

# Re-reading The Media: A Stylistic Analysis Of Malaysian Media Coverage Of Anwar And The Reformasi Movement

*This paper attempts to study how language is used by a pro-establishment paper in Malaysia - the New Straits Times (NST) - to portray the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim and the Reformasi Movement. It aims to investigate how the NST represents dissenting voices and the extent to which it helps to promote consensus and the dominant view. This paper argues that language in news coverage plays a crucial role in the construction of social reality. News is a practice, a discourse which does not reflect reality in a neutral manner but helps to "interpret", "organize" and "classify" this reality. The language that is used to depict events and people represent selections that are made out of all the available options in the linguistic system and these choices favour certain ways of seeing and reading. In consequence, certain meanings are center-staged at the expense of other meanings.*

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Malaysia's mainstream press<sup>1</sup> as a whole is well-known for its editorial restraint, compliance with almost all of the authority's edicts and unabashed self-censorship. Such characteristics can be largely attributed to the country's prohibitive laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Sedition Act, Internal Security Act, etc. as well as the pattern of media ownership which favour and help facilitate direct or indirect control of the media industry by the powers that be.<sup>2</sup>

The advent of the Internet into Malaysia, primarily made possible by the much publicised project of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), ironically offers promises of wider democratic space for dissenting views, and alternative news and information sources.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, the conservativeness and "political coyness" of the mainstream press would be checked to a certain degree by the

presence of the Internet's opposing voices (via dissident websites). This venue and the alternative publications such as the popular party organ *Harakah* and the *Aliran* Monthly magazine provide some means of interrogating mainstream views.<sup>4</sup>

The outbreak of the Reformasi Movement in September 1998, precipitated by the arrest of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim by his political mentor Dr. Mahathir Mohamed placed the mainstream press and other mass media under close scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is of concern to both the Mahathir administration and the Malaysian people in general, albeit for different reasons, how the mainstream press performs in the wake of competing accounts and voices from the alternative websites and publications. This study aims to investigate one of the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia, that is the *New Straits Times* (NST), in particular the language that is used to portray Anwar and the *Reformasi Movement*. The investigation is carried out using particular tools borrowed from the discipline of linguistics.

This paper argues that language in news coverage plays a pertinent role in the construction of social reality. Indeed, news is a practice, a discourse which does not reflect reality in a neutral manner but helps to "interpret", "organise" and "classify" this reality. The language that is used to depict characters or events in NST represents selections that are made out of all the available options in the linguistic system and these choices favour certain ways of seeing and reading while the other ways are muzzled or repressed.<sup>6</sup> In consequence, certain meanings are centre-staged at the expense of other meanings. These selections are never made at random for choice of lexis or syntactical structures is essentially ideological — representations which embody a particular point of view. Viewpoints, as Cameron (1996) asserts, are never free from ideological presuppositions (1996: 327). In this study, I examine the ways in which the NST encodes the dominant view and the extent to which it helps to reinforce hegemonic discourses.

Apart from analysing the linguistic codes and structures in the newspaper, it is equally vital to know which particular discourses<sup>7</sup> have been circulating in society at that time, be they dominant or otherwise, their conventions and the various institutional practices, to assess to what extent they regulate the linguistic practices of this particular newspaper. In other words, I situate this newspaper in its proper socio-discursive and political context so that I can examine all those extra-textual forces, the various ideas, values and beliefs that help to shape the perceptions and perspectives of this newspaper towards the subjects of discourse, in this case Anwar and the Reformasi Movement. It is important to consider the role of context as language use is always embedded in social contexts. A text, as Fairclough (2001) points

out, cannot be divorced from the processes of production that create it and which in turn cannot be disentangled from the local institutional and socio-historical conditions within which the text is situated (Fairclough 2001: 20; cited in Clark & Ivanic 1997: 10). I examine the language of these texts in the context of the discursive frameworks operating in society to enable this study to find out to what extent hegemonic discourses are being reproduced, reinforced or contested by NST.

A language-based approach is also employed to illustrate how and why students of communication studies ought to be equipped with basic linguistic skills in order to enable them to read critically and to better understand the content and messages that are transmitted via media texts. Although much work has been done by scholars such as Fairclough (2001), van Dijk (1998), Fowler (1991) in the area of critical language study and its ability to enhance media literacy, many media departments at tertiary level, particularly in Malaysia have yet to incorporate language study of this nature in their respective programmes. Much emphasis is still placed on the content analysis of media texts instead of a linguistic one. Although a content analysis procedure has its own merits, a linguistic approach such as the one advocated here, I believe, is equally illuminating especially if one is concerned about how and why events, people and places are represented in specific ways and the operation of power and ideology in language and society. The mass media is an important mediator of reality and a linguistic analysis can provide useful insights as to how that mediation can affect the representation of events and people (Thomas and Wareing 1999: 50).

