

Analysing News Coverage in the Context of Islam Apostasy Using Hayakawa's Trichotomy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to conduct a descriptive content analysis to examine the coverage and potential bias regarding Islam apostasy in Harakahdaily and The Star. The analysis utilised Hayakawa's trichotomy of general semantics three sentence types, namely reports/facts, inferences, and judgements, to assess the technical aspects of the language employed in news reporting. A comprehensive search was conducted to gather news articles on Islam apostasy published in Harakahdaily and The Star over a five-year period from 2019 to 2023. The study found that Harakahdaily had more apostasy-related articles than The Star. Moreover, being an independent newspaper, Harakahdaily used more inference and judgement statements in its headlines, implying bias. Contributors to Harakahdaily's stories, mainly Islamic scholars and Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) members, lack journalistic training. In contrast, The Star, a mainstream newspaper, had fewer such issues but should carefully select words to avoid misunderstandings. This study highlights how analysing news coverage of Islam apostasy using Hayakawa's trichotomy reveals biases, stressing the need for journalists, especially those lacking training, to provide objective, unbiased information, promoting balanced reporting.

Keywords: Islam apostasy, Harakahdaily, The Star, news coverage, general semantics, Hayakawa's trichotomy

INTRODUCTION

Apostasy refers to the act of rejecting one's previous religious or political beliefs (Hornby 2020). In the context of Islam, apostasy is known as *al-riddah*, *irtidad*, or *murtad* in Arabic. Linguistically, *al-riddah* is defined as "leaving something for something else" (Al-Manawi 1990). Based on this definition, an apostate is someone who returns to blasphemy. *Murtad*, or apostasy, means diverting from one thing to another, specifically in the context of Muslims, it refers to diverting from Islam to other religions or beliefs (Nik Rahim 2018).

Despite negative media coverage of Islam and Muslims, Islam is currently the fastest-growing religion worldwide. Surprisingly, there are more than 1.9 billion Muslims globally, comprising nearly one-fourth of the world's population. This makes Islam the second largest religion after Christianity (Pew Research Center 2017).

While the number of Muslims is increasing, there are also instances of Muslims choosing to leave Islam, particularly in Malaysia. This includes not only new Muslims (converts) reverting to their former religion but also Malays leaving Islam. Article 160 of the Constitution of Malaysia defines Malay as a person who professes the religion of Islam. Challenges faced by converts after embracing Islam, such as lack of faith, insufficient knowledge about Islam, religious commitment, marital issues,

and family conflicts, have led some to revert (Nazihah & Firdaus Khairi 2022). Malays, on the other hand, leave Islam due to various reasons such as sexual abuse, being gay, being effeminate, marriage issues, Christian zeal, atheism, concerns about Islamic morals, problems with hadith and Quranic science, and influences from individuals like Christian Prince (Morgan & Jasni 2020).

Religious, cultural, and ethnic interests in Malaysia sometimes clash over apostasy, conversion, and deviant Islamic practices, affecting social harmony in certain areas (Nehaluddin, Ahmad & Abdul Mohaimin 2016). These apostasy cases challenge the justice system and contribute to social tensions between Islam and other religious minorities, disrupting the harmony within Malaysia's multi-religious society (Azweed et al. 2017a).

The influence of mass media has been a significant research topic concerning apostasy. The unfiltered information disseminated through media poses risks, as individuals with lower levels of education are more susceptible to its influence. Propaganda and indoctrination can be conveyed without clarifying the accuracy of the shared information. These include discussions on free lifestyles, atheism, life after death, divine punishment, and other topics. Additionally, mass media may also report on scientific advancements that challenge believers' faith (Morgan & Jasni 2020). For instance, according to a report by *Free*

Malaysia Today (2017), a news headline titled “Malay atheist fears he might be killed” highlighted concerns among Malay atheists who feared for their safety following a statement by former Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Shahidan Kassim. Kassim had called for the tracking and identification of atheists amidst an investigation into the local chapter of an international atheist organisation. However, the use of the word “killed” in the headline, intended to grab attention, led to heightened apprehension and disrupted harmony. In reality, the content of the news indicated that the former Minister aimed to locate Muslims who had embraced atheism to assist them in returning to their faith. Furthermore, in an article by *Malaysiakini* (2018), the headline “Syed Saddiq: Why no divine retribution for corruption?” highlighted criticism from former Youth and Sports Minister Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman towards Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Zahid Hamidi. Zahid had asserted that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) activities invite divine punishment and trigger natural disasters, referencing the incident in Palu, Indonesia. Saddiq questioned whether similar divine punishment would be invoked against thieves and the corrupt. The headline appears to convey a propagandistic message aimed at diverting attention from the rise of LGBT issues in Malaysia. Furthermore, the article later downplayed Zahid’s remarks by mentioning that the 1,000 individuals involved in LGBT activities in Palu, where the earthquake and tsunami occurred, were merely members of an LGBT-oriented *Facebook* group.

Balancing the coverage of apostasy in the media is crucial to maintain religious harmony. Too many stories on apostasy can disrupt harmony, while too few stories can be seen as biased filtering. For example, Malaysia’s three most contentious religious conversion cases involve M. Moorthy, Nyonya Tahir, and Lina Joy. The first case sparked controversy as it entailed a dispute between Moorthy’s Indian/Hindu family and the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Council, which claimed Moorthy had converted to Islam during his lifetime without his family’s knowledge. The second case involved a Malay/Muslim woman who renounced Islam while alive and lived as a Chinese practising Buddhism. The third case centred on a Muslim woman who converted to Christianity to marry her Christian boyfriend but faced legal obstacles due to her identification card listing her as Muslim. These cases have garnered significant international

attention and media coverage. However, Malaysian media have agreed to avoid contentious issues of racial and religious sensitivities to prevent unnecessary tensions and animosity among the people (Halimahton, Hua & Raman 2006).

