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# Linguistic Symbolic Violence in Teacher–Student Interactions at Senior High Schools in Ambon

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## Abstract

This study examines how teacher–student language practices may operate as symbolic violence in senior high schools in Ambon City, Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and a critical interpretive perspective, the study draws on classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power, legitimate language, habitus, and misrecognition guide the analysis. Five practices are identified: academic labeling, degrading reprimands, devaluation of local speech varieties, unequal recognition of linguistic competence, and humiliating sarcasm. Examples in Ambon Malay show that the social meaning of an utterance depends not only on its wording but also on the speaker's institutional authority and students' opportunity to respond. Silence or compliance may accompany the normalization of unequal relations, although neither necessarily proves acceptance. The study contributes a context-sensitive reading of linguistic domination in Ambon's multilingual and culturally diverse school environment, with its post-conflict history treated as interpretive context rather than a demonstrated cause. Dialogic teaching, respectful treatment of regional varieties, and clearer procedures for student feedback are recommended.

**Kata kunci:** Symbolic Violence; Teacher–Student Interaction; Linguistic Legitimacy; Ambon Malay; Power Relations

## *Abstrak*

*Studi ini meneliti bagaimana praktik bahasa antara guru dan siswa dapat berfungsi sebagai kekerasan simbolik di sekolah menengah atas di Kota Ambon, Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dan perspektif interpretatif kritis, studi ini didasarkan pada observasi kelas, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Konsep Pierre Bourdieu tentang kekuasaan simbolik, bahasa yang sah, habitus, dan salah pengakuan memandu analisis. Lima praktik diidentifikasi: pelabelan akademik, teguran yang merendahkan, devaluasi ragam bahasa lokal, pengakuan kompetensi linguistik yang tidak setara, dan sarkasme yang mempermalukan. Contoh dalam bahasa Melayu Ambon menunjukkan bahwa makna sosial suatu ujaran tidak hanya bergantung pada kata-katanya tetapi juga pada otoritas institusional pembicara dan kesempatan siswa untuk merespons. Keheningan atau kepatuhan dapat menyertai normalisasi hubungan yang tidak setara, meskipun keduanya tidak selalu membuktikan penerimaan. Studi ini memberikan pembacaan yang peka terhadap konteks tentang dominasi linguistik di lingkungan sekolah multibahasa dan beragam budaya di Ambon, dengan sejarah pasca-konfliknya diperlakukan sebagai konteks interpretatif daripada penyebab yang terbukti. Pengajaran dialogis, perlakuan yang penuh hormat terhadap varietas regional, dan prosedur yang lebih jelas untuk umpan balik siswa direkomendasikan.*

***Key words***: *Kekerasan Simbolik; Interaksi Guru-Murid; Legitimasi Linguistik; Melayu Ambon; Relasi Kekuasaan*



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## INTRODUCTION

Language in schools communicates knowledge, regulates participation, and establishes expectations about appropriate behavior. Its meaning is also shaped by the institutional positions of speakers. Teachers are authorized to instruct, evaluate, and discipline, while students ordinarily have fewer opportunities to challenge how they are addressed. This asymmetry does not make all teacher directives violent. It does, however, create conditions in which disparaging labels, humiliating reprimands, and the exclusion of particular speech forms may be accepted as legitimate educational practice.

Bourdieu (1991) explains that linguistic exchanges are embedded in relations of symbolic power. Speakers do not possess equal authority to define the language that counts as legitimate in a given social field. In schools, judgments about correctness, intelligence, politeness, and appropriate speech can become entangled with wider judgments about students' worth. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) further demonstrate how educational institutions may reproduce hierarchies when particular cultural dispositions are treated as universal standards. Symbolic violence is especially difficult to recognize when these judgments are experienced as natural rather than as historically and institutionally produced.

The distinction between discipline and symbolic violence is therefore crucial. A request to maintain classroom order does not necessarily constitute symbolic violence. The analytical concern arises when a teacher's recognized authority gives degrading expressions the appearance of legitimacy, when students are assigned inferior positions through language, or when they come to view the resulting hierarchy as deserved. This process involves both symbolic recognition of the teacher's authority and misrecognition of unequal treatment as ordinary discipline (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Swartz, 1997).

