Lexicon of Verbal Bullying (*Ijime*) in Japanese and Its Cultural Implications: An Ethnolinguistic Study of Degrading Diction

Original Article

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Abstract

The phenomenon of *ijime* (bullying) remains a persistent social issue in Japanese society, exerting serious psychological effects on its victims. Among its most subtle yet pernicious forms are verbal *ijime*, or bullying through language, ridicule, and verbal humiliation intended to degrade an individual's dignity. This study aims to identify the lexical forms employed in verbal *ijime* and examine their underlying cultural implications through a qualitative ethnolinguistic approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with native Japanese speakers, field observations in the Tokai region (Aichi, Gifu, and Mie), and analysis of documentation and field notes related to cases of verbal *ijime*. Research participants included victims and former victims of *ijime*, teachers, counselors, coworkers, and native speakers familiar with linguistic expressions of verbal bullying. Data analysis followed descriptive qualitative procedures, including transcription, reduction, classification of degrading lexicons, and interpretation of cultural meanings based on Duranti's linguistic anthropology theory and Brown and Levinson's politeness and speech act theories. Findings reveal that the lexical patterns of verbal *ijime* reflect Japan's collective value system emphasizing *wa* (harmony), *meiyo* (honor), and social conformity. Derogatory expressions serve not only as emotional outlets but also as mechanisms that reproduce cultural norms reinforcing social hierarchy. Thus, language in verbal *ijime* functions as both a mirror of cultural ideology and an instrument of social control in Japanese society.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistics, *Ijime*, Japanese Culture, Linguistic Anthropology, Verbal Bullying.

1.   Introduction

The phenomenon of *ijime* (いじめ) or bullying is one of the social problems that continues to be a focus in Japanese society. Among its various forms, verbal *ijime* or verbal bullying has profound psychological impacts and is often more difficult to detect than physical forms. Verbal bullying is carried out through utterances, mockery, insults, or other forms of communication aimed at degrading someone's dignity. In a linguistic context, such actions manifest through word choices (lexicon) containing meanings of degradation and negative social judgment toward victims (Uwakise, 2010; 文部科学省 [MEXT], 2013).

The study of verbal bullying lexicon is important not only from a linguistic perspective but also from a cultural one. Language does not stand alone but reflects the value system, norms, and worldview of its speakers (Duranti, 1997; Koentjaraningrat, 2002). Therefore, ethnolinguistic analysis of verbal *ijime* lexicon can reveal how Japanese culture views concepts of honor (*meiyo*), social status, uniformity (*wa*), and deviation from collective norms. The choice of demeaning words does not emerge randomly but is closely related to social structure

and interaction patterns in Japanese society that emphasizes group harmony and conformity (Maynard, 1997; Sugimoto, 2010).

Several previous studies have discussed the *ijime* phenomenon from various perspectives. Limpo (2021) and Santosa (2019) examined bullying representations in films and their impact on victims' identity. Their study focus emphasized narrative and psychological aspects rather than language practices that occur in the workplace or direct utterances between perpetrators and victims.

Other research conducted by Akiba (2004) and Taki (2003) illustrates that *ijime* in Japan has a collective nature and often roots in cultural values emphasizing the importance of social harmony (*wa*). Both studies highlight the social and moral aspects of bullying but have not explained how language is used as a tool of domination or social control in actual interactions, especially in multicultural work environments.

Meanwhile, Osuka et al. (2019) developed the Japan Ijime Scale (JaIS) instrument to measure *ijime* experiences quantitatively. Although this research provides important contributions in methodological aspects, its study does not focus on linguistic analysis of demeaning utterance forms. On the other hand, Ikeda et al. (2020) confirms that *ijime* experiences during school years can impact adult work environments, but this research has not examined verbal mechanisms or cross-cultural communication occurring in daily workplace practices.

Based on this description, this research is present to fill gaps that have not been widely discussed previously. This study focuses analysis on verbal *ijime* forms occurring between Japanese workers and Indonesian trainee workers in the construction sector. Through an ethnolinguistic approach, this research attempts to reveal how language functions as a means of social control, manifestation of power, and reflection of hierarchical values in collective and hierarchical Japanese work culture.

Furthermore, verbal bullying can be understood as a representation of value conflict between individuals and groups. In collectivist-oriented Japanese culture, different individuals are considered to disrupt social balance (Nishida, 2005; Sugimoto, 2010). Through demeaning utterances, *ijime* perpetrators affirm social norms by suppressing individuals considered deviant. Thus, language becomes a tool of social control as well as a medium for affirming group identity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Matsuda, 2001). Research on ijime has previously been conducted by Santosa (2019).

This research aims to identify and analyze lexicon used in verbal ijime and examine its cultural implications in Japanese society. An ethnolinguistic approach is used to understand the relationship between linguistic forms and the cultural values underlying them (Duranti, 1997). Through this study, it is hoped to gain deeper understanding of how language plays a role in shaping, reproducing, and legitimizing social practices in the form of verbal bullying, and how Japanese cultural value systems are reflected in demeaning word choices (Rahardi, 2005; Uwakise, 2010).