The media holds a crucial position as a transmitter of information, influencing public perception and opinion by how it presents and delivers messages. This grants the media the power to act as an agent of change, capable of impacting the public (Mohd Nizam & Siti Aishah 2018). Hence, the objective of this study is to perform a descriptive content analysis to investigate the coverage of Islam apostasy in two Malaysian newspapers, focusing on potential bias. Taking an approach grounded in general semantics, the analysis aims to delve into the use of language to shape meaning for readers, with a focus on achieving accuracy and fairness in reporting.

The two Malaysian newspapers selected for this study include *The Star* and *Harakahdaily*. *The Star*, founded in 1971, is a prominent English-language newspaper in Malaysia, boasting a rich history of over seven decades. Renowned for its comprehensive coverage spanning local and international news, business, sports, and entertainment, the publication has earned accolades for its balanced reporting and editorial integrity, appealing to a diverse readership nationwide (Kong 2013). Meanwhile, *Harakahdaily*, established in 1997, is a Malaysian news portal associated with the Malaysian Islamic Party, also known as the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). It focuses on politics, current affairs, and Islamic viewpoints, serving as an online platform for the official newspaper, *Harakah*. These two newspapers were chosen to concentrate specifically on the subject of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

GENERAL SEMANTICS AND HAYAKAWA’S TRICHOTOMY

General semantics, a school of thought, was introduced and pioneered by Alfred Korzybski, a Polish-born engineer and philosopher, in 1933 with the publication of his book “Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics.” Regrettably, the book garnered unfavourable reviews due to its less-than-ideal construction, insufficient research, and subpar writing quality (Hayakawa 1950).

At its core, general semantics delves into the process of interpretation or, as Korzybski preferred to call it, evaluation. It explores how we assess and verbalise our reactions to various aspects of our environment, be it objects, events, symbols, or words. Sometimes, our methods of evaluation lead to conflicts and circular controversies, while in other instances, they contribute to effective problem-solving. Korzybski observed that human intelligence, which excels in cooperative problem-solving in fields like science and technology, often gets entangled in disputes and controversies in areas such as philosophy, politics, and human relations. His aim was to distinguish between the successful problem-solving approaches in science and the less successful, pre-scientific methods prevalent in other domains (Hayakawa 1950).

General semantics studies language as a means of representing reality and how it influences thought and behaviour. In essence, it can be summarised by three simple metaphors: “The map is not the territory,” emphasising that the representation (map) is not the actual thing it represents; “The map can never represent all of the territory,” indicating that no verbal description can fully encapsulate the entirety of reality; and “No map can be accurate unless it contains itself within the map,” suggesting that our perceptions are interactions between our nervous system and the world, and our verbal descriptions (maps) are only as accurate as our language allows them to be (Rapoport 1954).

The three guiding principles of general semantics are as follows: First, “the word is not the thing it represents,” also known as non-identity, highlights the distinction between the word or label and the actual entity it denotes. However, despite this awareness, we often react to words and labels as if they were the things themselves. For example, the mere mention of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) evokes unease in many listeners. Reflect on the predicament faced by the producer of a dietary candy named Ayds. Due to its resemblance to the medical term, sales plummeted by 50 percent, compelling the manufacturer to rebrand the product (Griffin 2003). The principle extends to recognising the uniqueness of everything in relation to reality rather than merely verbal descriptions (extensionalism).

Second, “the word can never describe all about anything,” termed non-allness, underscores that no matter how extensive and precise our vocabulary, we can only provide approximations of events,

objects, or nature. We cannot fully capture the entirety of their essence in verbal descriptions; thus, the map can never represent all aspects of the territory. For example, the statement “Cheryl is stingy.” The presence of the word “is” tends to lock us into perceiving fixed character traits. To address this, we should refrain from making categorical declarations about personality and instead qualify our assessments with statements like, “My Cheryl is stingy.” Although this might sound possessive, it offers a more accurate alternative to the general, all-encompassing judgement (Griffin 2003).

The third principle, self-reflexiveness, emphasises the importance of continuously reevaluating our assumptions about the world to maintain an accurate and up-to-date representation of reality. To achieve this, one must incorporate all previous experiences or maps into the current understanding, thereby ensuring a clearer perspective of the territory. This principle builds upon the idea of non-identity, recognising that each subsequent map (map₂) is distinct from its predecessor (map₁), and none of them fully encompasses the territory. For example, a European cartographer could create a reliable map of the continental United States by referring to 48 separate state maps, even without visiting the country. However, the map created this way cannot capture the full depth of the landscape as one would perceive by being physically present on location (Griffin 2003). Communication follows a similar principle. To prevent misunderstandings, individuals should refrain from employing abstract language. This involves moving away from ambiguous generalisations and instead offering precise details.

In 1941, Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa’s book “Language in Thought and Action” played a crucial role in elucidating and popularising Korzybski’s concepts. Within its pages, he introduced three distinct sentence types: reports, inferences, and judgements. The initial category, reports, centres on verifiable information. For instance, verifying a hardware store item’s price increase can be achieved by contacting the store or personally analysing the solution’s iodine content. While sometimes we might lack the means to independently verify report content, the nature of a report allows verification when resources are available or invalidation if inaccuracies emerge (Hayakawa 1978).

