Dialogue on “1 Malaysia”: The uses of metadiscourse in ethnopoltical accounting

Richard Buttny, Syracuse University
Azirah Hashim, University of Malaya

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/richard_buttny/26/
Dialogue on ‘1 Malaysia’: The uses of metadiscourse in ethnopolitical accounting

Richard Buttny
Syracuse University, USA

Azirah Hashim
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract
A small group of ethnically and religiously diverse Malaysians were assembled to discuss the recent call for ‘1 Malaysia’. Dialogue is widely recognized as a worthwhile communication activity to deal with the differences and issues between peoples. But how does dialogue actually work in practice? In this study, metadiscourse – talk about talk – is used as a resource to get at how participants understand their own discussion, for example, ‘we should have dialogues like this’ or ‘as long as we continue talking and trying to find solutions we have a hope of finding a solution if we don’t talk there won’t be any chance for a solution’. However, there are few instances of such metadiscourse in the over 2-hour discussion. More common are uses of metadiscourse to characterize prior problematic situations or what is needed in the future. Participants use metadiscourse as part of a narrative to give voice to self or other in making an argument about the situation in Malaysia. Participants’ narratives show how ethnicity and religion have become politicized into an ethnopolitical conflict. Most of all of the narratives are of problematic ethnopolitical relations between the Malays and non-Malays. Yet giving voice to these sensitive issues in a mixed group also points to possible solutions and a way forward.

Keywords
Accounting, accounts, dialogue, ethnopolitical conflict, intercultural dialogue, Malaysia, metadiscourse, 1 Malaysia

Corresponding author:
Richard Buttny, Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA.
Email: rbuttny@syr.edu
Malaysia is well-known as a major tourist destination. The tourist industry promotes Malaysia through their campaign ‘Malaysia, Truly Asia’. In tourist print-ads and videos, the diversity of Malaysia’s multicultural groups is pictured as smiling, exotic, and living harmoniously. While it is easy to be skeptical about such idealized portraits, we wanted to investigate the state of Malaysia’s multiculturalism. Just prior to our convening a focus group, the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib issued a call for ‘1 Malaysia’. This proved timely for our research purposes; we used the idea of 1 Malaysia to get a conversation going on national unity or ethnicity in our focus group. Malaysians are said to be highly aware of ethnic, racial, and religious differences which can be taken as social boundaries between groups (Fee, 2006; Haque, 2003; Hooker, 2004; Husin, 2008). In a study of ethnic integration, Malaysia was found to be the least integrated of all the countries investigated (Stewart, 2008). On the other hand, some Malaysians are cosmopolitan and freely interact with a wide variety of others in seeking ‘transethnic solidarities’ (Kahn, 2006; Mandal, 2004). Our focus here will be on intercultural dialogue in a people-to-people focus group discussing the notion of ‘1 Malaysia’ and related issues.

**Multicultural Malaysia**

The master narrative is that Malaysia comprises three main ‘races’: the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians plus others (M.C.I.O.). The Malays are the majority group and constitute about 67% of the population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010); they are Muslim and largely run the government. The second largest group is Chinese Malaysians at roughly 25%; the Chinese are Taoist or Buddhist and some Christians. The Chinese have been economically the most successful group (Hooker, 2004). Indian Malaysians comprise about 7% of the populous; they are largely Hindu with some Sikhs and Christians, and they are economically the poorest of the three main groups. Others, roughly 1%, include Eurasians and migrant workers from Indonesia, Pakistan, or the Philippines. In addition, Sabah and Sarawak of the northern states of Borneo joined Malaysia in 1963, adding a number of other cultural groups, for example, Kadazan, Iban, and Melanau. Each of these groups is diverse in terms of ethnicity and languages spoken, and comprises peoples of hybridized identities. Yet the master narrative continues to be of the three main cultural groups which have become naturalized as ‘races’ (Kahn, 2006; Maier, 2011) – what has been called ‘the race paradigm’ (Milner et al., 2014).

In Malaysia, tensions arise from a ‘question of national belonging’ (Goh, 2008). Chinese Malaysian success in business and economic matters leads to a resentment from the majority-group Malays. In response to such tensions, heightened by the 1969 Malay–Chinese riots, the National Government sought policies to create more economic equality, for example, the National Economic Policy (NEP) followed by the National Development Policy (NDP). These policies granted the Malays ‘special rights and privileges’ or ‘positive discrimination’ in work, schools, or scholarships (Mutalib, 2007). The government created the racial formation *bumiputera* (literally ‘sons of the soil’), by combining the Malays with the indigenous people of the peninsula, the Orang Asli, along with the indigenous from Sabah and Sarawak (Fee, 2006). The ‘special advantages’ for the *bumiputra* from these positive discrimination policies have fostered complaints among the Chinese...
and Indian Malaysians. Despite these ethnopolitical conflicts, Malaysia has largely avoided violent ethnic conflict since independence. Malaysia has been lauded as a success story among post-colonial states for its economy and the state’s management of inter-ethnic tensions (Aziz and Shamsul, 2004; Goh, 2008).

