address their significant others in a range of contexts. By taking into consideration the participants' background including level of education, occupation, income structure, living area and lifestyle, the following findings were obtained. A total of 97 female participants, aged between 30 – 50 years old completed the questionnaire. Based on the data, the participants were classified into three social classes namely upper middle, middle and lower class.

Chart 1. The number of participants in each social class

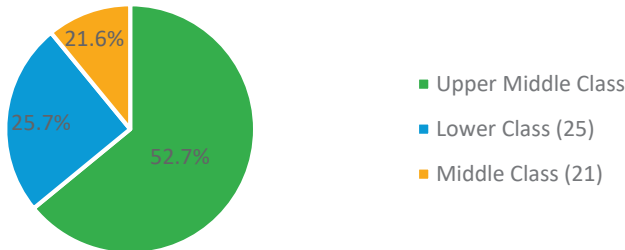


Chart 1 demonstrates the number of participants in each social class. The classification was performed based on the data relating to the income structure which participants voluntarily provided in the questionnaire. Based on the analysis, 51 participants (52.7%) fall within the upper-middle class category, 21 participants (21.6%) in the middle-class category, and the remaining 25 respondents (25.7%) fell into the lower-class category.

Social class	College Degree	Highschool Diploma	No education
Upper Middle class	40 (78.43%)	11 (21.57%)	0 (0%)
Middle class	4 (19.05%)	15 (71.43%)	2 (9.52%)
Lower class	0 (0%)	14 (56%)	11 (44%)

Table 1. Participants' level of education according to social class

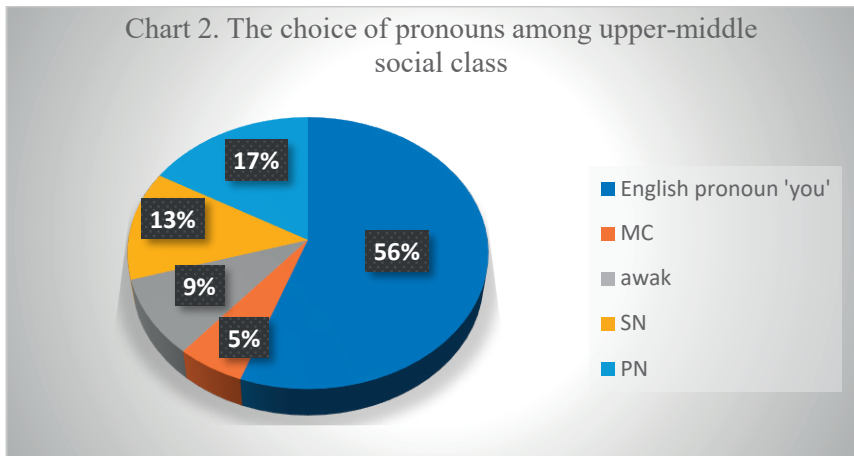
Table 1 specifies the participants’ education level in each social class. The data indicate that all of the respondents in the upper-middle class had some form of education with 40 out of 51 respondents (78.43%) were College Degree holders while the remaining 11 participants (21.57%) had completed high school and had at least a Diploma. A stark difference in terms of education level between the upper-middle class and the lower class can also be observed where in contrast to the upper-middle class, none of the lower middle-class respondents consisted of degree holders while close to half of the respondents (44%) had no education. For respondents in the middle-class category, only four respondents (19.05%) indicated that they have a College Degree while another 15 (71.43%) are Diploma or high school certificate holders. Two participants (9.52%) reported that they had no prior education.

4.1. The choice of pronouns among Malay women

The findings reveal that the common patterns of terms of address used by the Malay women to address their significant others were Kin Term (KT), Short Name (SN), Pronoun (Pr.), Pet Name (PN) and Mixed Category (MC). The MC refers to the combination of two forms of address, for instance, KT+SN, KT+PN or any other combinations. The breakdown as to the preferred choice of terms of address among Malay women in addressing their husbands in relation to their social class are as follows:

Upper-middle social class

As indicated in Chart 1, a total of 51 female respondents were grouped in the upper-middle-class category. Most of them work in educational institutions and government agencies as senior lecturers, registrars, administrators and public officials with an approximate stipend of RM108,000.00 (USD27,000.00) per annum. In this social class, a majority of the respondents mentioned using Pronouns to address their significant other regardless of where and when the conversation occurred.



As Chart 2 clearly reveals that the English pronoun “you” covers the highest occurrences with 56%, follows with a big difference of PN (17%), and with a recognizable difference of SN (13%), leaving a Malay pronoun ‘*awak*’ [you; polite, informal] with 9% and a distinguishably-least of MC (5%). Specifically, a total of 30 participants used the English second person pronoun ‘you’ to address their husbands with three respondents disclosing that they also use Mixed Category terms of address. The Mixed Category consists of Title + Name, i.e. *Encik Adam* [Mr. Adam], *Dr. Rosly* and *Tuan Zambry* [Sir Zambry], and is commonly used as an address form during conversations taking place in formal contexts or the presence of other colleagues.