The second sentence type, inferences, encompasses statements regarding matters not directly known, formed based on observed data. To

illustrate this differentiation, consider the statement: “He’s afraid of women.” Unlike a report, this sentence draws an inference from observable data, such as blushing and stammering in the presence of women. Inferences hold immense importance and can be crafted with care or recklessness. They might rely on extensive prior experience or none at all. A skilled mechanic, for example, can accurately infer an engine’s condition by sound, whereas an amateur’s inferences might be entirely incorrect. The quality of inference relates directly to the quality of the underlying reports or observations and the inference maker’s abilities (Hayakawa 1978).

The third sentence type, judgements, serves to express assertions about values, tastes, morals, or beliefs based on personal experience in one’s reporting. For instance, our unique interests and backgrounds inherently influence our selection and abstraction processes, rendering our experiences somewhat “slanted.” A subject’s importance can greatly differ for a 50-year-old suburban lawyer compared to a 20-year-old unemployed urban parent. A writer who remains impartial, neither advocating nor opposing, avoids undue slanting except when aiming for specific literary effects. Avoiding slanting is not solely about impartiality; it is more importantly about crafting accurate maps of experiential territory. Deeply biased individuals struggle to create accurate maps since they perceive enemies solely as enemies and friends only as friends. A proficient writer, through imagination and insight, can view a single subject from numerous perspectives (Hayakawa 1978).

Hayakawa underscores the importance of employing the three sentence types to ensure effective communication. This methodology allows for clearer expression by combining simple, factual sentences with more complex ones involving inference and judgement. Utilising this diverse structure enhances communication’s precision and depth. These sentence types later serve as a framework in general semantics, enabling the measurement of news bias through a trichotomy lens.

SEMANTICS IN JOURNALISM

Mass communication plays a crucial role in shaping collective meanings of words. The theory of meaning suggests that people learn or modify the meanings associated with words through exposure to portrayals in mass media. As a result, their interpersonal communications are further influenced

by the meanings derived from the media, eventually becoming part of the general language and culture. The media also plays a significant role in stabilising these meanings, acting as a source of both language changes and reinforcement of conventional usages (Abochol & Adegboye 2015). Therefore, the mass media plays a significant role in shaping the meanings of words, which become integrated into language and culture. This highlights the need for awareness of media influence on language and its impact on society.

A study by Abochol and Adegboye (2015) on semantic implications for the media, journalists, and the Nigerian state found that citizens in Nigeria become fearful or concerned when they encounter newspaper headlines containing violent expressions. As a result, many citizens are reluctant to purchase newspapers as the stories often revolve around violence. Some individuals read Nigerian newspapers with violent headlines for research purposes, but others, including people from other countries, may be discouraged from visiting Nigeria due to safety concerns arising from widespread violence. Certain locations in Nigeria that are prone to violence are avoided by both Nigerians and visitors. This indicates that the presence of violent expressions in newspaper headlines affects readers’ perceptions and has consequences for newspaper sales and tourism in Nigeria. Addressing the issue of violence in media portrayals may help alleviate concerns and improve the perception of safety.

Faridah (2010) examined the use and misuse of words in reporting by analysing war news in four Malaysian newspapers: *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *Utusan Malaysia*, and *Berita Harian*. The study aimed to identify how war is reported, from which perspectives, and through which angles. While most headlines reflect the content of the news, sub-editors have the responsibility to choose the right words and terms, avoiding labels and judgements. However, due to insensitivity, some headlines may exacerbate animosity. General semanticists argue that terms such as communism, capitalism, racism, terrorism, fundamentalism, conservatism, dictatorship, and others are based on individual perceptions and need clear definitions. Journalists have an ethical obligation to minimise harm, and thus, selecting appropriate words in news and headlines is a crucial task in newsroom decision-making to strive for accurate and unbiased reporting.

Mohd Rajib and Faridah (2011) explored prejudice manifested in war and terrorism news in the same four Malaysian newspapers. The study

focused on communication inhibitors identified by general semanticists, including dead level abstracting, two-value orientation versus multi-value orientation, undue identification, and unconscious projection. The findings indicated that prejudicial words used in these newspapers were often coined by major international news agencies and their sources. Abstraction and unconscious projection occurred more frequently than two-value orientation and undue identification. Journalists sometimes face constraints in selecting accurate words to describe events, leading them to rely on simpler intensional meanings, such as using familiar labels and symbols like “terrorism” and “suicide bombers.” Understanding the meaning of words and language used in the mass media can help individuals and journalists become aware of the presence of prejudice and take measures to reduce it before it manifests through behaviour.

Marr (1972) conducted a study comparing the modes of communication in two newspapers, *Jen Min Jih Pao* (People’s Daily) and the *Des Moines Register*. The analysis categorised the types of sentences used in the reporting of major international events: the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict, the first Chinese H-bomb, the first U.S. moon landing, the launching of the Chinese satellite, and the killings at Kent State University. The study found that events involving China’s achievements or perceived U.S. failures were reported in *Jen Min Jih Pao* with a higher percentage of judgement and exhortation sentences. The U.S. paper, on the other hand, reported contradictory statements from different sources without indicating which was correct.

Lasorsa and Lewis (2010) emphasised the fundamental principle of journalism that news articles should be based on facts rather than assumptions or evaluations. Their content analysis of deceptive and legitimate news stories in various publications in the Associated Press wire service, the *Boston Globe* daily newspaper, the *New Republic* monthly newsmagazine, the *New York Times* daily newspaper, and the *USA Today* daily newspaper revealed that deceptive articles contained a lower proportion of factual statements and a higher proportion of inferential and judgemental statements compared to ostensibly legitimate articles. These findings underscore the importance of reporters relying on firsthand observations, conducting interviews with credible sources.