Ambon City offers a distinctive setting for examining these relationships. Classroom interaction may involve standard Indonesian, Ambon Malay, and other locally meaningful expressions. Terms of address, intonation, joking, and reprimands may convey familiarity among peers but humiliation when used within an unequal teacher–student relationship. Ambon's cultural and linguistic diversity, together with its post-conflict social history, makes questions of recognition and belonging particularly salient. This historical background is treated as context for interpretation, not as evidence that past conflict caused particular classroom utterances.

Research on symbolic domination in educational communication provides a foundation for this inquiry. Reresi et al. (2023) examined teacher–student power relations at a senior high school in Saumlaki, Tanimbar Islands, and identified practices not readily recognized by participants as symbolic violence. Hakim and Syihabuddin (2024) analyzed symbolic violence in language learning through Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational thought. Heller (2006) also highlights the institutional settings in which particular linguistic practices acquire value. These works do not, however, specifically examine how Ambon Malay expressions, teachers' authority, and students' responses intersect in the classrooms considered here.

The novelty of this study lies in examining the micro-level relationship between local linguistic practices and institutional power in Ambon's senior high schools. It shows how an expression that may be tolerated in peer conversation can acquire disciplinary force when spoken by a teacher, and how the unequal recognition of standard and local speech varieties may affect who is heard in class. Teacher–student communication is the principal



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unit of analysis. Student–student exchanges are used only for comparison, not as an additional object of investigation. This focus also avoids equating every informal or firm utterance with symbolic violence.

The study addresses two questions: (1) What forms of linguistic symbolic violence occur in teacher–student interactions at senior high schools in Ambon City? (2) How are students' responses to unequal linguistic authority reflected in the observed and reported interactions? These questions direct attention to identifiable language practices, their institutional context, and their possible implications for student voice rather than to unmeasured prevalence or long-term effects.

## METHODS

### Research Approach and Type

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach with a critical interpretive perspective. It examined the meanings of utterances, classroom power relations, and the ways teachers and students understood their interactions. Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power, habitus, legitimate language, and misrecognition informed interpretation rather than serving as variables for statistical testing. The methodological orientation follows the qualitative principles described by Moleong (2018) and Creswell (2016).

### Participants and Research Setting

The participants were teachers and students in senior high school settings in Ambon City. The available study documentation does not specify the number or identities of participating schools, the number and characteristics of participants, their recruitment procedures, or the fieldwork period. These details must be checked against the researchers' field records; no figures or locations are inferred here. Accordingly, the analysis interprets situated exchanges without claiming to represent all teachers or schools in the city. Student–student speech is considered only as contextual comparison.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data collection comprised direct observation of classroom verbal and nonverbal interactions, in-depth interviews with teachers and students about their experiences of language use, and documentation concerning school communication and regulations. Ambon Malay utterances are presented as recorded in the study material, with English glosses where their meaning is sufficiently clear. Because speaker identifiers, dates, and school locations are not attached to every quotation in the available record, these details are not assigned retrospectively. The excerpts serve as illustrative qualitative evidence rather than a frequency-based sample.

### Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed through reduction, thematic categorization, and contextual interpretation, followed by comparison across observations, interviews, and documents (Miles et al., 2014). The categories included academic labeling, degrading reprimands, devaluation of local speech, linguistic favoritism, sarcasm, and limits on questioning. Interpretation considered the speaker's institutional position, the communicative purpose of



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an utterance, students' reported responses, and locally familiar speech norms. The comparison of the three data sources provided methodological triangulation. Bourdieu's concepts guided the qualitative interpretation; the procedure is not presented as a separately conducted formal critical discourse analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Local Speech Norms and the Significance of Speaker Position

Observation and interview accounts indicate that some potentially insulting expressions circulate in everyday exchanges among young people in Ambon. A reported example between students is "woii anjing eee…se dar mana? Atau tuanga se kalakuang paling anjing ee" (approximately, "Hey, dog, where are you from?" or "Goodness, your behavior is like a dog"). Among peers, comparable expressions may be understood as familiar banter. Rough diction alone is therefore insufficient to demonstrate symbolic violence; its meaning also depends on the relationship between speakers, the possibility of objection, and the response it elicits.