Nevertheless, despite the preference for using the English “you”, a Malay second person pronoun *awak* [you; polite, informal] was also used by women in this social category to address their husbands. This was reported by five women who alternatingly use *awak* in various situations to refer to their husbands. The data indicated these participants used *awak* in addressing their spouses when they were alone and sometimes with the presence of others such as their children and other family members.

Apart from that, the use of SN and PN are also quite common among participants in this social class. Of all the respondents, seven reported using SN while the remaining nine women used PN such as “honey”, “sweetie”, “sweetheart”, “baby”, “hubby” and “bie” (an abbreviation of ‘baby’) to address their husbands mainly when they were alone.

Overall, the data for the upper-middle-class category revealed that the English pronoun “you” is much more preferred by Malay women in addressing their significant others compared to other terms of address. This corresponds with Normala Othman’s (2006) account that the English pronoun “you” is always associated with educated and urbanized Malay women. Malay young women especially those who live and work in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Selangor were reported to prefer to use English second-person address forms to address friends, colleagues, and spouses.

Middle social class

The middle social class is defined by an earning indicator of RM72,000.00 (USD 18,000.00) per annum and for this study, a total of 21 participants matched this criterion. Based on the data collected, the participants in this social class tend to use three types of address terms towards their husbands, and they are KT, pronoun, and PN. The use of SN and MC were not reported at all.

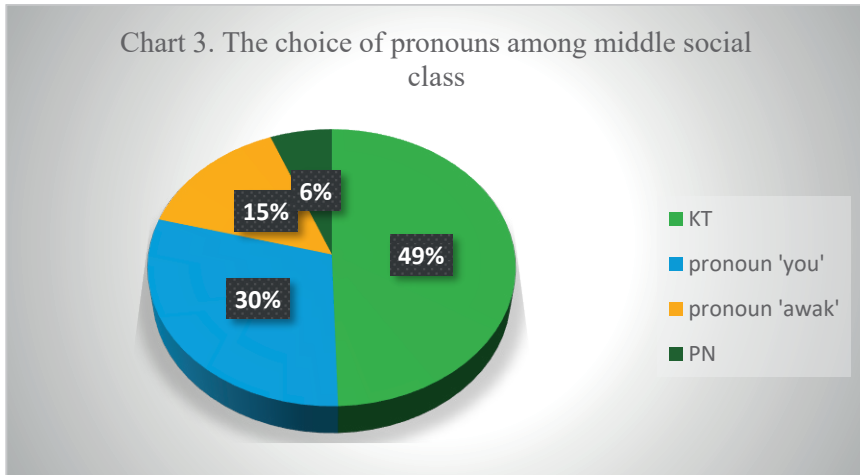


Chart 3 shows the choice of pronouns among women stratified in middle social class. A total of 10 respondents (49%) reported using the KT *abang* [big brother] as an address form towards their husband in various situations. *Abang* in its referential meaning is defined as a term used for blood relations encoding genealogical relationship (Braun, 1988; Agha, 2007). However, the term *abang* used by the Malay wives to address their husbands does not carry the same meaning when using *abang* to their biological sibling. In a marital relationship, the term *abang* insinuates that the husband has a higher and authoritative rank as the head of the family. It also indicates a degree of respect from the wife towards the husband. Additionally, the term *abang* also carries an affectionate connotation when used by a wife towards her husband (Nor Shahila Mansor, Normaliza Abd Rahim, Roslina Mamat & Hazlina Abdul Halim, 2018). This was supported by the respondents who use this address term by explaining that their choice of *abang* as an address term is guided by the high level of respect for their so-called soulmate/significant other. Beside *abang*, another KT, *papa* [daddy], was mentioned by the participants as one of the address terms used to address their husbands particularly in the presence of others particularly their children and parents of in-laws.

Conclusively, for Malay women in the middle-class category, apart from the term *abang* which is used by almost half of the respondents, the remaining 6 respondents (30%) prefer using the pronoun “you”, leaving 3 participants (15%) with the term *awak*, and the last 2 women (6%) opting to address their husband by PN such as “dear” and *sayang* [honey/love].

Lower social class

The lower social class is determined through the classification of earning per annum amounting to less than RM72,000.00 (USD 18,000.00) and based on the data

gathered through the survey, 25 respondents matched this criterion. Out of the 25 respondents, 11 indicated as having no formal education and are currently working as a general worker (cleaner). Analysis of the findings reveals that only two types of address forms were used by women in this group to address their husbands and they are KT and MC.