Lowry (1986) conducted two studies testing the validity of Hayakawa-Lowry content

categories. The first study involved 39 students, and the second involved 81 students from an Introduction to Mass Communication course. Results showed that untrained audience members perceived Hayakawa’s distinctions between reports, inferences, and judgements, influencing their perceptions of news objectivity. Negative judgements were sometimes seen as more biased. Education level affected bias perception, with Ph.D. students rating report sentences as more objective. Factual report statements without source attribution were perceived as more objective, while inference sentences were viewed as more objective without verbal cues indicating information verifiability. Attribution significantly impacted perceived objectivity, especially with judgement sentences, where unattributed judgements were seen as more biased, particularly unfavourable ones. The results strongly indicate that the distinctions measured by the level of education in content analysis studies significantly impact news consumers.

Nevertheless, propaganda is associated with general semantics. To illustrate, Mohd Rajib (2010) presents a perspective rooted in general semantics, which involves balanced thinking for assessing propagandistic language. General semanticists consistently maintain that the core principle of general semantics acts as a final defense against preconceived notions and biases inherent in propaganda messages. General semantics offers a pathway for communicators to rectify language and human behaviour by cultivating a “sane” approach through an awareness that symbols do not equate to the actual things they represent, maps are not identical to territories, and words are distinct from the concepts they signify (Hayakawa 1978). Mohd Rajib (2010) posits that the interdisciplinary framework of general semantics, which facilitates the evaluation of our daily language habits and promotes awareness, could contribute to initiatives for verbal peace.

Following this, Shamsiah and Ahmad Sauffiyan (2014) undertook a content analysis of propaganda within the *Harakah* newspaper. The results revealed that within the type category, white propaganda was employed most frequently, totalling 79 articles, while within the technique category, the card-stacking technique was predominant with 107 articles out of a total of 161 articles. Consequently, the study’s objectives were achieved. White propaganda generally emanates from a clearly identified source and is characterised by subtler methods

of persuasion, such as standard public relations tactics and one-sided presentation of arguments. According to the authors, card stacking tends to be most effective when the evidence presented is accurate. This technique proves highly efficient in swaying public opinion, thus, it finds application in nearly all forms of propaganda. Shamsiah and Ahmad Sauffiyani (2014) contend that by gaining a deeper comprehension of *Harakah*'s propagandistic approach, the government could enhance its political strategies to effectively counter issues raised by the opposition.

Previous studies have revealed the presence of prejudicial, judgemental, and propagandistic patterns in news reporting, indicating the influential role of mass media in shaping news portrayal. By examining how language is employed in reporting on apostasy in Islam, researchers can shed light on the ways in which media narratives shape attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours within society. This research has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding apostasy, media discourse, and their implications for religious freedom, social cohesion, and human rights. Therefore, while recent studies on semantics in journalism may be lacking, the relevance of this research lies in its potential to inform and enrich discussions on apostasy and media representation in contemporary society. Informed by the general semantics perspective, this study aims to examine potential bias by exploring how independent and mainstream newspapers report cases of Islam apostasy.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, the selection of case studies included the Malaysian alternative newspaper *Harakahdaily* and the mainstream newspaper *The Star*. The choice was influenced by factors such as their controversial editorial stance, reporting style, or the issues they cover. *The Star*, a widely read English-language newspaper in Malaysia, has occasionally faced criticism from different segments of society, with some perceiving it as having a pro-establishment or pro-business bias. For instance, subsequent to its front-page publication on May 27, 2017, which depicted Muslims praying under the headline "Malaysian terrorist leader," *The Star* faced criticism from internet users, social organisations, and political parties. They denounced the cover as a "misleading visual representation" and deemed

it insensitive towards Muslims (New Straits Times 2017).

Harakahdaily, on the other hand, is the official newspaper of PAS and is known for its Islamist perspective and critical stance towards the ruling government and its policies (Shamsiah & Ahmad Sauffiyani 2014; Zeti Azreen & Mazni 2017). For instance, on November 8, 2023, the Malaysian government revoked *Harakah*'s media accreditation, following a controversial article published on November 6. The Information Department (JPM), responsible for accrediting media outlets, took this drastic measure after *Harakah* published a piece titled "Malaysia di bawah Anwar ragu-ragu sokong Palestin?" (Is Prime Minister (PM) Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's government doubtful in supporting Palestine?), questioning the administration's stance on Palestine. This article, suggesting that the Anwar-led government was influenced by Western powers and featuring a photo with an Israeli flag in the background, elicited strong criticism from the PM himself. During a parliamentary session, Anwar accused *Harakah* of attempting to associate him with Israel (Eynez Syazmeena 2023).

The objective of this study is to perform a content analysis, which, as described by Krippendorff (2019), serves as a valuable research technique for drawing replicable and valid inferences from texts or other meaningful materials in relation to their context of use. Content analysis is particularly useful for qualitative analysis in this study. To conduct the content analysis, the digital archives of *Harakahdaily* and *The Star* were utilised to compile Islam apostasy-related newspaper articles from 2019 to 2023. A total of 28 articles focusing on Islam apostasy issues were selected for analysis, using the keywords "*murtad*" and "Malaysian apostasy." These keywords were used in search of news articles on Islam apostasy because they succinctly capture the essence of the study, encapsulating its main idea and theme. The content analysis specifically focuses on the headlines of the articles. Headlines play a vital role in indicating the topic and providing a summary of the main content, aiding readers in understanding the meaning of the text (Bonyadi & Samuel 2013).