**Intercultural dialogue**

Dialogue is widely recognized as a good thing, an important form of communication for mediating differences and tensions among peoples (Crosbie, 2014; Hoover, 2011). What is involved in dialogue can vary by culture reflecting various assumptions that constitute communicative practices of dialogue (Carbaugh et al., 2011; Wierzbicka, 2006). There has been a call for empirical case studies of intercultural dialogue (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2014), to which this study attempts to contribute.

Dialogue is clearly different from ordinary conversation; it is a special kind of talk (Penman and Turnbull, 2012) that presumes differences or problems between people which dialogue, hopefully, can begin to resolve. Such differences or problems between groups, nations, or individuals are what endow dialogue with its serious or special character.

In the literature on dialogue, there seems to be two main traditions (Stewart et al., 2003). One approach envisions dialogue philosophically, in its ideal version, while the other tradition strives to be more descriptive of how people actually engage in dialogue. One reflects a kind of philosophical ideal, a special kind of communication drawing from Buber (2007). In this normative tradition, participants who engage in dialogue need to be emphatic, to listen carefully, and try to really understand each other rather than just attempting to persuade one another. In engaging, people must see themselves as equals, as looking for a way to find common ground, and being open to the possibility of change while recognizing that dialogue can be a slow painstaking process.

Another approach to dialogue comes from Bakhtin (1981, 1986). In his view, an individual utterance stands in a dialogic relation to prior utterances, positions, or contexts. It is not the first to address a particular issue; it already has a history – it has been formulated, discussed, and evaluated by others in various ways. An utterance occurs within a stream of ongoing communication such that an utterance needs to be seen as a response or ‘rejoinder’ to prior viewpoints. A dialogic rejoinder may be in response to an interlocutor or peer group, to something from the media, or to a historical event. A response is always an evaluation of the prior as shown in the expressive aspects of our utterances. We position ourselves in relation to others’ views as agreeing, disagreeing, adding to, being ironic, and so forth. As Bakhtin (1981) puts it,

> The living utterance … cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around a given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it. (pp. 276–277)

Our speech is filled with others’ words which we ‘assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate’ for our own purposes. For Bakhtin (1986), words may be said to be neutral words, not
associated with anyone, others’ words, heard as belonging to others and implicating their views, or my words, associated with my voice or position. One’s selection of words in dialogue occurs within some ‘speech genre’ which structures our utterances. In our case, the speech genre would be a political discussion in an ethnically mixed focus group.

**Analytic perspective**

During talk-in-interaction, interlocutors display how they understand what it is they are doing as revealed in their actions and responses. At times, persons refer to their own or others’ talk. This reference to talk, or talk about talk, has been labeled ‘meta-talk’, ‘meta-communication’, or ‘metadiscourse’ (Buttny, 2010; Craig, 2005). Metadiscourse will be used here as a lens to see how participants characterize or evaluate their own or others’ talk. Metadiscourse can be used as a discursive resource to notice or comment on some feature of the current conversation – as good, bad, difficult, ironic, and so forth. More commonly, interlocutors draw on metadiscourse to talk about some past communication event such as in telling a story or narrative. Within a narrative, the story teller may use metadiscourse to give voice to the characters within the story, of what they said and did, or how they said it (Bakhtin, 1986). This form of metadiscourse has been called reported speech or constructed dialogue. Metadiscourse may also be used counter-factually to refer to some future talk, for instance, what one will or could or should say – so-called apocryphal speech.

These various modalities of metadiscourse (i.e. of the present interaction, of what was said in the past, or what could/should/will be said in the future) are used for more than descriptive purposes alone; they are designed to comment on or evaluate some aspect of the situation. This noticing or assessment of talk can be seen as a form of accounting – as criticizing, blaming, justifying, or explaining the event in question (Buttny, 1993). Given that most of our actions in social life are achieved through talk, it is not surprising that metadiscourse is used in accountings. Accounts involve a person’s telling of past events, present conditions, or future possibilities which purport to explain or assess that content. Such accountings are accomplished through narratives or assertions. Accounts involve references to events, persons, and their actions. We are interested in how accounts portray these persons and their actions, how these actors are identified, what voice(s) they are ascribed, and how they are positioned in the account. Accounts typically focus on out-of-the-ordinary or problematic aspects of events for which one may be held accountable. In accounts, persons become portrayed or evaluated favorably or unfavorably by the teller. How participants use metadiscourse in accounting allows them to portray events and to comment on them, to evaluate or explain.