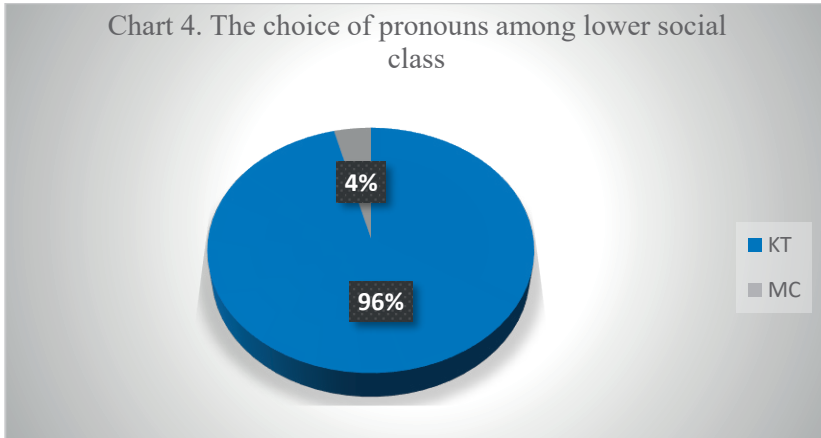


Chart 4 displays the choice of pronouns among participants categorized in lower social class. A total of 24 (96%) out of the 25 women mentioned using the KT *abang* [big brother] as the most common form of address to their husbands. As explained in the previous section, the KT *abang* used towards a husband carries a different connotation compared to its literal meaning. In the Malay culture, the use of kin terms to address a significant other is intended to show politeness, respect and closeness, affection, and genuine and sincere emotions toward a husband.

Only one respondent (4%) in this social class indicated the use of MC to refer to her husband. As her preference, she combines the KT *abang* with the title obtained after performing Haj (the Muslim pilgrimage) which is *Haji*. Consequently, the address term she used to refer to her husband is *Abang Haji* (literal translation: big brother haj). Both of the address forms mentioned above were used in all situations, regardless of whether they were alone or in the presence of others.

A number of the respondents provided explanations to their choice of pronouns in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Five women suggested that using the kin term *abang* [big brother] when addressing their husbands indicate the level of respect and social rank. According to these women, husbands are dominant and, whatever sensitive issue of ‘equal/non-equal status between husband-wife’ inculcation in the culture, they are aware that they do not have equal status with men in the marriage system. Given this reason, the usage of *abang* in addressing their significant other was considered normal. In general, this term is used to show intimacy, closeness and affection, and a high level of respect toward the addressee.

Other than kin terms, the English pronoun “you” is also considered a preferred pronoun among Malay women especially those who fall in the upper and middle-upper

social classes. From the explanations given by a few participants, several reasons emerged justifying the usage of English pronouns among Malay women. The first reason is the prestige received by the English language in Malaysia and this could have influenced Malay women into using English pronouns in their conversations including with their husbands. English is associated with high socioeconomic and prestige (Said-Sirhan, 2014) and a majority of Malay communities especially in lower social class find themselves unable to use it to their advantage because of their lack of competence in it. Thus, their knowledge of English may not be good enough for them to use the language widely, but the constant use of English pronouns might have caused them into perceiving that they are educated, urbanized, modernized and sounded “English”. Thus, the use of English pronouns allows the Malay speakers to step out from the conservative practices expected in Malay culture and emulate a more modern and individualistic stance as observed by Alsagoff (2010). On the other hand, Malay women especially in the upper and upper-middle classes use English pronouns to address their significant others can be considered as an ‘adequation’ strategy, because according to Beardsmore, (1986) in the Malay culture, the English pronouns are typically used among close friends or those regarded as ‘equals’. As mentioned earlier, Malay people have a specific address system with the practice of several rules, i.e., older citizens have more social capital than younger people and people categorized in lower social class must respect those who are stratified in a higher social class. For instance, among family members, a rigid social distance is maintained between parents and children, older and younger siblings, as well as husband and wife. However, in modern Malay culture, people with a higher level of education, regardless the gender, are socially powerful. Hence, Malay women, especially in upper social class, use English pronouns in addressing their husbands to denote the solidarity, equality, and power.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the pattern of address forms used by Malay women to address their significant others. The findings revealed a preference for English pronouns compared to Malay pronouns particularly among respondents from the upper middle and middle social classes. This suggests that English pronouns are associated with educated and urbanized Malay women and lends support to the findings of the study done by Normala Othman (2006). In both middle and lower social classes, kinship terms were the most common expression used by wives to refer to their husbands regardless of situations where the communication occurs. Among others, the results showed an overwhelming propensity the usage of kin term *abang* [big brother] by the women in both middle and lower social classes in addressing their significant others. This preference, apparently, is a common practice in the Malay culture and it can be seen as a sign of respect towards a husband.

Overall, the results show that Malay women in each social class agree to the following pronoun distribution in addressing their significant other in a range of situations:

1. Women from the upper-middle class group use the English pronoun “you”, mixed category (title + name), the Malay pronoun *awak* and terms of endearment;
2. Women from the middle-class group use kinship terms, the English pronoun “you”, the Malay pronoun *awak*, and terms of endearment; and
3. Women from the lower-class group use kinship terms and mixed category.

Given that this study only examined the pattern of address forms used by Malay women toward their significant others, it would be interesting to investigate the responding terms of address used by their significant others towards them and identify whether there are differences in their counter-responses. Further research in this area can provide not only a better understanding of the choice of address terms among Malay couples but also provide rich data for enhanced sociolinguistics and pragmatics studies that could also possibly allow the researcher to extrapolate from referential to address usage and vice versa. Future studies relating to this topic could also be extended to include respondents from other ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds.

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