The analysis of the headlines of newspaper articles on Islam apostasy is conducted within the framework of Hayakawa's trichotomy of general semantics, which encompasses three sentence types:

1. *Statements of report/fact*: Present verifiable assertions based on objective reality, supported by verification. An objective statement refers to

- a statement about the objective reality, which implies that it can only be either true or untrue. It is not subjective and cannot be true for one person while being untrue for another.
2. *Statements of inference*: Propose assertions about unseen relationships between things, based on observable facts and supported by verification and explanation of the connections. Inferences can be categorised as either true or untrue. When two individuals disagree on an inference, it indicates that at least one of them is incorrect. However, determining the truth of an inference is more challenging than establishing the truth of factual information. This is because inferences involve interpreting reality rather than solely observing it, and interpretations can vary among people. Therefore, it is crucial to support inferences by verifying the facts and providing explanations.
 3. *Statements of judgement*: Express assertions about values, tastes, morals, or beliefs, which are subjective and rely on verification of facts, explanation of inferences, and an attempt to persuade readers of implied values or perspectives. In contrast to statements of report/fact or inference, judgements are not objectively right or wrong. Two individuals can hold differing opinions on a judgement, and both perspectives can be considered valid. However, this does not imply that there is no room for debate or discussion. Certain values can hold greater depth and persuasive power than others. When presenting facts, it is important to

establish cause-effect inferences. Additionally, it is valuable to express one's moral perspective on the world and endeavour to persuade others to see things from one's point of view.

The three sentence types derived from general semantics were employed as variables in this study to uncover the meanings conveyed in the selected Malaysian newspapers headlines related to Islam apostasy. These headlines serve as the primary data for analysis. A greater occurrence of inference and judgement statements indicates an increased biasness. To exemplify the utilisation of the three sentence types, a headline from both *Harakahdaily* and *The Star* was furnished, accompanied by textual representations, with the *Harakahdaily* headlines translated into English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the total 28 articles addressing Islam apostasy issues published in *Harakahdaily* and *The Star* between 2019 and 2023, the majority, 20 articles (71.43%), were from *Harakahdaily*. The distribution of these articles across years was as follows: $N=7$; 35% in 2021, $N=5$; 25% in 2020, $N=4$; 20% in 2023, $N=3$; 15% in 2022, and $N=1$; 5% in 2019. In terms of sections, these articles primarily appeared in the *Nasional* section ($N=9$; 45%) and the *Berita* section ($N=5$; 25%). The remaining articles were found in the *Viral*, *Dakwah*, and *Pimpinan* sections ($N=2$; 10%, respectively).

TABLE 1. *Harakahdaily* news headlines of Islam apostasy, 2019-2023

| Headlines | Section | Date |
|--|----------|-------------|
| Murtad: Kebebasan mutlak bakal undang petaka | Berita | 22 Sep 2019 |
| Kekeliruan Liberal mengenai hukum murtad | Nasional | 12 Jan 2020 |
| Kebebasan beragama bukan tiket untuk murtad | Nasional | 12 Jan 2020 |
| Murtad: Awas tuntutan 'tolol' G25 | Nasional | 13 Jan 2020 |
| G25 kumpulan Liberal kelirukan isu murtad | Nasional | 13 Jan 2020 |
| Sangkaan murtad: Jangan dihukum sebarang | Viral | 21 Dec 2020 |
| Riddah dan segala sebab menjadikan seseorang murtad | Dakwah | 31 Jan 2021 |
| Murtad dihukum bunuh selepas enggan taubat | Pimpinan | 8 Feb 2021 |
| Lelaki dipercayai murtadkan wanita Islam dikenal pasti | Nasional | 20 Feb 2021 |
| Kes video murtadkan wanita dalam tindakan polis | Nasional | 21 Feb 2021 |
| Hasut murtad: Ummah N9 lapor polis | Berita | 25 Feb 2021 |
| Murtad: Orang ramai dinasihat 'tidak memamaskan' keadaan | Berita | 25 Feb 2021 |
| Individu mahu murtad perlu dikuarantin | Berita | 3 Mar 2021 |
| Dari hak penjagaan kepada memurtadkan | Nasional | 29 Mar 2022 |

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|--|----------|-------------|
| Murtad bukan bidang kuasa mahkamah sivil – hakim | Nasional | 12 Jul 2022 |
| Tiada campur tangan Mahkamah Sivil dalam murtad | Berita | 14 Jul 2022 |
| ‘Mentega Terbang’ manifestasi pluralisme agama, promosi murtad | Pimpinan | 1 Mar 2023 |
| Isu filem Mentega Terbang: Kerajaan perlu tegas | Nasional | 2 Mar 2023 |
| Serangan tersirat Mentega Terbang | Viral | 6 Mar 2023 |
| Ulasan mengenai filem kontroversi ‘Mentega Terbang’ | Dakwah | 7 Mar 2023 |

Out of the total 28 articles on Islam apostasy published from 2019 to 2023, eight articles (28.57%) were found in *The Star*. Among these articles, the majority ($N=4$; 50%) were published in 2020. Additionally, two articles (25%) were published in both 2021 and 2022, while one article (12.5%) was published in 2023. There were no articles addressing

Islam apostasy issues published in 2019. In terms of sections, a majority of these articles were located in the *Nation* section ($N=4$; 50%). The remaining articles were distributed across the *Reflecting on the Law* section ($N=2$; 25%) and the *Letters and So Aunty, so What?* sections ($N=1$; 12.5%).