We draw on Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic perspective to examine participants’ use of metadiscourse in accounting. Intercultural dialogue cannot be removed from ethno-political context or identity politics (Ellis, 2006; Witteborn, 2011). Ethnicity is made relevant in and through discourse. Discursive resources can be used in positioning one’s own or other groups through collective memory, narratives, or invoking religious values. Ethnic grievances are often cited involving reports of injustices, trauma, or victim narratives (Buttny and Ellis, 2007). Identity politics accentuates identity, group differentiation, or cultural boundaries. Religion can readily become intertwined with ethnic identity. Ethnic differences become most apparent during controversies or
competition over scarce resources. Given that most multicultural societies such as Malaysia are politicized, we examine how participants’ dialogue reflects or responds to such ethnopolitical differences.

This project is an extension of an earlier study on multiculturalism in Malaysia (Buttny et al., 2013). In the initial study, only about 10 minutes of a 2-hour and 20-minute discussion were examined. In that study, the focus was on participants’ uses of ‘the good-old days’ of greater intergroup contact, in contrast to accounts of an increasing social distance between the Malays and non-Malays. Malays’ increasing identification as Muslims was cited as an explanation for this decline in intercultural contact and was evaluated differently by the Malay and non-Malay participants. In this study, we focus more on the prospects and problems for dialogue in addressing ethnopolitical tensions and differences.

Given our interest in intercultural dialogue, our research questions are as follows:

1. Do participants see the discussion as dialogue? As intercultural?
2. How do the participants use metadiscourse to characterize their own or others’ talk?
3. How do the participants use metadiscourse to account for past or future events?

Data

The data come from an audio recording of a focus group held in April 2009. Questions were prepared by the two discussion leaders but we allowed the conversation to unfold naturally with few promptings. Participants were contacted by an inter-faith dialogue leader who invited people willing to discuss the situation in Malaysia. The eight participants were middle-aged to elderly (30–70 years of age), evenly divided by gender, and living in the capital area, Kuala Lumpur, or the Klang Valley. The ethnic composition of the group included three Malays, two Chinese, two Indians, and one who described herself as hybrid – of mixed ethnicity. The participants were as follows: James, Chinese-Malaysian Muslim; Jennifer, Chinese-Malaysian Christian; Ibrahim, Malay-Muslim man; Norazam, Malay-Muslim man; Dorothy a self-described hybrid from Sabah; Peter, Indian-Malaysian Christian; Shanthi, Indian-Malaysian Hindu woman; and Ramlah, Malay-Muslim woman. Participants spoke in English with some code-switching with Malay. The eight participants and two discussion facilitators sat around a large table. The meeting lasted for over 2 hours and 20 minutes. The meeting was audio-recorded, and relevant portions were transcribed using a modified Jefferson format (Jefferson, 2004). Excerpts where participants use metadiscourse were selected for analysis. We attempt to describe participants’ practices in using metadiscourse to account as well as the social realities they discursively construct.

Metadiscourse in characterizing dialogue

In the course of their 2-hour and 20-minute discussion, participants use metadiscourse to refer to their own or others’ talk in various ways. Such references to talk are done for the
speaker’s own interactive purposes; such references are made to accomplish various activities or moves.

In the following excerpt toward the end of the meeting, a Malay participant characterizes their discussion as ‘dialogues’:

#1 (dialogues)
Norazam: we must admit that there have been discriminations, we should have dialogues like this

This is the only instance of anyone explicitly characterizing the group discussion as dialogue. Here ‘dialogues’ is offered as a corrective to the prior clause where he concedes that there have been ‘discriminations’. This gloss, ‘discriminations’, is arguably the most important and frequent complaint that non-Malays have of the ‘special privileges’ or positive discrimination policy favoring the Malays. For Norazam, a Malay, to concede to this problem characterization as ‘discriminations’ is seemingly a significant step in doing dialogue.

Norazam’s concession here, ‘discriminations’, shows agreement with another Malay participant’s previous account, ‘everybody knows that eh on the ground the discriminatory: policies are still there?’ (excerpt #10, lines 1–2 (later)). It also can be heard as a formulation of some of the complaints uttered previously by the non-Malays during their meeting (see excerpts #6–7 (later)). Dialogue becomes relevant and called for in the face of differences or problems between peoples. Dialogue is used here as an account, as a way toward a remedy, a kind of cure-all for difficult relations between groups.

If excerpt #1 talks about the need for dialogue, the following excerpt points to what is involved in doing dialogue:

#2 (sensitive questions)
01 Ibrahim: Yeah I’m – I’m very glad that you come up with this uhm very relevant what some people might say sensitive questions because I think uhm that unless we hear these questions and try to answer and face those questions you get nowhere going around in circles: because we have to face: (.) uh these questions if we hope to progress and I think:: all of us of sound mind ah must wish for that to happen ((skip 15 lines))
24 as long as we continue talking and trying to find solutions we have a hope of finding a solution if we don’t talk? there won’t be any chance for a – a solution

Here, Ibrahim addresses one of the discussion leaders in the focus group and shows appreciation for his raising so-called ‘sensitive questions’. Sensitive questions are, of course, potentially delicate and need to be dealt with carefully. Sensitive questions reflect the differences or problems between groups that can necessitate dialogue.