This three-month stylistic analysis of the *Anwar-Reformasi* episode started in September 1998, the time when news of Anwar's supposedly "criminal acts" were first reported by the press. Language used by NST to depict these subjects of discourse was analysed, in particular the consistent lexical, phrasal and clausal selections employed to endorse or ratify the dominant discourses. To what extent did NST create the spaces for the interaction of other voices, viewpoints and discourses especially those that do not concur with the dominant discourses?<sup>8</sup> I used two frameworks — a lexical analysis and a transitivity analysis<sup>9</sup> to show the range of linguistic forms through which ideas and viewpoints can be expressed.

### **i. Lexical analysis**

Since the objective world is vast and its richness overwhelming, one tends to impose some kind of structure on it, by sorting it into categories in an attempt to simplify objective

phenomena and make them more manageable (Fowler 1986: 17). This would then make it easier for one to make sense of this hugely complex world. To help in the process of comprehending and representing this world one inevitably depends on language. However, it should be noted that since the system of classification used is not “natural” or “universal” but social in origin and because of the very nature of language, there is no neutral or disinterested way in which one can comprehend and represent the world.

Language provides one the capacity to select, classify, organise and evaluate experience and it is in this sense that representation is never impartial or neutral (Montgomery 1995: 228). For example, non-neutrality and representation is clearly observed in the distribution of vocabulary items that surround the notions of “male”, “female”, “man”, “woman” and the euphemistic depiction of nuclear “weaponry”. As regards the latter, Montgomery (1995) contends that the word “bomb” has been effaced from all official discourses on nuclear weapons and replaced by more general terms such as “weaponry”, “armaments” and “arsenal”. By naming the object differently, it serves to alter one’s perception and view towards that particular object. This, in essence, is an ideological device that is utilised to get the consent of the general public and subsequently to gain political legitimacy (Montgomery 1995: 223).

According to Halliday’s (1978) functional theory, vocabulary is the basic foundation of idea conceptualization.<sup>10</sup> It can be seen as a map of the objects, concepts, processes and relationships that a culture wishes to communicate. A vocabulary of a language is a structured system and not simply an alphabetical arrangement and collection of words. Vocabulary represents the world for a particular community and in doing so categorization or segmentation is needed to help members of a culture make sense of the world (Fowler 1991: 92). It is important to find out in analysing a discourse which terms habitually occur and which segmented part of the world enjoys discursive attention. A selection of related items in a text would pinpoint a preoccupation with a particular topic. This aside, part of the process of making sense of this world also involves the categorization of people. Category labels would not only indicate the preoccupations of a text but would also tell us something about the ideological world that is represented by it (1991: 93). These would include evaluative adjectives and fixed epithets that producers of texts often use in categorising people.

## **ii. Transitivity analysis**

Another essential tool in the analysis of representation, which

has been widely applied in the critical linguistics of texts, is transitivity. It is not just lexical categorization that can promote certain ideology but transitivity as well.<sup>11</sup> Transitivity is the very “foundation of representation” as it enables the analysis and interpretation of a particular event or situation in different ways. Hence, it is of great relevance to newspaper analysis (1991: 71). Transitivity, as an analytical tool, enables one to identify the participant who plays an important role in a particular clause and, the one who receives the consequence of the former’s action. Put differently, a transitivity analysis of clause structure can reveal who is mainly given subject (Agent/Doer) or object (Affected/Patient) position in a clause. In addition, transitivity is also concerned with the relationship encoded by the verbs used in a particular clause and the accompanying participant roles.

According to Halliday, the grammar of English provides a limited number of semantic options in the form of types or processes. These semantic processes which are expressed by clauses have potentially three main components (Simpson 1993: 88). They are:

- the process :- indicated by the verb phrase in the clause
- the participants:- realized by noun phrases
- the circumstances:- designated by adverbial and prepositional phrases

Semantic processes can be categorized depending on whether they display actions (action process), speech (verbalization process), mental state (mental process), or just the state of existence (relational process). Given the restricted set of processes and participant roles, one is given the option of selecting whichever one in whatever circumstances and combination and the choice that one makes characterises one’s perception and view of the world. These choices as a whole are transitivity choices. Essentially, transitivity represents that part of the linguistic system that describes the relationship between participants and processes via clauses or simply “who (or what) does what to whom (or what)” (Simpson & Montgomery in Verdonk & Weber 1995: 144-5). The type of process is revealed in the choice of verb used in the clause and this is vital as it determines the transitivity relation and the role played by the participant(s) in the clause. The processes and participant roles are:

### **a. Material processes: processes of doing**

Material action processes encompass verbs of doing, and doing to. In the example below, these processes are actualised by the verb “threw”. The participant roles involve an Agent, the Doer or the one performing the action and the ones on the receiving

end are the Affected participants. For instance, (NST , 26/10/98):

*Several protesters (Agent) threw stones, bottles and sticks at the policemen (Affected)*

In the above, the “protesters” perform an action on the Affected participants - “the policemen”. Of these participants, the “protesters”, the grammatical Subject, is much more powerful as they are assigned the Agent’s position. They perform an action on “the policemen”, the Affected or the grammatical Object.