A contrasting example from teacher–student interaction reads:

> *"kamorang ini baribot kaya binatang di utang-utang, seng bisa tutu dalam prop itu kah? Ini balom jam istirahat!" (approximately: "You are making noise like animals in the forest. Can you be quiet? It is not break time yet!")*

The disciplinary purpose—reducing classroom noise—is distinguishable from the comparison of students with animals. Unlike peer teasing, a teacher's utterance is reinforced by the institutional right to command compliance. Students may be reluctant to contest the comparison even if they experience it as degrading. These observations support an interpretation of symbolic domination when reprimands communicate that the teacher is entitled to define students' worth, not simply their classroom conduct. At the same time, the available excerpts do not allow a claim that all teachers in Ambon employ this language or that all students respond identically.

Ambon Malay is important here not because it is inherently abusive, but because expressions familiar in local social life can carry different consequences across power positions. Local habitus can make certain terms sound routine. In Bourdieu's terms, misrecognition becomes possible when a culturally familiar form of reprimand and the teacher's authorized position jointly make a degrading act appear like an ordinary correction (Bourdieu, 1991). The culturally diverse, post-conflict setting sharpens the need to examine these meanings carefully; it does not by itself establish a causal relationship between historical conflict and any particular classroom exchange.

### 2. Forms of Linguistic Symbolic Violence in Teacher–Student Interaction

Academic labeling. Reported expressions include "you are lazy," "you can't do anything," and "you are a diligent student." Feedback on a particular assignment differs from assigning students a fixed identity. Negative labels can transform a temporary learning difficulty into a judgment of personal capacity, whereas repeated positive labels may concentrate recognition among already favored pupils. The mechanism is the teacher's



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socially authorized power to classify students publicly and influence whose contributions are treated as credible.

Degrading reprimands. Reported examples include “you are so stupid,” “don’t embarrass yourself,” and “you have an empty brain.” Such statements do more than correct conduct: they attach a demeaning evaluation to the student. The teacher’s institutional authority can make these evaluations difficult to challenge because an objection may be read as disobedience. This combination of authorized judgment and constrained reply distinguishes symbolic domination from a firm but respectful correction.

Devaluation of local speech forms. The findings describe instances in which students speaking with an Ambon accent or another regional variety were laughed at, corrected contemptuously, or required to use standard Indonesian without explanation. Teaching standard Indonesian is a legitimate educational aim. Symbolic domination arises when a local speech variety is framed as evidence of personal or intellectual inferiority. In the school’s linguistic market, the teacher’s evaluation can elevate one variety while devaluing another (Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 2006).

Linguistic favoritism. The reported classroom interactions suggest that teachers sometimes respond more readily to students using fluent formal Indonesian or academic terminology. Students whose speech matches institutionally preferred forms may receive more opportunities to contribute; others may perceive their ideas as less legitimate. Linguistic proficiency is not itself the problem. The inequality emerges when the form in which an idea is expressed substitutes for an evaluation of its substance.

Sarcasm and humiliating humor. Remarks such as “low grades suit you” and “you’re lazy, so you’ll get bad grades” appear as examples of comments framed as jokes or informal corrections. When voiced publicly by a teacher, such remarks may classify a student as inferior while making a response socially difficult. Silence cannot automatically be read as agreement: it may express respect, avoidance, uncertainty, fear of sanctions, or acceptance of the teacher’s authority. The documented excerpts do not distinguish these responses in every case.

### 3. How Linguistic Authority Produces Misrecognition

The patterns above can be understood as an interaction between institutional authority and the symbolic valuation of speech. Teachers have legitimate authority to maintain order and evaluate learning. That authority becomes a mechanism of symbolic violence when labels, mockery, or exclusionary norms gain the force of acceptable educational judgment. Students who are repeatedly assigned low-status labels may begin to treat those classifications as accurate descriptions of themselves rather than as judgments produced within an unequal classroom relationship (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Swartz, 1997).

These practices are best conceptualized as symbolic devaluation rather than a separate form of “negative symbolic capital.” In Bourdieu’s framework, symbolic capital depends on the value that a social field accords to particular resources and forms of competence. A degrading label or ridicule of an accent reduces the recognition granted to a student’s speech and social position. When fluency in standard Indonesian is rewarded while Ambon Malay is disparaged, linguistic variation can become a hierarchy of educational



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legitimacy. Misrecognition may occur when such unequal judgments are taken to be ordinary discipline or culturally acceptable joking instead of institutionally authorized devaluation.