The notion of ‘sensitive questions’ seems to be taken more seriously in Malaysia than in, say, the West (Hoffstaedter, 2013). The metadiscursive term, sensitive questions, is
Buttny and Azirah

used in the West, but it does not seem to have the same gravitas or be used as often as in Malaysia. This may be due to cultural differences in face considerations (Jamaliah, 2000). As Ibrahim puts it, sensitive questions must be ‘face(d)’ in order to ‘progress’. He does not label such talk dialogue, but clearly that is what he has in mind. Facing the grievances or issues of the other is an important part of dialogue. Connecting this excerpt to excerpts #1 and #3, ‘discriminations’ and ‘religion’ would be paradigmatic instances of sensitive issues in Malaysia.

A moment later Ibrahim again draws on metadiscourse to claim ‘as long as we continue talking and trying to find solutions’ (lines 24–25). Such talk is necessary to work out their differences, a kind of problem-solving approach. ‘Solutions’ or problem solving through continued talking may be said to merge into deliberation, a step beyond dialogue (Ellis, 2014). The border between dialogue and deliberation is fuzzy. Deliberation involves more problem solving and working through the details of dividing issues. Dialogue has been said to be a precursor to deliberation (Ellis, 2014).

Another participant describes some of the features of dialogue, though without identifying them as such. He uses metadiscourse to describe another group to which he belongs:

#3 (43:15 I respect you)

01 James: for example I’m attached with this group–services international we are a small group of people but what we do is very interactive ((skip 2 lines))

06 when we talk about religion we talk about religion but
07 we try to understand other people and then you your
08 view you your opinion and so forth I may disagree with
09 you but (then) I respect you ( ) and I see
10 that ah there are quite ( ) populations that has
11 similar sentiments and that gives hope for us in the
12 future

James, a Chinese Malaysian who converted to Islam to marry his Malay wife, offers what sounds like a textbook version of dialogue in his account of his group’s talk. As he puts it, in discussing a sensitive topic such as religion, they focus on trying to understand the other (lines 7–8), on respecting the other, even when they disagree (lines 8–9). Efforts toward understanding and having respect for the other are hallmarks of Buber’s (2007) conception of dialogue. Notice that James uses the historical present tense in describing their dialogue. The historical present allows him to portray how this group regularly interacts (lines 6–7). Then he switches footing from describing their talk to demonstrating or enacting dialogue as he speaks in the first person, ‘I may disagree with you but (then) I respect you’ (lines 8–9). This performance of dialogue is used to portray the attitudinal stance that these participants adopt in engaging with each other.

Toward the end of the discussion, Ibrahim returns to a metadiscourse of problem solving using the metaphor of ‘work’:

#4 (not just talk but work our way)

01 Ibrahim: the future will be good, it’ll take time but
02 people like us need to sit down and not just
Again Ibrahim speaks of the kind of talk needed for dialogue. It involves not just any kind of talk, such as of the ‘good old days’. This can be heard as specifying the conditions for dialogue. In drawing this contrast between talk of good old days and the possible realistic options, he is implicitly responding to a theme running through their discussion of the ‘good old days’ (Buttny et al., 2013). Participants offer conflicting accounts on the ‘good old days’, and the implicit criticism of so-called Islamization of society is responsible for the increasing social distance between the Malays and non-Malays.

Ibrahim’s characterization of the kind of talk needed blends dialogue with deliberative discourse. It is not just about understanding or respecting the other, but also about recognizing the range of ‘possible choices’ (line 6). Such talk requires ‘work’, not just nostalgic reminiscing on the ‘good old days’. Implicit here is the assertion that the Malays have largely become more Islamic, which restricts several kinds of intercultural contact. He asserts that resolving their differences may not be easy; it will be difficult and require ‘work’ (line 6). Also, he employs journey metaphors, ‘the path we choose’ (line 7) and ‘along the way’ (line 9). The journey metaphors suggest that the process may not be easy and will take some ‘time’ (line 1).

By way of summary, participants use metadiscourse in characterizing dialogue. Their metadiscourse refers to their own talk in the group, or to an exemplary group’s dialogue. Also, metadiscourse is used to refer to the kind of future talk necessary to make progress. Such talk will not be easy due to sensitive questions. There is recognition of problems or differences between groups. The kind of talk needed to deal with such differences will require hard work to make progress in resolving problems.