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with an ethnolinguistic review concept. This approach was chosen because the research not only focuses on linguistic forms but also on their relationship with cultural values and social systems of Japanese society. Through ethnolinguistics, language is viewed as a cultural mirror and a tool to understand how Japanese society interprets concepts of honor, conformity, and social practices related to *ijime* (Duranti, 1997; Koentjaraningrat, 1990).

The research was conducted in several Tokai regions, Japan, such as Aichi, Gifu, and Mie, which have high social awareness of *ijime* issues. Research subjects consisted of: victims and former victims of verbal *ijime* (students, university students, or workers); teachers, school counselors, and colleagues who were witnesses or mediators of *ijime* cases; native Japanese speakers who have experience or knowledge about forms of bullying utterances. Informant selection was conducted using purposive sampling technique, namely selecting participants based on relevance criteria and direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Sugiyono, 2016).

Data was obtained through several techniques:

1) In-depth interviews with native Japanese speakers using semi-structured guides. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and recorded for subsequent transcription.
2) Field observation, to observe social context and verbal interactions in school environments, workplaces, or communities with potential for verbal *ijime* occurrence.
3) Field notes and documentation, including conversation transcripts, researcher reflective notes, and supporting sources from online media or anti-*ijime* campaigns.

Data analysis was conducted descriptively qualitatively with the following stages:

1) Transcription and data reduction, namely transcribing interview results, then filtering utterances containing elements of insult, mockery, or degradation.
2) Classification of degradation lexicon, by grouping words or expressions based on type, function, and context of use (for example, based on social status, gender, or form of insult).
3) Ethnolinguistic analysis, to interpret cultural meaning behind such lexicon, relating it to concepts of *wa* (social harmony), *meiyo* (honor), and Japanese social hierarchical structure.
4) Result interpretation and conclusion, namely explaining the relationship between linguistic forms and cultural values underlying verbal *ijime* practices.

Analysis was conducted with the help of linguistic anthropology theory (Duranti, 1997) and politeness and speech act theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to understand aspects of degradation and face-threatening acts in bullying utterances. To ensure validity, this research uses source and method triangulation techniques. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data from various informants and matching interview results with observations and documentation. Additionally, member checking was performed with informants to ensure accuracy of researcher interpretation of utterance meanings expressed.

A total of 25 informants engaged in this research, consisting of 15 Indonesian trainee workers, 6 Japanese coworkers, and 4 supervisors/foremen directly involved in everyday workplace interactions. Because they actively engaged in or witnessed verbal communication pertaining to ijime activities, these individuals were chosen.

The construction sector was intentionally chosen as the research setting due to its intense physical demands, high production pressure, masculine work culture, and strongly hierarchical communication patterns. Such conditions tend to foster direct verbal expressions, including harsh commands and insults, making it a relevant environment for investigating verbal *ijime* phenomena in naturalistic contexts.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Research Results

Research data findings and discussion based on field interview data obtained show 25 findings from field data analysis regarding the use of lexicon with degradation/demeaning connotations in the context of work interactions between leaders, Japanese employees, and Indonesian trainee workers in construction environments. Main data was obtained through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and recording of utterances emerging in actual work situations.

Analysis focused on utterance forms reflecting verbal bullying (verbal *ijime*), particularly word choices containing degradation meanings toward interlocutors. Through an ethnolinguistic approach, this research examines the relationship between linguistic forms, social structure, and cultural values underlying the use of such utterances. Thus, language is not only seen as a communication tool but also as a mirror of cultural values and social hierarchy of Japanese society.

This section presents empirical conclusions based purely on field data obtained from 25 workplace contacts. 25 lexical elements and utterance patterns that were classified as verbal *ijime* expressions were found through analysis. These included derogatory pronouns (*kisama*, *temee*), demeaning nouns (*aho*, *baka*, *inu*), dehumanizing assessments (*tsukaenai*, *atama ga warui*), insults based on appearance (*debu*, *kuroi*), exclusionary directives (*kaere*, *kubi*), and psychological assaults (*shine*, *atama okashii*). Each lexical unit was captured under authentic interactional circumstances between Japanese supervisors and Indonesian trainees.

Through these results and discussion, it is hoped to reveal how verbal bullying in multicultural work environments is not only understood as a purely linguistic phenomenon but also as a manifestation of Japanese society's value system and worldview emphasizing hierarchy, honor, and social conformity. Following is the analysis of such data:

3.1.1. Data (1)

吉田	:手すりを片付て、置く場所は枠足場を作って！
ハムディ	:はい
吉田	:違うだろう、貴様！

Yoshida	: *Tesuri wo katadzukete, Okubasyou wa wakuashiba wo tsukutte!*
Hamdi	: *Hai*
Yoshida	: *Chigau darou, Kisama!*

Yoshida	: Tidy up the handrail, make the storage place with frame scaffolding!
Hamdi	: Yes
Yoshida	: That's wrong, you!