TABLE 2. *The Star* news headlines of Islam apostasy, 2019-2023

| Headlines | Section | Date |
|--|-----------------------|-------------|
| G25: Constitutional amendments needed to legitimise Jakim’s existence | Nation | 11 Jan 2020 |
| G25 responds to criticism of report | Letters | 17 Jan 2020 |
| Learning to live together in harmony | Reflecting on the Law | 17 Dec 2020 |
| Zulkifli: Don’t make accusations of apostasy based on rumours | Nation | 23 Dec 2020 |
| Police looking for man wanted for alleged apostasy | Nation | 25 Feb 2021 |
| Building bridges, dismantling walls | Reflecting on the Law | 8 Apr 2021 |
| Moderation, the Saudi way | So Aunty, so What? | 14 Dec 2022 |
| Perikatan MPs to seek audience with S’gor Sultan, Conference of Rulers over private Bill | Nation | 8 June 2023 |

Out of the 20 Islam apostasy news headlines in *Harakahdaily*, eight news headlines (40%) represent statements of report/fact. Inferences and judgements statements, on the other hand, make up 30% of the Islam apostasy news headlines, with six news headlines each.

The majority of statements of reports/facts found in the *Harakahdaily* news headlines regarding Islam apostasy served the purpose of providing verifiable information. However, there was also a headline in *Harakahdaily* that served as a foundation for potential ideological exhortations. An example of such a headline is “Murtad dihukum bunuh selepas enggan bertaubat” (Death sentence for apostate who refuse to repent) (*Harakahdaily* 8 February 2021). This finding aligns with Marr’s (1972) study, which emphasised that a report/fact can either provide informational data or be utilised as a basis for launching ideological exhortations.

The majority of statements of inference observed in the *Harakahdaily* news headlines concerning Islam apostasy were formulated as conjectures. An example of such an inference is “Kebebasan beragama bukan tiket untuk murtad”

(Religious freedom is not a ticket to apostasy) (*Harakahdaily* 12 January 2020). This finding aligns with the study conducted by Lasorsa and Lewis (2010). Furthermore, the inappropriate use of words or phrases in the inferences found within the Islam apostasy headlines of *Harakahdaily* resonates with Hayakawa and Hayakawa’s (1991) assertion that communicators often fail to give adequate attention to their use of inferences, resulting in an overuse of inferences in reporting. Consequently, this reinforces Ibrahim’s (2010) argument that journalists bear an ethical responsibility to minimise harm, making the selection of appropriate words in news and headlines a critical aspect of newsroom decision-making.

The statements of judgement found in the *Harakahdaily* news headlines regarding Islam apostasy were expressed in the form of evaluations. For example, “Murtad: Kebebasan mutlak bakal undang petaka” (Apostasy: Absolute freedom has the potential to invite catastrophe) (*Harakahdaily* 22 September 2019). This news headline emphasised a disagreement with the idea of granting absolute freedom to religion, aligning with the findings of

Lasorsa and Lewis' (2010) study, which characterised judgements as statements expressing favour or disfavour towards something. Hence, this discovery reinforces the assertion made by Mohd Rajib and Faridah (2011) that comprehending the meaning of

words and language utilised in mass media enables individuals and journalists to recognise the existence of prejudice and proactively address it to prevent its manifestation through behaviour.

TABLE 3. Percentage of Hayakawa's trichotomy of general semantics in *Harakahdaily* news headlines of Islam apostasy, 2019-2023

| Sentence Types | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Statements of report/fact | 8 | 40.0 |
| Statements of inference | 6 | 30.0 |
| Statements of judgement | 6 | 30.0 |
| Total | 20 | 100.0 |

Among the eight news headlines related to Islam apostasy in *The Star*, it can be observed that five headlines (62.5%) present statements of report/fact. Statements of judgement account for 25.0% of the Islam apostasy news headlines, consisting of two headlines, while statements of inference make up 12.5%, represented by one headline.

The predominant utilisation of statements of report/fact in *The Star* news headlines concerning Islam apostasy is geared towards presenting verifiable information. For example, the headline "Constitutional amendments needed to legitimise Jakim's existence" (*The Star* 11 January 2020) exemplifies this. This aligns with Marr's (1972) assertion that report/fact sentences serve the purpose of conveying informational data.

The statement of inference identified in *The Star* news headline pertaining to Islam apostasy was formulated as speculation, which can fall into the categories of either true or untrue. A prime example of such an inference is "Learning to live together in harmony" (*The Star* 17 December 2020). This discovery aligns with the findings of Lasorsa and Lewis' study (2010). Additionally, the improper use of words in the inference present in *The Star*'s Islam apostasy headline resonates with Hayakawa and

Hayakawa's assertion (1991) that communicators often overlook the significance of their choice of inferences. Consequently, this further reinforces Faridah's argument (2010) that journalists bear an ethical responsibility to minimise harm, emphasising the critical role of selecting appropriate words in news and headlines as part of newsroom decision-making.

The statements of judgement identified in *The Star* news headlines concerning Islam apostasy were presented as evaluations. A notable example is "Moderation, the Saudi way" (*The Star* 14 December 2022). This news headline highlights an endorsement of the concept of moderation implemented by Saudi Arabia, aligning with the findings of Lasorsa and Lewis' study (2010), which characterised judgements as statements expressing favour or disfavour towards a particular subject. Consequently, this discovery reinforces the claim made by Mohd Rajib and Faridah (2011) that understanding the meaning of words and language used in mass media enables individuals and journalists to recognise the presence of bias and proactively address it to prevent its manifestation through behaviour.