**Metadiscourse in accounting for the problems or prospects for dialogue**

Dialogue comes into being as a communicative activity to deal with the problems and tensions between groups. Metadiscourse can be employed in accounting for such problems and differences. Here Peter, an Indian-Malaysian, quotes a nationalistic slogan commonly uttered at the end of Malay political speeches:

```
#6 (1:32 raise the kris)
01 Peter: if someone ever raises the kris and then ends
02 the speech with like many of our politicians [have done=
03 Dorothy:                      [h h h h
04 Peter:  = < demi agama demi bangsa demi negara > (.)
        ((for the sake of religion, race and nation))
```
my view is you’re not going to create (.) >equal rights
as well< for race and religion (.) as I said earlier
religion is a personal matter between you and God
I know many of you may disagree< but if you’re thinking
of 1 Malaysia then no politician or no leader should
raise the kris for whatever reason no political party
should ever say ;my religion my ( )
that’s not the way to create 1 Malaysia
so if any leader in our country raises the kris my
religion I cannot and will not and cannot agree with
that I will not be ruled I will respectfully say
I disagree with you because we are (.) one community
under God, one humanity under God

Here, Peter quotes the nationalistic Malay slogan, ‘demi agama demi bangsa demi negara’ (line 4) (for the sake of religion, race, and nation). He code switches into Bahasa Malaysia while uttering the slogan more slowly for emphasis. This slogan is intensified by Peter’s reported action of the Malay leader raising the kris. The kris, a traditional Malay knife, has powerful symbolic significance in Malay history and politics (Frey, 1989). This gesture with the raised kris while uttering this slogan could be seen as provocative, as rousing the Malays and excluding non-Malays.

Peter’s quote of this political slogan is a type of metadiscourse, direct reported speech. A common feature of reported speech is that it not only ‘reports’ what was said, it also comments on or evaluates the speech in question. As seen here upon directly reporting the slogan, Peter immediately offers his view of it. He cites the incompatibility of this nationalistic slogan with the universalistic principles he invokes of ‘equal rights . . . for race and religion’ or ‘religion is a personal matter’ (lines 5–7). This difference between the Malays’ nationalistic position and the non-Malays’ universal principles reflects an ongoing ethnopolitical conflict between these groups (Hoffstaedter, 2011).

During his speaking turn Peter repeats the Malay slogan two more times, albeit in a much shortened version. He prefaces each repetition of the political slogan by citing the speaker’s physical gesture, ‘raise the kris’. He then ventriloquizes the Malay politician’s words ‘my religion’ (lines 11 and 17–18). So religion, read Islam, is used by Peter as a shorthand term to formulate the differences between these groups. The slogan is tacitly addressed to Malay Muslims, rather than to Chinese Muslims or Indian Muslims.

Peter concludes his speaking turn using a type of metadiscourse called apocryphal speech to envision what he would say in response to the nationalistic Malay leader. As Peter imagines his rejoinder, ‘I will respectfully say I disagree …’ based on the universalistic principle that ‘we are … one humanity under God’ (lines 19–21). The use of these different types of metadiscourse (reported action, direct reported speech, apocryphal speech) allows Peter to recreate these problematic actions and open a space for him to criticize them and to imagine his response to the Malay leader.

A bit later in the discussion, another participant tells of similar troubling words by a Malay politician uttered at the conclusion of his speech:
James’s narrative here of a provocative nationalistic slogan at the end of a political speech is very similar to Peter’s previous account (excerpt #6). James uses direct reported speech of the Prime Minister’s slogan (line 5). Peter code switches into Bahasa Malaysian to quote the slogan. Using the speaker’s exact words in their language hearably conveys more verisimilitude in reproducing the slogan. This slogan, of course, is addressed to the Malays rather than being inclusive of all Malaysians.

Again we can see the usefulness of this practice of reporting speech: it opens a space for the current speaker to evaluate the words in question. James imagines the implications of this slogan for the Malays, ‘mati semua (die all)’ (line 7). He interprets the upshot of this by the apocryphal speech, ‘they are telling the people kill the rest, kill the rest’ (lines 12–13).

In excerpts #6–7, we see non-Malay participants use direct reported speech and apocryphal speech to criticize Malay leaders’ inflammatory discourse. In the following, Ibrahim uses reported speech and other metadiscourse to portray a rather different picture – that intercultural relations are actually ‘progressing’:

#8 (progressing)
01 Ibrahim: we should not be forever hiding those issues we have
02 to address those issues it’s taken us more than one
generation to come here but at least we can see that
04 we are: ah progressing why I’m certain of that just
05 one generation ago if the non-Malays: talked about
06 Malaysian-Malaysia the Malays would jump; forget it
07 now the Malay leaders are championing Malaysian-
08 Malaysia you see you must admit this that there’s been
09 drastic change one generation ago the Malays reject
10 Malaysian-Malaysia it is – it is Malay-Malaysia or
Ibrahim offers a kind of historical narrative to argue for progress in intercultural relations. He envisions what the Malay response would have been a generation ago to a proposal from non-Malays for a Malaysian-Malaysia. He uses a form of reported speech to ventriloquize the Malays’ response – what the Malays would have said (lines 5–6). Reporting the speech of an aggregate group has been called choral reported speech, ‘choral’ meaning the chorus or aggregate group’s words. He emphatically performs the imagined voice of their response, ‘Malays would jump forget it’ (line 6). He then further elaborates on the Malays’ response: ‘one generation ago the Malays reject Malaysian-Malaysia it is – it is Malay-Malaysia or Malay-Malaya the others are: welcome guests’ (lines 9–11). Notice how he shifts from describing their rejection to adopting the choral voice of the Malays, beginning at ‘it is’ (lines 10–11).