Several Ambon Malay excerpts illustrate these mechanisms: “Se memang seng bisa diandalkan eee” (“You really cannot be relied on”); “se iko saja, jang batanya lai” (“Just follow along; do not ask so many questions”); and “Se lia se tamang bisa baru se ni parah eee” (“Look, your friend can do it; why can’t you?”). The first turns a student into a supposedly unreliable person, the second restricts questions, and the third publicly defines ability through comparison with peers. Their symbolic significance lies in the authority of the speaker and the limited room students may have to reject the evaluation.

The excerpts point to a possible sequence of symbolic domination: the teacher’s authorized position lends force to a judgment; the judgment classifies a student or a speech variety; and a constrained opportunity to reply allows the classification to remain uncontested. Accounts of students avoiding challenges to teachers support an interpretation of misrecognition when unequal treatment is experienced as normal. However, these data do not establish how widespread or enduring that response is, nor do they justify treating every instance of silence as consent.

## 4. Student Responses, Critical Awareness, and Educational Implications

The interview and observation accounts describe reluctance to question teachers who use commanding or dismissive language, especially where grading and discipline are presented as unilateral decisions. Examples include “This grade is my decision, it cannot be contested” and “You deserve a low grade.” Their symbolic force does not lie in assessment alone but in restricting students’ opportunity to request reasons or respond. These examples show how linguistic authority can narrow classroom dialogue; they do not demonstrate that every classroom in the research setting operates in this way.

Reported consequences include reduced confidence and passive classroom participation, but these remain qualitative interpretations rather than measured causal effects. A student’s apparent acceptance may reflect respect for the teacher, uncertainty, fear of negative consequences, or a tactical effort to avoid confrontation. Assessing critical awareness therefore requires attention to particular responses and situations, not an assumption that every quiet student has internalized domination.

The findings extend discussion of symbolic violence by showing how locally familiar utterances acquire different meanings according to institutional roles. Peer banter supplies a contextual contrast, while the principal concern is the asymmetry of teacher–student communication. The coexistence of standard Indonesian and Ambon Malay introduces an additional dimension: forms of speech may receive unequal recognition even when they express meaningful contributions. This reading is consistent with the emphasis on dialogic and non-oppressive educational relations in Reresi et al. (2023) and Hakim and Syihabuddin (2024).

For practice, schools can incorporate examples of degrading labels, ridicule of accents, and humiliating correction into teacher professional development. Classroom norms should distinguish firm discipline from attacks on students’ identities and encourage feedback that addresses behavior or work rather than fixed personal traits. Teachers can explain the role of standard Indonesian without presenting Ambon Malay or other regional varieties as



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deficient. Opportunities for respectful questions and appeals about assessment can also protect student voice and strengthen classroom dialogue (Cazden, 2001).

The interpretation is limited to the documented excerpts and reported themes. Unverified details about the number and selection of schools and participants, the fieldwork period, and the attribution of individual quotations restrict assessment of transferability. The evidence supports a context-sensitive account of possible mechanisms of symbolic violence, not estimates of prevalence or causal claims about educational achievement. Fuller reporting of fieldwork and excerpt provenance is needed for subsequent analysis.

## CONCLUSION

Five forms of linguistic symbolic violence were identified in teacher–student interactions at senior high schools in Ambon City: academic labeling, degrading reprimands, devaluation of local speech, linguistic favoritism, and humiliating sarcasm. These practices may reproduce inequality when teachers' institutional authority turns judgments about speech or behavior into apparently legitimate classifications of students. Expressions familiar in peer interaction can acquire a different meaning when used by teachers to discipline or evaluate. Student responses included reported silence, compliance, and reluctance to question authority; these patterns may indicate misrecognition but cannot alone establish willing acceptance. Ambon's linguistic diversity and post-conflict history provide an interpretive setting, not proof of causation. Schools should promote respectful feedback, protect regional language varieties from stigma, and provide channels for student questions and assessment clarification. Further field documentation is necessary before extending the findings beyond the interactions examined.

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