TABLE 4. Percentage of Hayakawa's trichotomy of general semantics in *The Star* news headlines of Islam apostasy, 2019-2023

| Sentence Types | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Statements of report/fact | 5 | 62.5 |
| Statements of inference | 1 | 12.5 |
| Statements of judgement | 2 | 25.0 |
| Total | 8 | 100.0 |

According to the study's findings, *Harakahdaily* features a higher number of apostasy-related newspaper articles compared to *The Star*. In order to uphold religious harmony, it is essential to carefully handle the representation of apostasy in the media. An excessive emphasis on apostasy can disrupt this harmony, while insufficient coverage may be perceived as biased censorship, as pointed out by Halimahton, Hua, and Raman (2006).

Examining the types of sentences used in news headlines, it was observed that the independent newspaper, *Harakahdaily* employs a greater quantity of inference and judgement statements compared to the mainstream newspaper, *The Star*. This correlation aligns with the results of Shamsiah and Ahmad Sauffiyan's (2014) research, which revealed that *Harakahdaily*'s predominant form of propagandistic reporting is white propaganda, with card-stacking being the most frequently utilised technique. White propaganda presents accurate yet potentially skewed information, involving the selective use of facts, illustrations, and logical or illogical statements to present the best or worst possible scenario for an idea, programme, person, or product (Lee & Lee 1939). Card stacking is closely related to the concept of slanting in general semantics. It primarily involves the omission of arguments that contradict the advocated position, focusing solely on supporting evidence or arguments. Nonetheless, the chosen arguments or evidence can be either true or false (Severin & Tankard 2010).

Irrespective of the language used, journalists carry a significant responsibility to uphold journalistic objectivity, which implies fairness and impartiality in gathering and disseminating news and information. Journalists are trained to adhere to factual reporting and avoid incorporating personal opinions (Hayakawa & Hayakawa 1991). Nevertheless, the majority of individuals who contributed to *Harakahdaily*'s narratives consist of Islamic scholars and PAS members, lacking a journalistic background and proper journalistic practices.

STATEMENTS OF REPORT/FACT

1. "Murtad dihukum bunuh selepas enggan bertaubat" (Death sentence for apostate who refuse to repent) (*Harakahdaily* 8 February 2021)

In actuality, it has been reported in the *hadith* al-Bukhari (in Fath al-Bari 1998) that those who change

their Islamic religion should be killed. According to the opinion of the Shafi'i *madhab* followed by Muslims in Malaysia, an apostate is given a three-day opportunity for repentance. If they still refuse to repent, they will be sentenced to death (Abu Bakar ibn Muhammad al-Husayni 1994).

The Kelantan State *hudud* bill also states (Rang Syariah Criminal Canon Law (II) 1993) that if an apostate persists in their refusal to repent and maintains their opposing stance, the court will pronounce the death penalty upon them. This death penalty ruling for apostasy is derived from the foundational theory of the Islamic state, as expressed in the book *Sistem Pemerintahan Negara Islam* (Islamic State System of Government) written by Abdul Hadi Awang in 1995. The book states that apostates should be sentenced to death if they do not repent after being given the opportunity.

As a result, the news headline is factually verifiable. In addition to presenting verifiable information, the news headline includes an ideological exhortation that mirrors the beliefs of Abdul Hadi Awang, the 7th President of PAS, as evident in his aforementioned book *Sistem Pemerintahan Negara Islam*. It is noteworthy that *Harakahdaily*, the newspaper under scrutiny, serves as the official publication of PAS and is recognised for its Islamist perspective.

2. "G25: Constitutional amendments needed to legitimise Jakim's existence" (*The Star* 11 January 2020)

In January 2020, G25, a group comprising former civil servants in Malaysia, released a comprehensive 404-page report titled "Administration of Matters Pertaining to Islam." In this report, they raised concerns about the constitutionality of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). Detractors argued that Article 12 of the Federal Constitution specifically addresses education matters, not the criminal enforcement of religion. Additionally, the report highlighted the absence of any mention of Halal certification. The G25 study also questioned the legal foundation of the religious court system.

In essence, G25 claimed that the establishment of JAKIM and the Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia (MKI) deviated from the constitutional framework since there was no provision for the agency to be established at the national level. Therefore, the news headline published in *The Star*, "G25: Constitutional amendments needed to

legitimise Jakim's existence," reports the claims made by G25 and provides verifiable information. This aligns with Marr's (1972) assertion that sentences conveying reports or facts serve the purpose of conveying informational data.

STATEMENTS OF INFERENCE

1. "Kebebasan beragama bukan tiket untuk murtad" (Religious freedom is not a ticket to apostasy) (*Harakahdaily* 12 January 2020)

The issue of apostasy and freedom of religion raises concerns in Malaysia, as the imposition of the death penalty on apostates contradicts the principle of freedom of religion, which is a fundamental human right. Article 18 of the Declaration of Human Rights emphasises the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to change one's religion or belief.

According to the Qur'an, religion is a personal choice that should not be coerced by anyone, including state intervention or religious authorities. Choosing a religion should align with individual beliefs, and thus, freedom of religion should be respected. It is inappropriate for the state or religious authorities to threaten punishment, including the death penalty, for apostasy unless it poses a threat to the security of the state and society. Verses in the Qur'an, such as Al-Baqarah (2):217 and 256, Yunus (10):99, al-Nisa' (4):137, and al-Kahfi (18):29, emphasise the principle of freedom of religion (Rokhmadi et al. 2023).