In performing this choral voice of the past, the label, ‘welcome guests’ (line 11), is a politer way of calling the non-Malays ‘immigrants’, that is, not fully-fledged citizens. Furthermore, the competing appellations for identifying the nation reflect the crux of the dispute. ‘Malay-Malaysia’ (line 10) indexes Malay supremacy and ‘Malay-Malaya’ (line 11) even more so. ‘Malaysian-Malaysia’ suggests an equal standing or citizenship for Malays and non-Malays alike. Who belongs in the country and who is heir to special rights and privileges and who is an immigrant exemplifies what this dispute over labels is all about.

Ibrahim makes his case for progress by using metadiscourse to articulate this claim, ‘Malay leaders … talking about Malaysian-Malaysia’ (lines 14–15). In other words, instead of the past resistance from the Malays, now their leaders are envisioning ‘Malaysian-Malaysia’ or 1 Malaysia.

If Ibrahim’s narrative of progressing intercultural relations is optimistic in tone for reconciliation, another Malay narrative uses metadiscourse to portray what might be called a real-politic perspective:

#9 (the bigger brother)
Norazam: you talk about India let me tell you brother Peter
there was a Gandhi Institute in Delhi the director is
a guy from south from Kerala he’s the director so I
made this comment to him about this – remember there
was this . . . killing about the Muslims and I told him –
((skip 2 lines))
I told him to explain he said what do you expect the
Hindus are the bigger brothers so the bigger brothers
are expected to bully the younger brothers coming from
this guy [the director – ye’s: and he is from – he’s
?? [hh h h hh hh hh
((skip 16 lines))
Norazam begins by referring to Peter’s prior evoking of Gandhi (not shown here). This reference allows Norazam to launch into a narrative about a conversation he had with the director of the Gandhi Institute in India. He tells of how he asked the Gandhian director about the killing of Muslims in India, and he uses direct reported speech to quote the director’s justificatory account: ‘the bigger brothers are expected to bully the younger brothers’ (lines 9–10). This reported account from the Gandhian director receives some incredulous responses and a smattering of laughter from other participants (line 12). However, Norazam fails to align with other participants’ disbelief or to question the merits of this bullying justification.

Norazam eventually returns to the Gandhian director’s bullying account and applies it to what he takes to be a parallel situation in Malaysia, where the Malays are the ‘bigger community’ (line 30) – as he puts it, the ‘pragmatics of life’ (line 31), to argue that ‘the Malays will dominate’ (line 32). He concludes his account by shifting into the voice he uses in speaking to the Malays: ‘you are the bigger brother the bigger sister … we will dominate we will always dominate’ (lines 33–36). So metadiscourse is drawn on as a resource in the form of reported speech from the Gandhian director and then applied to justify the Malay dominance in Malaysia.

From a dialogue perspective, this excerpt may seem rather argumentative. Norazam makes his case based on the credibility of the director of the Gandhi Institute. Other participants’ laughter at his justification seems to undermine this authority. Norazam appeals to the principle of ‘the pragmatics of life’ to justify his ‘bigger brother bigger sister’ position. Dialogue must necessarily lead to deliberation; both sides need to work through their differences – not just with empathy and understanding, but also with argument and reasoning (Ellis, 2014).

In doing dialogue, one needs to give an honest appraisal of one’s own group’s position. Such reflexivity is an important part of dialogue. In the following, Ibrahim admits to certain problems with the Malay position:

1 Ibrahim: because everybody knows that eh on the ground the discriminatory: policies are still there? so what is 1 Malaysia you know to the non-Malays non-Muslims they want (. ) a situation where – where every citizen has equal rights no special privileges for anybody? (. ) ah the Malays Muslims (treat it as) how you say Orwellian we are equal but some are more equal than others? (. ) and
that’s the reality even in 1 Malaysia, isn’t
that true? huh? even with this new Prime Minister
I’m not saying he’s right or he’s wrong I’m
talking as a Malay ah reflecting to you my
observation because I feel we have a long: way to
go before everybody is satisfied (.) um but until
we come to that situation uhm we have two
choices, either to ↑quarrel hh>alright< =

Ibrahim: = or [still have alright ( ) huh? =
Jennifer: [Negotiate negotiate

Ibrahim positions himself here not as partisan, but as explaining the current impasse.
He recognizes ‘the discriminatory policies’ which he then characterizes as ‘Orwellian’
by drawing on the famous passage from George Orwell’s novel Animal Farm: ‘we are all
equal but some are more equal than others?’ (lines 7–8). Just as Orwell was using irony
to be critical of his dystopian fictional society, so Ibrahim is drawing on his words to be
critical of Malaysian society. This is another form of metadiscourse, using well-wrought
phrases or sayings from literature, the media, or popular culture.

