

# Edition 2 Introduction

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*“Language, be it remember’d, is not an abstract construction of the learn’d, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground.”* Walt Whitman

Language is a profoundly potent tool and the academic study of language goes well beyond the analysis of words and grammatical rules. As American poet Walt Whitman suggests, language is deeply embedded in the experiences of individuals and the complex workings of societies.

For several decades, scholars working in linguistics, anthropology, sociology, history and related fields have examined the relationship between language and power.

An early advocate of such an approach is Norman Fairclough, whose seminal book, *Language and Power (1989)*, critically investigates the link between power and discourse. He has shown that language is not simply a neutral tool with which to represent reality. Whether by governments, public or private institutions, the media or individuals in personal encounters, power relationships are created, maintained and disputed through the ways in which the world is discursively construed. Additionally, the choice to use one language, variety or dialect over another also reveals struggles between different groups within society. Speakers of certain dialects may be disadvantaged by speaking them instead of a prestigious variety of the language. Through the use of our language and our choice of languages, we can empower or disempower—from the marginalisation of individuals through to geopolitical wars of words.

Edition 2 of *Melbourne Asia Review 'Dynamics of Discourse, Society and Power'* brings together expertise in language research and explores the dynamic nature of languages within the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, each of the articles offer insights into ways power is exercised and negotiated, asserted and suppressed through language in shaping changing social awareness, ideologies and communication practices across Asia. The articles presented here explore how media, policy-makers, professionals in institutional settings, and citizens use language to construe certain aspects of the social order in their struggles for power.

The exercise of power through language is currently being writ large on the international stage in public exchanges on COVID-19 and its origins between Chinese diplomatic officials and the US administration, particularly US President Donald Trump. Both nations are using strong rhetoric which displays a significant verbal battle in terms of who is responsible for the pandemic and how it has been handled, and which also reveals much about their respective strategic aims, domestically and internationally. These dynamics are exemplified by the powerful implications of word choice discussed by two articles in this edition.

**Craig Smith** explores the Chinese concept of *xiaokang* - officially, if inelegantly, translated as 'moderately prosperous society' - and offers **insights into the motivations and aims of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)**. The term has been adapted from Confucian thought to become an important element of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. *Xiaokang* defines China's political agenda, even during the current threat of COVID-19, and it is a key element in the CCP's political aims and for the aspirations of the Chinese people and their nation.

Cultural misunderstanding and conflict can flow in very specific and current ways from the misuse (whether unwitting or deliberate) of language. A large group of US Senators and the leaders of other nations such as Australia have called for Chinese 'wet markets' to be closed due to concerns that COVID-19 originated in the 'wet markets' of Wuhan. But **Delia Lim** highlights **critical translation and transcultural processes in her examination of the conflation of 'wet markets'**

**with ‘live wildlife markets’.** She argues that this use of language aggravates the already disturbing trend of disempowering racism against Chinese people.

Language and its real-world discriminatory effects are also explored in the contexts of gender and sexuality-diverse communities. **Michael Ewing** discusses the internationally-known acronym LGBT that is becoming widely used in Indonesia and Indonesian media in reporting on issues of gender and sexuality. He shows how the use of the term can underpin a narrative of indistinct threat that characterises much of the public discussion about gender and sexual minorities in Indonesia today. **‘LGBT’ can become constructed as an enemy that is amorphous and not fully understood, at the same time foreign, anti-religion, anti-Indonesia and corrupting.** **Claire Maree** approaches issues concerning language, gender and sexuality drawing on examples from Japanese language education. She **problematizes the ‘persistent ideology’ of heteronormativity in relation to gender and sexuality in the classroom and warns us against ‘tokenistic inclusivity’.**

**In a very different context, Ikuko Nakane** examines broader changes in the organisation of discourse when she examines **shifts in power through the changing use of language in Japanese courtrooms.** There has been a recent push towards a verbal ‘battleground’ type of courtroom communication and away from written evidence as part of the judiciary’s modernisation effort. Her article suggests that this has not necessarily empowered defence lawyers, and that prosecutors still hold overwhelming institutional power in the Japanese justice system.

**Taking a much broader view and looking at languages across history and geography, Tarek Makhlouf** reveals the deep roots of Arabic across Asia. He highlights the enormous impact the Arabic language and its script have had, and continue to have, on Asian societies. His discussion **challenges the assumption that Asian languages are neatly contained within national borders,** highlighting the complex ideologies that operate around language and the power

relationships that exist between different languages.

*Image credit: pxfuel.com*