In data (1), there is an utterance of the lexicon *kisama*. Historically, *kisama*/貴様 had an honorific meaning ("Your Excellency"), but this meaning shift occurred due to cultural and power dynamics. In the context of the Japanese military (Meiji to World War II), this term was used by high-ranking soldiers to subordinates to create associations of authority and intimidation. Thus, in modern society, the lexicon *kisama* is not merely a form of address but a symbol of verbal power affirming social dominance. In an ethnolinguistic context, this meaning shift of the lexicon *kisama* is an example of a semantic process influenced by cultural structure and Japanese society's value system. In ethnolinguistics, language is considered both

a product of culture and simultaneously a tool for shaping social reality (Duranti, 1997). The utterance *kisama* reflects Japanese cultural value system that is highly hierarchical and status-oriented.

For Japanese people, language use indicates social position within group structure (*uchi/soto*). When Yoshida (Japanese leader) uses the lexicon *kisama* to Hamdi (foreign worker), he actualizes his social position as the higher party not only in terms of position but also ethnocentrically (Japanese person vs foreign worker). This is consistent with the concept of "language as social practice" (Duranti, 1997), where utterances are not neutral but reflect power relations between speakers. In this case, *kisama* is a form of verbal degradation, namely a linguistic action manifesting power and insult. According to Nishida (2005), Japanese cross-cultural communication emphasizes context sensitivity. However, in emotional situations such as anger, this control can be lost and produce verbal aggression. The utterance *kisama* functions as a linguistic symbol of anger and affirmation of Japanese superiority identity, while for foreign interlocutors like Hamdi, this word becomes a form of linguistic *ijime* (verbal bullying) because it creates fear and feelings of inferiority. Thus, *kisama* is not only an insult but a symbolic action demonstrating power distance and Japanese cultural control over outsiders.

3.1.2. Data (2)

吉田	:ハムディ、直交クランプを取って！
ハムディ	:はい, これです
吉田	:あほか！直交クランプだろう自在クランプじゃねーよ

Yoshida	: *Hamudi, choko kuranpu wo totte!*
Hamdi	: *Hai, kore desu*
Yoshida	: *Ahoka! Choko kuranpu darou jizai kuranpu jyane-yo.*

Yoshida	: Hamdi, get the *choko kurampu* (non-rotating clamp).
Hamdi	: Yes, this one.
Yoshida	: Stupid! It's the *choko kurampu*, not the *jizai* clamp (rotating clamp).

In data (2), in Kansai dialect, *aho* can have a light nuance (like "fool" in jest). However, in Tokyo dialect which is standard language (*hyōjungo*) and used in formal work worlds, the lexicon aho becomes an insult word. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, the use of lexicon アホ (*aho*) contains social and dialectal values that differ in each Japanese region. According to Koentjaraningrat (2002), language meaning is greatly determined by the cultural context in which the language is used. Because the interaction location is a formal workplace, the use of lexicon aho shows violation of politeness norms (*keigo*) and represents a form of verbal aggression in Japanese communication culture. Yoshida, as Japanese leader, has higher social status than Hamdi, foreign trainee worker. When he says *ahoka*! he uses language not to convey information but to enforce social hierarchy. According to speech act ethnography theory (Duranti, 1997), every utterance has a social function, and in this case, the utterance function is giving social stigma to subordinates.

The use of rude words to subordinates also reinforces the concept of *uchi/soto* (inside vs outside group). Hamdi is positioned as soto 'outsider', so superiors feel legitimate to use aggressive language forms. In Japanese work culture, precision and high discipline are core values (*sekinin* and *chūsei*). However, when small mistakes are met with insults like "アホ", this shows cultural dissonance between the ideal of *keigo* (hierarchical politeness) and the

reality of field interactions. According to Uwakise (2010), forms like this are included in 言葉の暴力 /*kotoba no bōryoku* 'violence through language' which is part of the verbal *ijime* phenomenon in modern Japanese society. For foreign workers like Hamdi, this utterance is not only linguistic but also has psychological and social identity impacts: it reinforces impressions of inferiority and cultural alienation. Language and culture mutually shape each other. In an ethnolinguistic perspective, the rude utterance *aho* not only reflects emotion but represents Japanese value system, power, and cultural identity. In the context of intercultural interaction (Japan-Indonesia), differing perceptions of word meanings cause communication asymmetry. This phenomenon is a form of linguistic *ijime* (verbal bullying) showing how Japanese socio-cultural structure is expressed and maintained through language.

3.1.3. Data (3)

成田　　　　　：ハムディ、柱足場配っておいて、ここ一本あそこ日本ね
ハムディ　　　：了解です。
成田　　　　　：ハムディなんで違うよ、ここ一本だろうあそこ日本だろうお前　なんでできないや、国帰れ！

Narrita　　　：*Hamudi, hashira ashiba kubatte oite, koko ippon asoko nihon ne*
Hamudi　　　：*Ryoukai desu*
Narita　　　：*Hamudi nande chigau yo, koko ippon darou asoko nihon darou omae nande dekinai ya, kuni kaere!*

Narita　　　：Hamdi, distribute the support poles first, one pole here, two poles there, okay
Hamdi　　　：Understood
Narita　　　：Why is it wrong, Hamdi? One pole here, two poles there, right? Why can't you even do this... Just go home.