## **b. Mental processes: processes of sensing**

Mental processes entail verbs of feeling or mental reaction (love, hate), perception (see, hear), and cognition (considered, believed). The participant roles involve a “Senser” (the conscious one doing the thinking, feeling or hearing) and “Phenomenon” (that which is being perceived, reacted to or thought about). For example, (NST, 11/11/98).

*I (Senser) persuaded, advised and convinced Ummi Hafilda (Phenomenon)*

In the above example, “I” (M. Said)<sup>12</sup> is the Senser and “Ummi Hafilda”,<sup>13</sup> the Phenomenon. The Mental process, in this situation, is realised by the verbs “persuaded”, “advised”, and “convinced”. Mental action processes are important because they signify that readers are meant to see the unfolding of events through someone’s eyes. In short, the Senser’s eyes.

## **c. Verbalisation processes: processes of saying**

Verbalisation processes encompass verbs of saying or telling such as “said”, “told”, “reported” and so on. The participant roles include a “Sayer”, (the one who speaks), “Target” the one to whom the speech is aimed at) and Verbiage (that what is talked about). For instance, (NST, 4/11/98):

*Anwar (Sayer) had ordered Mohd Said (Target) and Amin<sup>14</sup> (Target) to meet him*

In the above example, “Anwar” is the Sayer whilst “Mohd Said” and “Amin” are the Targets. Here, the verbalisation process is realised by the verb “ordered”.

## **d. Relational processes: processes of being**

Relational processes entail intensive verbs, and verbs indicating possessive or circumstantial relations. The participant roles include the “Carrier”, (the topic of the clause) and “Attribute” (a description of the topic). For instance, (NST , 10/11/98):

*Anwar (Carrier) was a homosexual (Attributes)*

In the above clause, “Anwar” is the Carrier of certain Attributes.

## Socio Discursive And Political Constraints

The socio-discursive and political context in which NST operates is important to enable this study to assess the extent to which NST is willing to negotiate the constraints imposed on it. This entails a discussion of the various discourses that were in currency around that time.

In Malaysia, press freedom is, firstly, curtailed by draconian laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act and Official Secrets Act. These Acts, which have undergone several amendments over time, are considered restrictive because they empower the Home Minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of a publication, if and when the Minister deems that the contents of that publication can undermine the security of the country or if he considers the contents a threat to morality and public order. Indeed, as many argue, this is an extremely severe law as whatever decision that is taken by the Home Minister is considered final and not subject to judicial review (Zaharom & Mustafa 1998: 15).

Secondly, ownership of the media is concentrated on a select few whose political persuasion is closely aligned to the ruling party. *The New Straits Times Press* and the *Utusan Melayu* group are believed to be owned and managed by people who are close to the powers-that-be. For instance, an array of newspapers and magazines under the stable of the major mainstream *New Straits Times Press* (NSTP), is owned and controlled by an investment company called the Fleet Group. This investment company was set up by Fleet Holdings, an investment arm of the dominant partner in the Barisan Nasional coalition, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). By the same token, UMNO has direct or indirect ownership of the *Utusan Melayu* newspaper group whilst MCA, another partner in the ruling coalition, has a major stake in the popular English language tabloid, *The Star* (Zaharom & Mustafa 1998: 14).

The government often contends that the mass media needed some guidance to steer the people's attention towards socio-economic development. Driven by the notion of "development journalism", the press was to promote positive news about government policies and projects and discourage what was deemed unnecessary political bickering and criticisms from the opposition which might jeopardise "national interest". This nationalist ideology of promoting economic development, solidarity between the country's many ethnic and cultural groups and, consequently, national stability that was, and still is, being promoted by the mainstream media is instrumental in shaping and popularising the politics of consensus among the rakyat (citizens) as well as the media practitioners.

The policies and projects of the government are portrayed as

being carried out in the name of national interest through official, legitimate and orderly means. The interest of the State is projected as necessarily the same as those of loyal and law-abiding Malaysian citizens. This implies that the “national interest” cannot be compromised or jeopardised. Loyal Malaysians should not allow those “Others”, whose interests are deemed alien to theirs, to destroy this “national interest”. It then follows that the media and people won over by the rhetoric perceive groups or individuals who are critical of certain government policies and actions as trouble-makers, forces of political instability, anti-national elements and rabble-rousers. Since such groups of people are viewed as socially deviant, they are demonised and categorised or labelled as the “external Other” or the “social Other” (Riggins 1997: 3). This act of labelling does not just function to celebrate consensus - the idea of shared assumptions and interests - but more than that, it concretises the very nature of “consensus” by pointing to what is not. Both these elements, the celebration of consensus and the denigration of dissent, help to legitimise the power of the dominant group (Murdock in Cohen and Young, 1981: 207).