Even though Ibrahim is being critical of the discriminatory policies favoring the
Malays, he positions himself metadiscursively as ‘talking as a Malay’ (line 12). That is,
a Malay can be critical of the seemingly discriminatory policies that favor the Malays.

Continuing to explain the current situation, he postulates the difficulties in resolving
the differences. As he frames it, we have ‘two choices, either to ↑quarrel’ (lines 15–16).
Quarrel is uttered emphatically with rising intonation and receives a smattering of laugh-
ter from other participants. Before he can state the second of the choices, Jennifer says,
overlapping, ‘negotiate’ (line 19). These two metadiscursive terms, ‘quarrel’ or ‘negoti-
ate’, seem to capture the point at which Malaysians now finds themselves.

Discussion

Our project here has been to look at ordinary Malaysians’ uses of metadiscourse as a
discursive resource and how they position themselves in relation to the idea of 1 Malaysia
or the current situation. Participants’ metadiscourse was used to see how they talk about
their talk, a kind of lay theorizing or folk logic about the process. During the discussion,
participants engage in dialogue by using metadiscourse to raise issues or problematic
incidents. Both talking about dialogue and engaging in dialogue involve various forms
of metadiscourse which allow participants to draw on talk from the present, past, or
future.

Beginning with how participants talk about their own discussion, we saw a participant
refer to it as ‘dialogue’ (excerpt #1). Another characterized the interaction as raising
‘sensitive questions’ that need to be answered (excerpt #2). Each of these types of talk is
positioned favorably, as a response to problems or differences between groups. However,
there are few such references by participants to their own group discussion. More fre-
quent were references to dialogue occurring from other places – currently, the past, or
what’s needed for the future. For instance, another group who does service work engages in dialogue about sensitive issues such as religion (excerpt #3). Their conversations are characterized as attempting to really understand the other and showing respect for differing views – seeming textbook dialogue in the Buber tradition. The historical present tense is used to indicate that such dialogue occurs not just once, but regularly in this group. The speaker switches footing from describing the dialogue to demonstrating dialogue, that is, to enacting the voice which epitomizes the group’s dialogue. This shift of footing is also evident in excerpt #9, switching into the voice he uses to address the Malays about being the ‘bigger brother the bigger sister’.

Various forms of metadiscourse are used to dialogically address past talk. For instance, two non-Malay participants use direct reported speech of egregious political slogans by Malay leaders (excerpts #6–7). As a discursive practice, reported speech opens up a space for the teller to evaluate what was said, and in these instances the slogans are criticized by the tellers as inconsistent with the idea of 1 Malaysia. Metadiscourse of past talk can also be evaluated favorably and be used in support of the teller’s own position. The reported speech of the director of the Gandhi Institute is quoted – the ‘bigger brother bullying’ – and this rationale is applied to the situation in Malaysia (excerpt #9). Another form of metadiscourse is choral reported speech used to portray the speech of an aggregate, such as the reply from the Malays of the past (excerpt #8). In this narrative, the teller switches into the collective voice of the Malays. This Malay voice of the past, a generation ago, is contrasted with the Malay stance of today conveyed by indirect speech (excerpt #8, lines 14–15).

Metadiscourse is also used to talk about talk in the future. For instance, apocryphal speech demonstrates how one would respond to the political leader who raised the kris. Peter takes on the voice of how he would respond to the leader (excerpt #6, lines 19–21). Other forms of talking about future talk envision the kind of dialogue needed to progress. These are broad statements of how to proceed, for instance, ‘continue talking … to find solutions’ (excerpt #2). Or that future deliberations need to be not the nostalgic talk of the good old days, but talk about what is possible today (excerpt #4). This ‘talk about good old days’ is a reference to the group’s own talk earlier in the focus group (Buttny et al., 2013). This nostalgia is contrasted with the kind of realistic talk that can work toward reconciliation. Finally, in envisioning future discussions, Ibrahim boils it down to two discursive choices: either ‘to quarrel’, but before he can finish, Dorothy overlapping offers the alternative, ‘negotiate’ (excerpt #10). The tenor of this group of Malaysians is clearly for negotiating, dialogue, and deliberation.

In this study, we have examined how participants use metadiscourse as a discursive resource to reflect on their discussion, or others like it, and to cite specific incidents or general patterns of talk which hinder or foster dialogue and reconciliation. Participants use metadiscourse for various evaluative positions: to argue for their viewpoint (e.g. the bigger brother bullies; we are progressing), to cite obstacles or problems (e.g. race-based slogans from political leaders; the good old days), or in being self-critical of one’s own group (e.g. there have been discriminations; Orwellian). These metadiscursive accountings can also be interpreted for what they say about ‘sociality’ (social relationships) or ‘personhood’ (Carbaugh, 2013: 13–14). As regards sociality, participants’ accounts were both critical (e.g. ‘discriminations’: ‘not going to create equal rights’; ‘Orwellian’) or
favorable (e.g. ‘we are progressing’; ‘talking about Malaysian-Malaysia’; ‘Malays and the Muslims we will dominate’). For personhood, statements such as ‘people like us’ or members of ‘group services international’ were portrayed favorably, while political leaders were generally singled out for criticism.