In data (3), the utterance *kaere*! means "go home!" used by Japanese superior (Narita) to trainee worker (Hamdi) considered slow or making mistakes. This form is a direct command without using polite particles, so ethnolinguistically reflects social distance and speaker dominance. In Japanese culture, rude language like this violates the value of *wa* (harmony) and the principle of *enryo* (self-restraint) which forms the basis of social interaction (Ide, 1989). The use of *kaere* in work environments shows how language can function as a tool of power and social control as stated by Bourdieu & Thompson (1991), that utterances reflect the speaker's social position.

3.1.4. Data (4)

俊哉　　　　　：ヘリの趣味はなに？
ヘリ　　　　　：趣味はサッカーをすることです。
俊哉　　　　　：嘘、お前デブだろう。

Toshiya　　　：*Heri no syumi wan ani?*
Heri　　　　　：*Syumi was aka wo suru koto desu*
Toshiya　　　：*Uso, omae debu darou.*

Toshiya　　　：Heri, what's your hobby?
Heri　　　　　：My hobby is playing soccer
Toshiya　　　：Lie, you're fat.

In data (4), the term debu literally means "*fat*", but in work contexts is often uttered as mockery toward someone's physique. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance shows a form of body-shaming rooted in aesthetic values and honor (*meiyo*) of Japanese society (Sugimoto, 2010). This utterance violates politeness principles demanding respect for others (*sonkei no hyōgen*). Although sometimes uttered in joking contexts, its social function still affirms status differences between speaker and utterance receiver.

3.1.5. Data (5)

竹村　　　　　：アントニ、あれちゃんと縛って！

アントニ ：はい。。。

竹村　　　　　：違うだろう、死ね！！！

Takemura	: Antoni, *are chanto shibatte!*
Antoni	: *Hai..*
Takemura	: *Chigau darou, Shinee!!!*

Takemura	: Antoni, tie that (steel bar) properly!
Antoni	: Yes...
Takemura	: That's wrong, go die!

In data (5), the expression shine! means "*die!*" is an extreme utterance form showing anger and verbal aggression. In Japanese culture that prioritizes politeness (*keigo bunka*), this word is highly taboo in work environments (Ide, 1989). According to Culpeper (2011), utterances like this are included in impoliteness strategy that deliberately attacks the interlocutor's face. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, this form illustrates violation of *wa* value and reveals harsh characteristics of masculine communication in Japanese construction world (Nishimura, 2015).

3.1.6. Data (6)

ハムディ	：吉田さん、手すりどこに置きますか
吉田	：奥に置いて！
ハムディ	：自在クランプはどこですか
吉田	：お前うるさいな、自分で探せ！

Hamdi	: *Yoshida san, tesuri doko ini okimasuka*
Yoshida	: *oku ni oite!*
Hamdi	: *Jizai kurampu ha dokodesuka*
Yoshida	: *Omea urusai na, jibun de sagase!*

Hamdi	: Mr. Yoshida, where should I put the *tesuri* (handrail)?
Yoshida	: Put it in the corner!
Hamdi	: Where is the swivel clamp?
Yoshida	: Shut up and find it yourself!

In data (6), the word *urusai* literally means "noisy", but in work conversations can become a form of rude sarcasm toward someone's behavior, for instance when a worker is considered too talkative or slow. According to Matsumoto (1988), maintaining calm and

harmony is an important part of Japanese communication, so the utterance *urusai* is a violation of politeness norms. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance shows vertical relationships between superiors and subordinates, where language is used to control and suppress interlocutor behavior (Duranti, 1997).

3.1.7. Data (7)

根元	：ハムディ、ロップで材料を縛って！
ハムディ	：はい、こんな感じですか
根元	：違う、下手くそなお前。

Nemoto	: Hamdi, *roppu de zairyou wo shibatte!*
Hamdi	: *Hai, konna kanji desuka?*
Nemoto	: *Chigau, heta kuso na omae.*

Nemoto	: Hamdi, tie the materials with *roppu* (thick rope)
Hamdi	: Yes, is it like this?
Nemoto	: Wrong, you're so dumb.

In data (7), the lexicon *hetakuso* means "very stupid" or "completely incompetent". In Japanese work world, technical ability is identical with professional honor, so this utterance is culturally an attack on someone's self-esteem (*meiyo*). According to Goffman & Best (2005), insults like this attack the face or social image of the interlocutor. In an ethnolinguistic perspective, *hetakuso* functions as a means of maintaining social hierarchy and strengthening speaker authority over subordinate workers.

3.1.8. Data (8)

請井	：ハムディ、その船は隣のコンクリートに置いて！
ハムディ	：はい、ここですか
請井	：違う、あそこだよ　この野郎！

Ukei	: Hamudi, *sono fune ha tonari no konkurito ini oite!*
Hamudi	: *Hai, koko desuka*
Ukei	: *Chigau, asoko dayo kono yarou!*

Ukei	: Hamdi, put that water tub next to the concrete!
Hamdi	: Yes, here?
Ukei	: No, over there, "you bastard"!