This helps to explain why labels such as “extremist”, “mob” and “psychopath” tend to be used when mainstream newspapers depict groups that are perceived to be different from the dominant group, especially those who threaten to disrupt the existing paradigm of order. These government critics that are perceived to be outside the realm of consensual politics deserve, according to the dominant political discourse, condemnation and political incarceration. Indeed, conflictual relationship with the State is to be abhorred within the larger discourses of ethnic harmony and national security.

Having said this, however, such constraints have somehow helped to propel certain positive transformations in the otherwise tepid Malaysian political scene. Since September 1998, the country has experienced major political turbulence that stemmed from an “internal party-political confrontation” that took place within the dominant UMNO ruling party. This internal conflict affected Malaysians from all walks of life as it implicated the judiciary, the police, security services and the government-controlled media (Farish 1999: 5). The conflict saw the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim from his position as Deputy Prime Minister on charges of corruption and sexual misconduct, in particular of sodomy and homosexuality. However, the sacking had prompted his supporters to rally to his calls for reformation by being part of a group dubbed the Reformasi Movement, a group which is at the forefront of a number of peaceful demonstrations and rallies around the country. The members of this group transcend ethnic, religious, social and economic boundaries as they consist of professionals, civil

## Analysis And Findings

servants, students, members of the armed and security forces, ordinary civilians, the unemployed, pensioners and so on. The Movement's manifesto is spelt out in a document entitled the "Permatang Pauh Declaration" and can also be found in Anwar's speeches and writings (1999: 5).

The cry for "reformasi" (reforms) by this group of Malaysians entails the demands for real social change. The group called for an end to cronyism, collusion and corruption, a demand that did not go down well with the ruling elite. The Reformasi Movement also calls for greater democracy, transparency and accountability. This discourse of social and political change among the Reformasi supporters interrogate the government's dominant rhetoric of national development and political stability.

### i. Lexical Analysis

Apart from being referred to as the "sacked Deputy Prime Minister", Anwar has been negatively labelled as a "ringleader", a "rabble-rouser" and a "homosexual". Where the Reformasi Movement is concerned, more often than not, it has been labelled and categorised in a highly pejorative manner. Listed below are some of the epithets that have been used to characterise this *Reformasi Movement* and its activities, epithets that evoke criminal and subversive tendencies".

*Anti-party (Movement); anti-UMNO (Movement); aggressive (Movement); rebel(s); illegal and potentially explosive demonstrations and marches; violent demonstrators; violent protest; ungrateful people; ringleaders; violent clash; violent rioting; violent anti-government protests and demonstrations; illegal assembly; unruly demonstrators; rioters; reformasi demonstrations; illegal gatherings; rabble-rousers; rowdy (demonstrators); unsettling demonstrations; dubious and nebulous Reformasi Movement; mob; mobsters; street violence; so-called Reformasi Movement; Kuala Lumpur street protesters; renegade Anwar supporters; betrayers who work with external forces; mob rule; unlawful assembly.*

From the above, one finds that there is a proliferation of words, (a case of over-lexicalisation) often pejorative used to characterise the movement. These words carry the main theme of law and order. The words aim to reinforce the idea that the movement is an enemy of the state, for it is involved with activities that are deemed unlawful and "criminal". As such, the Reformasi Movement has to be feared because it poses a threat to the existing paradigm of order. This view, promoted by the ruling elite, is a view which NST quickly endorses. By supporting this view, NST indirectly justifies the deployment of police personnel on the streets as "rioting" can be defined as a form of civil disorder that requires

immediate police action (Fowler et al 1979: 99).

More than that, NST also helps to discredit the Movement and the causes it wants to champion. Although those aligned to the Movement consider the demonstrations a legitimate exercise of their rights as citizens of this country and their right to voice out their frustration at the abuses of power within the ruling coalition, this is played down by NST. Its main concern is with the event, the “who” and “how” of protest and what is clearly missing is a painstaking analysis of the underlying causes or the fundamental reasons for the demonstration (Murdock in Cohen & Young, 1981: 211). An important political happening, in other words, has been conveniently dehistoricised. Neither does NST attempt to show the possible culpability of the police personnel in exacerbating this violence via acts of alleged brutality and provocation. In many ways, the explicit judgements passed by NST serve to relegate the Reformasi Movement to the status of the Other. Viewed from a consensual paradigm, the derogation of the Other is made justifiable on the grounds that the movement is in a conflictual relationship with the State. Thus, the Reformasi Movement deserves to be represented in this manner, for it is, after all “anti-government” and “anti-Umno”.