According to Mohammad Nidzam (2018), the imposition of the death penalty has the potential to create substantial tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is due to the perception that it presents Islam as a harsh religion that disregards human rights. In societies that strive for peaceful coexistence and harmony, this raises concerns and undermines the fundamental principles of living together. Consequently, the peaceful interaction between individuals of diverse religions, particularly within a multicultural country like Malaysia, becomes compromised.

As a result, the news headline is accepted without question as being true, with the writer neglecting to examine or clarify the connection between freedom of religion and apostasy. Furthermore, the presence of the phrase "not a ticket" implies that deciding to become an apostate is an incorrect decision. This demonstrates that the relationship between freedom

of religion and apostasy is not portrayed as being aligned.

2. "Learning to live together in harmony" (*The Star* 17 December 2020)

Malaysia can be considered a harmonious country due to its ability to accommodate people of different races and ensure their safety. While Malaysia generally maintains a low profile, it is recognised as one of Asia's most friendly and tolerant nations, where the three major ethnic communities largely coexist in harmony (Ramadurai 2021). This is further supported by the Malaysian government's decision not to introduce a new law, namely the National Harmony and Reconciliation Commission Bill, indicating that the existing legislation is deemed sufficient (Malay Mail 2020).

Therefore, the news headline challenges the notion of Malaysia being a harmonious country by employing the word "learning" at the forefront. The writer suggests that Malaysia is in the process of achieving harmony. Consequently, the inference made in the news headline can be considered inaccurate.

STATEMENTS OF JUDGEMENT

1. "Murtad: Kebebasan mutlak bakal undang petaka" (Apostasy: Absolute freedom has the potential to invite catastrophe) (*Harakahdaily* 22 September 2019)

The use of the phrase "absolute freedom" lacks clarity as it equates religious freedom with unrestricted freedom. Consequently, this news headline exhibits bias towards the subject matter. Furthermore, the news headline demonstrates a clear bias against apostasy and religious freedom, as emphasised by the writer's suggestion that they have "the potential to invite catastrophe." This aligns with Lasorsa and Lewis' (2010) argument that a judgement reflects a position of favouritism or disfavour.

The writer's unfavourable stance towards apostasy and religious freedom contradicts the principles of *maqasid shariah*, which prioritise peace and tranquility while safeguarding religion, life, and property. Additionally, the Federal Constitution's provisions, as stated in Article 10 (Mohammad Nidzam 2018), allow Parliament to impose restrictions on the freedoms granted based on constitutional grounds. Hence, the writer clearly

aims to influence readers by conveying a particular perspective on apostasy and freedom of religion.

2. “Moderation, the Saudi way” (*The Star* 14 December 2022)

The news headline exhibits clear support for Saudi Arabia’s intention to adopt a more moderate form of Islam, as stated by Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince (Chulov 2017). Consequently, the writer implies that Malaysia should also pursue a similar path towards moderation, involving a departure from ultra-conservative practices and an emphasis on empowering citizens and attracting investment. The writer’s intention is to convey a personal moral perspective and persuade readers to adopt their viewpoint, which aligns with the characteristics of a statement of judgement.

CONCLUSION

Functioning as a conduit for information, the media occupies a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and viewpoints through its presentation and delivery of messages. This bestows upon the media the authority to operate as an agent of transformation, wielding the potential to effect change within the populace. The impact of mass media has emerged as a substantial focal point in the realm of apostasy research. The unvetted information propagated by the media gives rise to inherent hazards, particularly given the heightened susceptibility of individuals with limited educational backgrounds to its sway. Instances of propaganda and indoctrination can be communicated without a clear validation of the accuracy of the disseminated information. Moreover, the coverage of apostasy contributes to the escalation of social tensions between Islam and other religious minorities, thereby disrupting the equilibrium within Malaysia’s diverse religious coexistence.

The study revealed that *Harakahdaily* had a higher number of apostasy-related articles compared to *The Star*. Additionally, as an independent newspaper, *Harakahdaily* utilised more inference and judgement statements in its news headlines compared to *The Star*, indicating a propagandistic approach. Most of the people who provided content for *Harakahdaily*’s stories are Islamic scholars and PAS members, without a journalistic background or proper journalistic training. The careful portrayal of apostasy in the media is critical for upholding

religious harmony. Consequently, *Harakahdaily* needs to be mindful of its frequency of reporting on apostasy within Islam. Given its tendency for biased reporting on Islam apostasy, it must adopt a fair reporting approach to enhance transparency in its coverage. Furthermore, in order to maintain relevance and viability within the newspaper industry, *Harakahdaily* must adhere to established journalistic standards. Conversely, while *The Star*, as a mainstream newspaper, did not face any notable concerns in this regard, it should exercise caution in word selection to prevent potential misunderstandings. Regardless of language considerations, journalists bear the responsibility of maintaining objectivity, ensuring fairness and impartiality by presenting factual information devoid of personal opinions.

Nonetheless, this study faces limitations concerning data access and instrumentation. Only 28 articles were available within the five-year timeframe from 2019 to 2023. Additionally, utilising the Hayakawa-Lowry News Bias Analysis Categories could have provided more detailed findings, suggesting a direction for future research. Lowry’s expansion of Hayakawa’s trichotomy of sentence types into a system of nine categories, considering news attribution, offers a valuable framework. Despite the scarcity of recent studies on frameworks like Hayakawa’s trichotomy, this approach remains relevant, as demonstrated by this study’s results, indicating its validity in assessing news coverage bias. This research has the potential to enhance understanding of the complexities surrounding apostasy, media discourse, and their impact on religious freedom, social cohesion, and human rights. Therefore, while recent studies on semantics in journalism may be scarce, this research is significant for its ability to contribute to discussions on apostasy and media representation in contemporary society.

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