In data (8), the expression *kono yarou*! literally means "this person!", but is used as a curse equivalent to "bastard!". In Japanese communication culture, rude expressions like this violate *keigo* norms and transgress the principle of *wa* (harmony). According to Haugh (2007), forms of cursing in Japan are often disguised in group solidarity, but in work contexts, the solidarity function transforms into domination. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance shows how masculine communication style in workplaces reflects hierarchical and patriarchal social value systems.

3.1.9. Data (9)
げんた ：ハムディ、お前これできるか
ハムディ 　　　：すみません、まだできません
げんた ：お前使えないな〜

Genta 　　　　**:** Hamudi, *omae kore dekiruka*
Hamudi 　　　: *Sumimasen, mada dekimasen*
Genta 　　　　: *Omae tsukaenai na*

Genta 　　　　: Hamdi, can you do this?
Hamdi 　　　　: Sorry, I can't yet
Genta 　　　　: You're useless~

In data (9), the word *tsukaenai* literally means "cannot be used", but when directed at someone means "useless". This utterance is a form of insult toward someone's professional ability. According to Silverstein (2003), language can function as a marker of social identity and power through indexicality. Ethnolinguistically, the use of *tsukaenai* shows hierarchical views toward trainee workers considered to lack high work value, and reflects social structure where language becomes a tool for status affirmation.

3.1.10. Data (10)
坂井 　　　　：ハムディ、ほら見て！車の窓当たったよ。
ハムディ 　　　：どこですか見えないです
坂井 　　　　：これ、お前が悪いな！

Sakai 　　　　: Hamudi, *hora mite! kuruma no mado atatta yo*
Hamudi 　　　: *Doko desuka mineai desu*
Sakai 　　　　: *Kore, omae ga warui!*

Sakai 　　　　: Hamdi, look at this! The car window got hit
Hamdi 　　　　: Where? I can't see
Sakai 　　　　: This, it's your fault

In data (10), the word *warui* means "bad" or "wrong". In the context of utterances like "お前が悪い！" ("it's your fault!"), this word functions as a direct accusation attacking the interlocutor's negative face. In Japanese culture emphasizing group harmony, direct accusations like this are considered impolite (Ide, 1989). Ethnolinguistically, the utterance *warui* shows a shift from collectivity values toward individualism influenced by modern work environment pressure. This also indicates how language plays a role as a tool for moral evaluation and social behavior control.

3.1.11. Data (11)
北村 　　：アマド、あそこにパイプを付けて！
アマド ：はい。。。
北村 　　：違うな、これウンコみたいだな〜

Kitamura 　　　: Ahmad, *asoko no paipu wo tsukete!*
Ahmad 　　　　: *Hai..*

Kitamura : *Chigauna, kore unko mitai da na ~*

Kitamura : Ahmad, install the steel pipe there!
Ahmad : Yes
Kitamura : Wrong, this is like shit~

In data (11), the word *unko* means "feces" or "excrement", which belongs to taboo utterances (*kinshi kotoba*) in Japanese language. In work contexts, using this word toward someone indicates extreme insult and verbal abuse. According to Allan & Burridge (2006), the use of taboo words is a form of verbal aggression reflecting social disrespect. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, the use of *unko* in workplaces reflects the loss of politeness boundaries (*reigi*) and dehumanization toward the interlocutor. This phenomenon shows that language can become a tool of symbolic oppression as stated by Bourdieu & Thompson (1991), where utterances function to affirm the speaker's social position.

3.1.12. Data (12)

吉田 ：ハムディ、その足場を先に配って！
ハムディ ：はい、あそこはいくつ置きますか
吉田 ：考えろ、頭使え！

Yoshida : Hamdi, *sana ashiba wo sakini kubatte!*
Hamdi : *Hai, asoko wa ikutsu okimasuka*
Yoshida : *Kangaero, atama tsukae!*

Yoshida : Hamdi, distribute that scaffolding first!
Hamdi : Yes, how many should I place there?
Yoshida : Think, use your head!

In data (12), the utterance *atama tsukae*! means "use your head!". This sentence is usually uttered with an angry tone, thus indicating mockery toward the interlocutor's intelligence. Based on speech act theory (Searle, 1979), this form is classified as directive act used to pressure and regulate someone's behavior. In Japanese work culture, this utterance touches on the value of honor (*meiyo*) and thinking ability considered important in work ethos (Sugimoto, 2010). Ethnolinguistically, this utterance illustrates intellectual hierarchy showing how language becomes a symbol of superiority and tool of social control (Duranti, 1997).