## ii. Transitivity Analysis

Basically, in conducting a transitivity analysis, I attempt to locate the clausal structures, in particular those that feature Anwar or the *Reformasi Movement* as one of the participants and find out how as participants they are positioned in the clauses vis-a-vis other participants. Are Anwar and the *Reformasi Movement* ascribed the roles of Agents/Sensors/Sayers, the ones whose actions can affect others or as the Affected/Phenomenon/Target, the ones who are on the receiving end? In addition, I also want to analyse the kind of predicates or verbs that they are made participants of.

In the various clauses that I have analysed, NST tends to depict Anwar as an Agent/Sensor or Sayer, the more powerful participant in a clause. By putting him in such a focal position, we are able to see him clearly as an entity who is powerful and whose actions can directly affect others. Anwar certainly is powerful as he is Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister. Placing him in such a focal position, however, brings forth a serious implication: that Anwar had misused his powers as Deputy Prime Minister. The examples selected below show Anwar in a focal position in transactive clauses:

<b>Agent (Doer)</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Affected</b>
<i>Anwar</i>	<i>sodomised</i>	<i>him (13/11/98)</i>
<i>His employer</i>	<i>(had) sodomised</i>	<i>him (13/11/98)</i>
<i>(Anwar)</i>		
<b>Senser</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Phenomenon</b>
Anwar	files suit	against PM and the government(14/11/98)
He	commit(ted) carnal intercourse	against Mior Abdul Razak (4/9/98)
Anwar	was) plotting	(to oust) Dr Mahathir (28/9/98)
Anwar	(had been) inciting	his supporters (to riot) (30/9/98)
He	used	the Special Branch (5/11/98)
<b>Sayer</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Target</b>
Anwar	direct(ed)	Mohd Said and Amin (4/11/98)
Anwar	directed	me to get the retractions (5/11/98)
Anwar	asked	him to put a little fear in them (5/11/98)
Anwar	dictated	changes to letter (27/11/98)

Below we see Anwar in focal position but in non-transactive clauses:

<b>Senser</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Circumstances</b>
He	took	steps to deny the contents of the letter (4/11/98)
He	gave	specific instructions (4/11/98)
He	wanted	the letters to be open letters (5/11/98)
DSAI	gave	instructions over the telephone (27/11/98)
Anwar	pressured	us to stop probe (17/9/98)
Anwar	committed	adultery and sodomy (27/11/98)
Anwar	orchestrated	two illegal assemblies (22/9/98)
Anwar	wanted	the word "penafian" (denial) to be inserted (27/11/98)
Anwar	faces	another charge of unnatural sex (4/9/98)
He	instigated	rioting (23/9/98)
Anwar	created	disturbances(26/9/98)
<b>Carrier</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Attribute</b>
Anwar	had	relationship with Azizan and Shamsidar (10/11/98)
Anwar	was	a homosexual' (10/11/98)

The above examples show that Anwar is not only the more powerful entity, but he is also portrayed as the “perpetrator” of crimes. He is a social deviant, for he breaks the laws of the state and also indulges in acts that go against the laws of nature. He is said to have instigated rioting, he is a homosexual and has committed various acts of unnatural sex, including sodomy. We are made to perceive him as being different from “us” for he is not “normal”.

The dominant pattern that emerges appears to encode a view of a polarized world, an “us/them” world. This connects with the theme of law-and-order because Anwar represents “them”, the Other, the people on the wrong side of the law. He is the victimizer whilst the State, the “us” group, those on the right side, comprising participants such as Mohd Said and Amin, the Special Branch, the government and PM are portrayed as the helpless victims. The predicates or verbs that Anwar is made a participant of, help to accentuate his criminal disposition and deviant behaviour. For instance, Anwar is said to have “sodomised”, he has “plotted” and “planned” conspiracies, he has “instigated” and “incited” rioting and has “pressured”, “directed” and “ordered” other participants. Such language justifies the swift removal of a person who is seen to be inimical to national development, the national interest, and political stability. Such a selection of words by the NST reinforces the dominant discourses of the government.