Our focus on metadiscourse and accounting fits with a Bakhtinian dialogic perspective: each instance of metadiscourse is of words that were uttered in the past or historical present, or will be uttered in responding to prior positions or discourse. The uses of metadiscourse are a way to show, to paraphrase Bakhtin, the link in the chain with other utterances. Participants’ metadiscourse portrays others’ or their own words to evaluate, assess, or reinterpret them for the speaker’s own purposes.

Our discussion group is just an assemblage of ordinary Malaysians willing to engage in people-to-people dialogue about current ethnopolitical issues. In describing this research project to colleagues, a few non-Malays commented that they were surprised that Malays would even participate in such a forum. Talking about sensitive issues in a mixed group is not the sort of activity that people naturally gravitate toward; talk about ‘race’ or ethnic politics generally occurs with members of one’s own group. The participants in our discussion were articulate and seemed familiar with such kinds of exchanges. There were eight participants from the Kuala Lumpur area so we can hardly generalize to all of Malaysia. But participants’ arguments and positions resonate with discourses heard in other places, in other conversations, or on social media sites. Their willingness to engage in dialogue was a notable feature of this group.

Our focus group was formed when the 1 Malaysia idea was first propounded. Now five years hence, the 1 Malaysia notion is still being heard in slogans and as promotional material, but many see it as mere rhetoric from the ruling political party, Barisan National (BN). Issues pertaining to Malay special rights and religion, for example, have affected the country’s attempts at a more unified and less racially divided society. The 2013 general election demonstrated that the 1 Malaysia ideal had not been successful. Prior to and during this general election, BN leaders, including the Prime Minister, moved to the right using hot-button issues such non-Muslims using ‘Allah’ or the Chinese openly challenging Malay special rights to garner support from the Malay base (Chin, 2014). The BN government lost Chinese votes heavily to the opposition and the Prime Minister spoke of a ‘Chinese tsunami’. Although the party had championed 1 Malaysia, racial polarization stood out clearly not only during the elections, but also in the various race and religious issues that continue to plague the society.

On an interpersonal level, the picture is more bifurcated: an increasing identification with Islam has led many Malays to be more ‘ummah’ (Islamic community) oriented, leading them socially distancing themselves from non-Muslims, but at the same time, there has been a mixing of more cosmopolitan Malaysians including Malays in work life, the arts, and sport. There are countervailing forces at work, but on the ground 1 Malaysia remains more of an ideal than a real policy or social reality.

The differences in this discussion break down, not by the master narrative of the three main ‘racial’ or ethnic groups of Malaysia, but along ethnoreligious lines – Malay Muslims and non-Malays. The race paradigm remains, but appears reconfigured along ethnoreligious lines. This is where the ‘intercultural’ in intercultural dialogue comes in. It was not only the non-Malays who were critical of Malay policies and actions; the
Malay participant, Ibrahim, was critical of both some non-Malay and some Malay views. Different aspects of cultural identity can come to the fore, and these are intertwined with identity politics, memories, and socio-economic factors (Witteborn, 2011). In speech genres such as dialogue about sensitive issues, the intercultural cannot be severed from ethnopolitical considerations (Buttny et al., 2013; Ellis, 2006; Mollov and Schwartz, 2010).

Acknowledgements

Many thanks for the conversations at various stages of this project: Yasin Yazdi, Michael Hadzantonis, Sumit Mandal, Mary Varghese, Alena Sanusi, Shanta Nair-Venugopal, Saskia Wittenborn, Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, and Jodi R Cohen.

Funding

This work was supported by a Visiting Senior Research Fellowship from the Humanities Cluster of the University of Malaya, 2014, a University of Malaya grant RP004-2012C, and by a Fulbright Fellowship, 2008–2009.

References


Leeds-Hurwitz W (2014) Intercultural dialogue as the elephant in the room: Moving from assumptions to research investigations. Unpublished manuscript.


**Author biographies**

**Richard Buttny** is a Professor of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. He received his PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Massachusetts. His research interests are in accounts, metadiscourse, intercultural discourse, and environmental communication. He received a Fulbright Fellowship to lecture at Punjabi University, India, 2003, and at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, 2008–2009. He was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the University of Malaya, Spring 2014. He has published several papers in communication and discourse studies, which are available at his webpage: http://works.bepress.com/richard_buttny/

**Azirah Hashim** is a Professor in the English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics and Dean of the Humanities Research Cluster at the University of Malaya. Her research interests include language contact, language and law, and academic and professional discourse. She was awarded the Georg Forster Research Fellowship for Experienced Researchers, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Germany, in 2009–2010 and is a Life member of the Foundation.