3.1.13. Data (13)

吉田 ：とりあえずシートを縛って！
ハムディ ：はい、これも縛りますか
吉田 ：当たり前だろう、これ簡単だよう　お前頭が悪いな〜

Yoshida : *Toriaezu shi-to wo shibatte!*
Hamdi : *Hai, kore mau shibarimasuka*
Yoshida : *Atarimae darou, kore kantan dayou omae atama ga warui na~*

Yoshida : For now, tie the tarp!
Hamdi : Yes, should this also be tied?
Yoshida : Of course it should be tied, this is easy, you're dumb

In data (13), the phrase *atama ga warui* literally means "bad head" or "stupid". This utterance is a form of negative assessment toward someone's ability. In politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) call utterances like this attacks on positive face, namely someone's self-image that wants to be valued. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance reflects *senpai–kōhai* cultural values where subordinates are considered naturally to receive harsh criticism from superiors. However, in cross-cultural practice, this utterance can become a form of verbal *ijime* eroding foreign workers' self-esteem.

3.1.14. Data (14)

成田	：この材料をばらした後片付けてね
ハムディ	：はい
成田	：ハムディ、片付けはちゃんとやれよ　これ汚いよ。

Narita	: *Kono zairyo wo barashita atau katadzukete ne*
Hamdi	: *Hai*
Narita	: Hamdi, *Katadzukete wa chanto yare yo kore kitanai yo.*

Narita	: After dismantling these materials, tidy them up, okay
Hamdi	: Yes
Narita	: Hamdi, do the tidying properly, this is still messy.

In data (14), the expression *chanto yare*! means "do it properly!". Although it appears as an ordinary command, high tone and emotional context make it a form of pressuring utterance. Based on the *uchi–soto* (inside–outside group) concept, this utterance reinforces social boundaries between Japanese workers and foreign workers. According to Holmes (2000), workplace language often functions as power enactment, namely a tool to affirm authority. Ethnolinguistically, *chanto* yare shows how command language is used to maintain productivity, but simultaneously reproduces social hierarchical structure in Japanese work world.

3.1.15. Data (15)

神原	：おい!何しょうんなお前は
バンバン	：赤城さんにちょっと手伝っていますよ
神原	：お前首だよいらないよ。

Kanbara	: *Oi! Nansyounna omae wa*
Bambang	: *Akagi san ini cyotto tetsudatte imasu yo*
Kanbara	: *Omae kubi dayo iranai yo.*

Kanbara	: Oi! What are you doing?
Bambang	: I'm helping Mr. Akagi a bit
Kanbara	: You're fired, not needed anymore.

In data (15), literally, the word *kubi* means "neck", but idiomatically is used as a threat "you're fired!". In Japanese work culture, losing one's job is considered shameful (*haji*) and threatens family honor. According to Bourdieu & Thompson (1991), forms of verbal threats like this are included in symbolic violence, where language is used as a weapon of domination. Ethnolinguistically, the utterance *kubi* shows the relationship between social status, economy,

and honor, and illustrates how linguistic threats can cause profound psychological pressure on subordinate workers.

3.1.16. Data (16)

野田	：スルタン、お前こち来い！
スルタン	：はい、何ですか
野田	：お前黒いな〜

Noda	: Surutan, *omae kochi koi!*
Surutan	: *Hai, nandesuka*
Noda	: *Omae kuroi na*

Noda	: Sultan, come here!
Sultan	: Yes, what is it?
Noda	: You're black~

In data (16), the word *kuroi* means "black". In cross-cultural interaction contexts, this word can become a form of mockery toward skin color or appearance of foreign workers. According to Sue et al. (2007), utterances like this are included in microaggression, namely disguised forms of linguistic discrimination. Ethnolinguistically, the use of *kuroi* shows aesthetic bias in Japanese society identical with white skin as a symbol of cleanliness and perfection (Nakamura, 2019). Thus, this utterance shows how aesthetic values and ethnocentrism are reflected through daily workplace language.

3.1.17. Data (17)

吉田	：足場板を配って、配ったら番線で縛って！
ハムディ	：はい
吉田	：ハムディ、ボケ　何をしている？分からないか

Yoshida	: *Ashiba ita wo kubatte, Kubattara bansen de shibatte!*
Hamdi	: *Hai*
Yoshida	: Hamdi, *boke nani wo shite iru? wakaranaika?*

Yoshida	: Distribute the scaffolding boards, after distributing tie them with wire rope
Hamdi	: Yes
Yoshida	: Hamdi, idiot, what are you doing? Don't you understand?

In data (17), the word *boke* generally means "fool" or "senile". It originates from *manzai* comedy culture in Kansai, where boke plays the role of comedian pretending to be stupid. However, in the work world, this word changes meaning into an insult toward someone's lack of focus or mistakes. According to Nishimura (2015), lexical forms like *boke* show how popular culture elements can transform into offensive utterances in different social contexts. Ethnolinguistically, the use of *boke* reflects the flexibility of Japanese language allowing humorous meaning to change into forms of verbal violence depending on context and power relations.

3.1.18. Data (18)

山本　　　　：てめえ、何回言わせるんだよ！
パンドゥ　　：すみません、また手すりを持って来ます
山本　　　　：てめえみたいなやつ、バカだな

Yamamoto　：*Temee, nankai iwaserundayo!*
Pandu　　　：*Sumimasen, mata tesuri wo motte kimasu*
Yamamoto　：*Tememitai yatsu, Baka dana*

Yamamoto　：Hey you, how many times do I have to tell you!
Pandu　　　：Sorry, I'll bring the safety handrail again
Yamamoto　：People like you are really stupid!