Whilst agency is highlighted as regards Anwar in the above examples, there are times when it is concealed via the use of passivisation and nominalisation. For instance, in relation to Anwar’s bruised eye, it is rare to find clauses that locate the police in Agent position. By using the passive form, the police are never placed in focal position, hence it becomes difficult to link the actions committed to the participant who is responsible for such actions. More than that, this would ensure that Anwar is never accorded a victim or Affected participant position. Consider the use of the passive forms in the following example:

*“Attorney General Tan Sri Mohtar Abdullah has received the reports on the investigations into claims by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim that he was assaulted by the police while being detained under the ISA.” (NST, 21/11/98)*

*“Probe into Anwar’s claims begin. The high-powered team of police officers formed to investigate DSAI (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) allegations that he was assaulted while in police custody began its work today.” (NST, 2/10/98)*

In the same vein, the agent responsible for Anwar’s removal from the Cabinet is rarely identified, especially when news of his arrest was first made public because of the use of the passive and the nominal forms. By using nominal forms such as “removal”

and “expulsion”, there is no need to reveal the identity of the one who is doing the removing or expelling. Similarly, the identity of the person responsible for the assault is withheld. Consider these examples:

*“Anwar removed from Cabinet” (by whom?) (NST, 3/9/98)*

*“DSAI (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) has been removed as DPM (Deputy Prime Minister) and Finance Minister effective from 5.30 p.m. today.” (NST, 3/9/98)*

*“Removal of DSAI (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) from all government positions and his expulsion from the party were necessary for the government of the nation.” (NST, 6/10/98)*

*“AG (Attorney General) studying official report on alleged assault of Anwar” (NST, 21/11/98)*

With reference to the Reformasi Movement and their members, I observe a similar patterning. They are, more often than not, accorded an Agent’s position. In such positions, one sees them as the “perpetrators” or “victimizers”. Their “victims” comprise police personnel and innocent bystanders. Once again the theme of law-and-order is being alluded to. Perhaps, more than that, where the demonstrators are concerned, as seen from the following examples, “criminality” is being defined much more forcefully (Fowler 1991: 138). Numbers are used to heighten this idea of “criminality” and to intensify our perception of them as threats. For instance, the protesters are either “several”, “a few hundred” or a “group” whilst the Affected participants are depicted using the plural noun forms. This is encoded in the following examples:

<b>Agent</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Affected</b>
Several protesters	threw	stones, bottles and sticks at the policemen (26/10/98)
Demonstrators	attacked	pressmen of two dailies (26/10/98)
A group of demonstrators	hurled	stones at journalists (26/10/98)
40 demonstrators	hurled	bricks and stones at the Utusan Malaysia’s a four-wheel drive (26/10/98)
A few hundred	(had) chased	several policemen and

## Limited Terrains Of Contestations

From the various lexical and transitivity structures as exemplified above, clearly Anwar and the *Reformasi Movement* have been maligned to a large degree. However, NST did grant opportunities to some writers to provide alternative views and a critique of the government via their personal columns and via certain features that appeared during that period of time. These voices of discontent are, sad to say, few and far between.

In relation to the above, one of the columns that need to be mentioned here is *Perforated Sheets* — a fortnightly column by Amir Muhammad and which used to appear in the NST on the Wednesday's literary page. The writer, a literary and film critic, had used this column to provide critical reviews of literary works and films, both local and foreign. However, unlike other reviews that appeared on this page, this particular writer had used his reviews to satirize and parody "great" political happenings in the country, lampooning in the process, erstwhile politicians, the government and its policies. For instance, in his review of the recent film version of Arthur Miller's famous allegory *The Crucible*, one senses Amir's attempts at parodying the bigotry, pretentiousness, lies and deceptions that surrounded the trial of Anwar Ibrahim. This column, unfortunately, was axed a fortnight later, after the writer had written a critical piece on the state of our newspapers, criticizing them for not allowing alternative views and for toeing the line. Whilst, arguably, *Perforated Sheets* may exemplify NST's attempts at providing a space for alternative views, one wonders how many readers actually take the trouble to read the literary page and for those who do read it, how many are able to understand the satirical endeavours on the writer's part.

Apart from *Perforated Sheets*, there were some attempts made by NST-based journalists to provide their personal thoughts on Reformasi, apart from documenting the perceptions of some Malaysian teenagers towards the issue of reformation and Anwar's "Permatang Pauh" declaration. In addition, there were some efforts made to discuss the various constraints that journalists in Malaysia have had to consider in writing and the issue of "biased" and "unfair" reporting. These expressions of dissent, with the exception of *Perforated Sheets*, however, were located not in the main section of the newspaper, but in the second section, the one devoted to the social and arts scene.

## Discussion

From the linguistic options that have been exercised by the NST, I find that certain types of linguistic structures tend to be favoured over others. In the case of Anwar, there is a tendency to cast him in powerful, agentive or focal roles and fewer other

participant roles. Although in the beginning of the political conflict there were attempts to cast him in different participant roles, this soon petered out. The same goes for the Reformasi Movement. By consistently ascribing them such roles, one is inclined to perceive them as particular types of participants only. Such participants can only accompany a limited range of predicates or verbs.