In data (18), the word *temee* is a second-person pronoun that is very rude, used to show anger or severe insult. According to Ide (1989), pronoun selection in Japanese language is highly dependent on social hierarchy and power relations. In work contexts, the use of *temee* ethnolinguistically shows highly unequal relationships between speaker (Japanese superior) and interlocutor (foreign trainee worker). This form of address not only violates politeness norms but also indicates verbal aggression affirming social dominance and Japanese speaker ethnocentrism toward foreign workers.

3.1.19. Data (19)

きた　　　　：お前また間違えたのか？
ルクマン　　：そうなんですか
きた　　　　：しっかりやってよ。お前はいらない。
ルクマン　　：すみません、気をつけます

Kita　　　　：*Omae mata machigaeta noka?*
Lukman　　：*Sounandesuka*
Kita　　　　：*Shikkari yatte yo. Omae wa iranai.*
Lukman　　：*Sumimasen, ki wo tsukemasu*

Kita　　　　：Did you make a mistake again?
Lukman　　：Did I make a mistake?
Kita　　　　：Do it properly! You're not needed here
Lukman　　：Sorry, I'll be more careful

In data (19), the phrase *omae wa iranai* means "you are not needed". In work communication contexts, this utterance shows rejection of someone's social existence. According to Scollon et al. (2012), language can function as a tool of linguistic exclusion, namely a means to erase someone's membership from a social group. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance reflects the application of the strong *uchi-soto* (inside-outside group) concept in Japanese culture. By positioning foreign workers as outsiders (soto), this utterance functions to strengthen social boundaries between Japanese and non-Japanese groups. This phenomenon affirms that language is not merely a communication tool but also an instrument of exclusion and cultural control.

3.1.20. Data (20)

中村	：パンチャーお前何をしている？
パンチャー	：この足場を建て方は考えます。
中村	：え？お前知らないの？
パンチャー	：まだ知らないです。

Nakamura	: Panca, *Omae nani wo shite iru?*
Panca	: *Chotto tate kata wa kangaemasu*
Nakamura	: *E? Omae shiranai no?*
Panca	: *Mada shiranai desu.*

Nakamura	: Panca, what are you doing?
Panca	: I'm thinking about how to build this scaffolding
Nakamura	: Huh? You don't know?
Panca	: I don't know yet.

In data (20), the utterance *shiranai no* means "don't know, huh?". Although it appears as an ordinary question, in certain situations it becomes sarcasm or mockery toward someone's ignorance. Lakoff (1973) states that forms of irony and sarcastic tone are included in indirect impoliteness strategies. In Japanese work culture, utterances like this are used by seniors to show linguistic superiority over subordinates. Ethnolinguistically, this phenomenon reflects the *senpai-kōhai* concept, where language ability becomes a symbol of experience and social status.

3.1.21. Data (21)

川崎	：おい！何やってんだ、落とすなよ　馬鹿野郎！
ヒラジュディン	：すみません、気をつけます。

Kawasaki	: *Oi! nani yattenda, otosuna yo bakayarou!*
Hirajudin	: *Sumimasen, ki wo tsukemasu.*

Kawasaki	: Hey! What are you doing, don't drop it, you dumb!
Hirajudin	: Sorry, I'll be more careful.

In data (21), the curse *bakayarou!* means "you dumb!" or "bastard!". In Japanese culture, this word is known as a form of rude utterance generally uttered in high-emotion situations. According to Culpeper (2011), this utterance is included in on-record impoliteness because it directly attacks the interlocutor's positive face. In an ethnolinguistic context, *bakayarou* reflects strong values of masculinity and hierarchy in the Japanese construction world, where harsh communication style is considered normal (Nishimura, 2015). However, from the perspective of wa culture, this utterance is a form of violation of the principle of social harmony.

3.1.22. Data (22)

岡本 　：おいヘンキ、お前犬みたいだな。何もやる。

ヘンキ ：。。。（黙って苦笑）

Okamoto 　：*Oi henki, omae ini mitai da na. Nademo yaru.*
Henki 　：.... (*Damatte nigawarai)*

Okamoto 　：Hey Henki, you're like a dog. You do anything.
Henki 　：... (silent with a strained smile)

In data (22), the word *inu* means "dog", but in social contexts is used to demean someone considered worthless or too obedient. Allan and Burridge (2006) state that animal-based curses are a form of dehumanization that eliminates human dignity. Ethnolinguistically, the use of *inu* in workplaces indicates a form of verbal violence wrapped in hierarchical systems. This utterance also shows how animal metaphors are used to reinforce social inequality and affirm speaker dominance over foreign workers.

3.1.23. Data (23)

岸野 　　：おい！そこじゃないって言っただろう！日本語分からないか！？

スギアント 　：すみません。。もう一度お願いします。

Kishino 　：*Oi! Soko jyanai tte itta darou! Nihongo wakaranaika!?*
Sugianto 　：*Sumimasen.. mau ichido onegaishimasu.*

Kishino 　：Hey! I already said not there! Don't you understand Japanese?
Sugianto 　：Sorry... please repeat once more.