Since little attempts are made to cast these participants in a variety of roles, I find that NST is inclined to project a monologic view of the world, one which perceives these participants as "victimizers" and as "perpetrators" of crimes. This binary division of the world helps to facilitate the imagery of an "us" and "them". The "us" is often depicted as a group that is at the receiving end of the law, breaking "them", the destabilisers of law-and-order. This is the picture one gets after conducting a stylistic analysis of the texts in question which, perhaps, may not be made that visible had a content analysis been attempted. The imagery of an "us" and "them" is further heightened by the fact that any report on the Reformasi Movement is always in connection with violence and the destruction of property often reinforced with visuals. And reports of social upheaval in foreign lands, especially neighbouring Indonesia, only works towards intensifying this imagery. Thus, the juxtaposition of Reformasi-related reportage with the Indonesian Reformasi Movement and other world calamities, accompanied by a rhetoric of self-glorification. As a consequence, readers of this newspaper will never know what Reformasi stands for, what it hopes to achieve and what the "Permatang Pauh" declaration entails since alternative views of the Reformasi, especially from those who are closely connected with the Movement, are never reported.

The discourse of consensus prevails throughout the newspaper. One sees a daily barrage of political speeches by government ministers and officers, all swearing allegiance and undivided loyalty to the present leadership and its decision to expel Anwar followed by damning remarks about Anwar and the Reformasi Movement. These are reflected in such headlines: "*Give undivided support to our Prime Minister, Malaysians told*" (1/9/98), "*More leaders urge citizens to support Dr M*" (6/9/98), "*More State leaders, ministers support PM's decision*" (4/9/98), "B.N. "*Youth declares loyalty to Dr M*" (4/9/98), "*UMNO MPs back removal of Anwar from Cabinet and party*" (5/9/98), "*Youth groups support decision on dismissal*" (4/9/98), "*Kampung Baru residents spurn 'reformasi'*" (26/10/98), "*Trade Unions and NGO's voice their disapproval*" (26/10/98), "*Reject violence, people urged*" (26/10/98), "*Call to act firmly against violent demonstrators*" (26/10/98) and so on.

Similar themes are pedalled by the editorials, personal columns such as “*Other Thots*” and the “Letters to the Editor” column. This is a classic case of the newspaper taking the cue from the primary definers of news. Editorial censorship may have determined the selection of letters from the readers so that only letters expressing outrage and condemnation of the Movement’s so-called violence are published. One is made to feel that the populace are in full agreement with the State with regard to the disruptiveness of the *Reformasi Movement* and Anwar’s villainy.

The NST’s black-and-white summation of the *Reformasi Movement* may paradoxically have the opposite effect of calling up grey areas and ambiguities in the minds of thinking Malaysians. Were the actions of the Reformasi people really violent and injurious to “national security” and “national interest”? Is the deliberate association made between the *Reformasi Movement* and the political upheavals in Indonesia and other countries too simplistic? Such a monologic account of the *Reformasi Movement*, or for that matter any social change, does not square with notions of fairness, objectivity and social responsibility in news coverage. Equally disturbing is the fear that such journalistic tendencies reflect the apathy of a Malaysian press seduced by economic and technological progress to abandon all sense of critical enquiry.

## NOTES

1. The mainstream press in Malaysia has strong affiliations with the ruling government. For instance, *New Straits Times*, one of the local English dailies, is currently owned and controlled by an investment company called the Fleet Group, an investment arm of the dominant partner in the Barisan National ruling coalition, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The other popular English tabloid, *The Star*, is owned by MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association), another partner of the Barisan National. The New Straits Times Press and another “local media giant”, Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Sdn. Bhd. together produce an array of newspapers and magazines in peninsula Malaysia. For further information on ownership and control of the press in Malaysia refer to Zaharom, N (2000), “Globalized Theories and National Controls: The State, the Market and the Malaysian Media” in Curran, J & Park, M.J., *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. Routledge. London & New York and Zaharom, N., (1994) “Commercialization and Control in a Caring Society: Malaysian Media towards 2020” in *Sojourn*, 9(2): 178-99.
2. These prohibitive laws are “stringent” and “inflexible” as they provide the government “significant leeway” to determine the type of newspaper that is made available to Malaysians. The Printing Presses and Publications Act, 1984 (amended in 1987), for instance, requires all mass circulation newspapers in Malaysia to have a printing permit that is to be granted by the Ministry of Home Affairs before a newspaper gets published. This permit is renewable annually. Under section 13A