In data (23), the sentence *nihongo wakaranai ka* means "you don't understand Japanese, do you?". Although it appears as a question, the high-tone context makes it a form of mockery toward the interlocutor's language ability. Ochs et al. (1992) explains that language ability is closely related to social identity. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance shows linguistic ethnocentrism, where Japanese language is considered a superior standard for assessing someone's competence. This phenomenon shows how language mastery becomes an indicator of social acceptance in Japanese work environments.

3.1.24. Data (24)

健太 　　：なんで逆に入れてんだよ！頭おかしいじゃないのか！？

ラムラン 　：すみません。。説明がよく分からなかったです。

健太 　　：ちゃんとやれよ！

Kenta 　：*Nande gyaku ni iretendayo! Atama okashii jyanai no ka!?*
Ramlan 　：*Sumimasen... Setsumei ga yoku wakaranakatta desu.*
Kenta 　：*Chanto yare yo!*

Kenta 　：Why did you install it backward? Are you crazy!?
Ramlan 　：Sorry... I didn't quite understand the explanation.
Kenta 　：Do it properly!

In data (24), the expression *atama okashii* means "head is strange" or "crazy". In work contexts, this word is used to judge someone's behavior considered unreasonable. According to Terkourafi (2008), utterances attacking mental condition are classified as psychological verbal abuse. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance shows a form of symbolic violence toward the interlocutor's mental health, and indicates lack of empathy in hierarchical work relations. The use of this utterance also shows social bias toward the concept of "normality" in Japanese culture that upholds behavioral conformity.

3.1.25. Data (25)

岡本	：バユ、これ全部間違えたじゃないか！お前のせいだ！
バユ	：申し訳ございません。確認してなかったです。
岡本	：やる前に確認しろ！

Okamoto	: Bayu, *kore zenbu machigaeta jyanaika! Omae no sei da!*
Bayu	: *Mou shiwake gozaimaen... kakunin shiteinakatta*
Okamoto	: *Yaru mae ini kakunin shiro yo*

Okamoto	: Bayu, all of these are installed wrong! It's your fault!
Bayu	: I apologize... I hadn't confirmed it
Okamoto	: Confirm before doing it!

In data (25), the phrase *omae no sei da* means "it's your fault". In Japanese culture that emphasizes collective responsibility, misuse of this form indicates individualization of mistakes. According to Matsumoto (1988), the principle of *wa* requires each group member to maintain harmony, not blame each other. Ethnolinguistically, this utterance reflects a shift from collectivity values toward individual pressure. Language in this case is used as a pressure instrument to affirm mistakes and shame the other party, showing how utterances can reflect power structures and shame culture (*haji*) in Japanese society.

3.2. Discussion

According to a discussion of the results, verbal ijime serves as a methodical kind of symbolic power in Japanese workplace culture in addition to being a spontaneous emotional outpouring. By portraying superiors as legitimate authority figures and Indonesian trainees as inferior foreigners, the observed lexicons show how language enacts hierarchical oppression.

Rude pronouns like "*omae*," "*temee*," and "*kisama*" are frequently used, which fosters social distance and indicates power imbalance. Animal metaphors (*inu*), bodily mocking (*debu*, *kuroi*), and intelligence attacks (*boke*, *atama ga warui*) further undermine workers' social identity, operating as means of psychological control rather than operational training. The conflict between the harsh realities of productivity-driven businesses and cultural aspirations of harmony (*wa*) is reflected in these language habits.

According to recent studies (Ikeda et al., 2020; Nakamura, 2019; Osuka et al., 2019), bullying at work in Japan often takes the form of verbal and symbolic abuse rather than outright physical violence. Additionally, current patterns of linguistic discrimination are mirrored in microaggressive statements directed at foreign workers, particularly with reference to appearance and language ability (Sue et al., 2007; Nishimura, 2015).

This study thus indicates that verbal ijime functions at the nexus of cultural values, economic pressure, and power relations, where language serves as both a social control tool and a communication medium.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to reveal the forms and meanings of verbal *ijime* occurring in work environments between Japanese workers and Indonesian trainee workers, examined from an ethnolinguistic perspective. Based on analysis results of 25 utterance data, it can be concluded that verbal *ijime* is not only in the form of curses or rude expressions, but also reflects cultural values and social structure of Japanese society.

This study concludes that verbal ijime in Japanese construction workplaces is implemented through systematic use of disparaging lexicons, directives, insults, and psychological pressure aimed predominantly from Japanese superiors toward Indonesian trainees. These statements serve as verbal tools of dominance that uphold social borders, hierarchy, and discipline.

Three key features emerge from the research: (1) language is a tool for affirming authority; (2) verbal statements often transgress harmony principles and polite standards; and (3) utterances strengthen insider-outsider disparities within hierarchical work cultures. Verbal ijime consequently represents not only individual acts of hostility but also culturally rooted communicative behavior reflecting broader social structures.

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