of the amended Act, the Home Minister is also empowered to reject, revoke or suspend a printing licence if he finds that the contents of a publication threaten morality, public order, security, public or national interest. The Internal Security Act (ISA) is the most powerful authoritarian weapon which was adopted by the government in 1960, soon after the emergency rule declared by the British in 1948 to fight communist insurgency had been lifted. Under this Act, the Minister of Home Affairs is empowered to detain without trial anyone who acts "in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia". The Sedition Act prohibits the discussion of issues that have "a tendency... to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes to the population of Malaysia". In addition, under this act it becomes an offence to question the sovereignty of the Malay sultans, the position of Malay as the national language, the special rights of the Malays and so on. For more information on these Acts and other prohibitive laws refer to Zaharom (2000, 1994), Khoo (1995), *Paradoxes of Mahathirism - An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*. Kuala Lumpur. Oxford University Press and Kahn, J. & Loh, F (1992), *Fragmented Vision - Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*. Asian Studies Association of Australia in Association with Allen & Unwin.

3. Among others, the more popular websites are *Malaysiakini*, *Saksi*, *Aliran* and *Harakah*. A further discussion of the MSC is found in the paper jointly written by Banerjee & Mustafa (1999) entitled "The House of Culture Revisited: Cultural Constructs and Contradictions in the Information Technology Age", presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the World Communications Association on History and Horizons: Cultural Constructions and Contradictions, held in Seri Kembangan, Selangor from 27th June 1999 to 2nd July 1999.
4. *Harakah*, is the official party organ of PAS (*Parti Angkatan Islam Malaysia*), Malaysia's leading opposition-led party. *Aliran* Monthly magazine is a publication of *Aliran*, a Reform Movement dedicated to Justice, Freedom and Solidarity. Johan Saravanamuttu (1999) views these alternative websites and publications as "new awakenings of political consciousness in the Malaysian Body Politic". He argues that recent political developments have encouraged more and more people to turn to alternative news sites for information. Hence, PAS's *Harakah* has hit a circulation of 300,000 in recent months. For further details, refer to his article entitled "From Crisis to Reform", in *Aliran Monthly*, May 1999 19(4).
5. Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, was elected to head the government in 1981. He is the reigning President of UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), a dominant partner of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (National Front). Anwar Ibrahim became Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy President of UMNO in 1993. He was removed from his Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister posts on Sept. 3 1998 on charges of corruption and sodomy.
6. This view of language is advocated by the critical linguists. Critical linguistics interpret texts on the basis of linguistic analysis. Their code of practice can be directly traced to the work that was carried out in the 1970's by R. Fowler, G. Kress, B. Hodge and T. Trew at the

- University of East Anglia. For further details, see Fowler et al (1979), *Language and Control*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
7. I have incorporated this idea of discourse from M. Foucault. Foucault conceives discourse as language and the system of rules that enable utterances or texts to be produced. Because of its dependence on rules, a discourse tends to be prescriptive as it imposes limits and restrictions on what to say or not to say, what is possible to do or not to do, about the subjects and objects of discourse in relation to the institutions that they are derived from. See N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Oxford 1992, p. 36-61 for a lucid account of discourse in the Foucauldian sense. See also Foucault, M. (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock Publications.
  8. Essentially, I am making references to the idea of polyphony or the free interaction of multiple voices and viewpoints, a view that was advocated by M. Bakhtin. For further details see Bakhtin, M.M. (1981), *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed, Michael Holquist. trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press.
  9. Kate Clark has used such frameworks when analysing the representation of crimes of sexual violence in the U.K. based newspaper called *The Sun*. See K. Clark "The Linguistics of Blame: Representations of Women in The Sun's Reporting of Crimes of Sexual Violence" in Toolan, M (1992), *Language, Text and Context: Essays in Stylistics*, London: Routledge for further details. These frameworks have also been used to analyse the representation of miners strike in the U.K. press. See Fowler, R. (1990), *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* for further details.
  10. According to Halliday's functional theory, a text means "language that is functional" - language that is doing something or other in some context. As a semantic entity, language is made up of meanings which are then expressed or coded in words and structures. Apart from that, it also represents choice, it is "what is meant" selected from a pool of options that constitute what can be meant. See M.A.K. Halliday (1978), *Language as Social Semiotic*, London: Edward Arnold, for a further elaboration of this idea.
  11. According to Halliday (1978), there is a systematic relationship between text and the context of situation. An examination of lexical and transitivity structures can reveal to us individual views as it is via these structures that participants' can encode their perceptions and experiences of the environment, the event, objects, participants, actions and so on. These linguistic structures can also help to unveil a participant's response to the various ideas and discourses prevalent in society.
  12. Mohamed Said is chief of Malaysia's Special Branch.
  13. Ummi Hafilda Ali is the person who sent a letter to Dr Mahathir, accusing Anwar of sexual misconduct with her sister-in-law, Shamsidar, and sodomy with Anwar's former driver, Azizan Abu Bakar.
  14. Amin is a police officer.

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**Newspaper analysed:**

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