# MAKING SENSE OF LANGUAGE OF PEACE:
# THE CASE OF IRAQI POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' NARRATIVES

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses the language of peace by making sense of the Iraqi students' narratives on their experience in their country. It explores how the people who experience war situations talk about their desires of having peace. The paper argues that positive discourse can be strategically engineered to empower people to use language that promotes peace and harmony in daily communication in particular when conflict situations exist. By listening to the laymen discourse, we can observe how language users construct peace through their selection of language. For this purpose, eight Iraqi students from a public university in Malaysia participated in the study based on a purposive sampling. The following criteria were employed: (i) They have experienced war situations in Iraq; (ii) They come from various regions; and (iii) They are able to articulate their experience freely given the maturity of their age. Data were collected through the pilot study comprising focus group discussion and in-depth interviews, and analysed using the thematic content approach. The results reveal the varied ways the participants' use language to frame their feelings and perspectives of the notion of peace and factors that hinder peace situations. The paper also provides several implications and recommendations for future studies on peace language.

**Keywords:** language of peace, narratives, discourse, focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, Iraq

## 1. Introduction

Language plays a significant role in human communication. It can harmonise or escalate conflicts in interpersonal relationships. In this sense, language is a medium of communication and coexistence. There is a growing body of literature that addresses

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the multi-dimensional aspects of peace. However, there is precious little coverage that has been given to analysing the linguistic aspect of peace. Peace like any other thing is a social construction. It is to do with meaning making. What is peace to one person might be viewed as conflict to another. There are cultural nuances associated with the word 'peace'. The language of peace, in particular, seems to be taken for granted despite the numerous efforts on maintaining stability in the world. People have tended not to connect peace with diplomacy, which is vital in maintaining a harmonious situation, be it among people, or between neighbouring and other countries. The language of peace as global educational language can assist in bridging gaps of social, religions, ethnic, and even gender equality (Nipkow, 2018).

We can imagine that language of peace denotes peaceful coexistence as it avoids speakers to use utterances that might be construed as negative (e.g., a desire to have violence or conflict). Such language is capable of generating a positive environment for people around the world (Dedaic & Nelson, 2012; Ntlama, 2017). However, peace has a longer and deeper relation to the global education which provides a means for individuals to exercise their public rights in the community (Harber, 2018; Tani, Houtsonen, & Särkelä, 2018).

In the case of Iraq, for instance, peace rhetoric seems to be less dominant given the increase episodes of tension among not only the citizens but also the people at large. The peaceful communication, in particular, was not popularised by the Iraqi nation, at least, from our observation of everlasting conflicts. Such absence is due to the fact that they often always encountered internal conflict and war situations. Moreover, the Iraqis have had to endure series of attacks from all sorts of angles (Al-Khalidi & Tanner, 2006; Cordesman, 2004; Greenstone, 2007). Although there have been previous studies on the war situations and rhetoric in Iraq (Athiemoolam, 2003; Belloni, 2001; Goretti, 2007; Morgan & Vandrick, 2009; Obono & Onyechi, 2017; Orjuela, 2003), none of the previous researches have attempted to explore and analyse the positive *language-in-use*, in particular, peace communication among ordinary citizens.

We argue that knowledge about peace language or (peaceful linguistic expressions) will empower people to want to promote peace situations, which, in turn, will contribute to resolving the complex skirmishes in society. It will also offer many possibilities for future research. Thus, this paper is derived out of the necessity to explore the language of peace in particular from the Iraqi students' tragic narratives. The discussion should lead to insights into educating people about language use and creating awareness of the need for peaceful interactions among people in daily situations.

## 2. Literature Reviews

### 2.1 Making Sense of the Language of Peace
To have an in-depth understanding of the language of peace, we need to make sense of the relations between language and peace discourse. The constant use of language that addresses peace tends to foster better interaction, which in turn, also generate effective

coexistence and cooperation among people as they opt such goals for survival (Burke, 1966). Language that we use informs who we are, and where we are coming from. People around us can be influence by the way we use language, and similarly, we are also impacted by our surrounding. For instance, entertaining guests requires people (the host) to display polite language and warmth, be it in the hospitality industry or even at ones' own homes (Blue & Harun, 2003). Thus, what is involved when we discuss the language of peace? Oxford (2013) defined language of peace as follows:

> *"any form of communication--verbal or non-verbal--that describes, reflects, expresses, or actively expands peace. The language of peace offers us the vocabulary for conversing about peace, but it also has transformative qualities. Using peace language enables us to change our attitudes, enhance inner harmony, improve relationships, deal more effectively with conflict, defuse potential or actual violence in society, foster social justice and human rights, and reverse destruction of the environment."* (p.3)

This definition is indeed, loaded. It contains key elements to particular language that is known as peace language. It concerns us as human beings, the way we are raised, our environment and what we learn. The spiritual capacity for peace plays a crucial function in enhancing education. Studies have shown that peace studies might contribute to promote stability and harmonious communications among citizens meaningfully (Lazarus et al., 2017; Oxford, 2017; Staub, 2003; Walker, 2004). And this, in turn, will tend to create goodwill among individuals'.

In this regard, we are all involved in ensuring peace, and peaceful communication. Most of us would want to have peace. However, the term peace can mean different things to different people as we witness in the world today. Does peace mean, having the absence of violence? While most people tend to equate peace with having no war, others might wonder about interpersonal conflicts, for instance, between two neighbours, or friends. Similarly, what about hostile non-verbal communication between ethnically diverse groups or tribes within the country?

Bar-Tal (2009) argued that reconciliation can help increase the peace process in the international community. In this process, language of peace has the ability to condition the minds for peaceful living. This is the case given that all of us inevitably use language to communicate with culturally diverse others. As such, we get to hear people's different accents, pronunciations and most importantly, the variety of words being uttered and exchanged as people try to communicate with or without diplomacy and make sense of the exchanges, as in the case of the students in multicultural settings (Dalib et al., 2017; Harun et al., 2018; Harun, 2007). Recently, some studies indicated that peaceful rhetoric can achieve harmonious communication among the world at large, in particular, when the individuals' avoid using harmful language (Oluoch & Adams, 2017; Ugoji, 2017).

A growing number of studies have provided insights into the importance of peace language (Chandra, 2016; Holland & Martin, 2017; Oxford, 2017). In the academic setting, for instance, university students and teachers must assist to boost enthusiasm

and become peaceful practitioners for peace utterances (Amaladas & Byrne, 2017; Jadav & Subera, 2014). Herman and Chomsky (2010) revealed that peace is essential in many fields, in particular, economic, mass media and policy making. Realistically, as evident in the world today, words can make or break peace. Families can break due to the rude exchanges or impolite gestures. It is possible to lose our close friend/colleague due to the indifference of the words that we have said. In this regard, the language of peace has emerged as a significant feature of civil rhetoric and is reflected at the personal, practical and even institutional level (Galtung, 1969; Mac Ginty, 2013).

By studying the rhetoric of peace, speakers will create an alternative to the realm of hostilities. Hence, the peace language should be embraced as particular way(s) of speaking, that is, with politeness, diplomacy, and grace to contribute to resolving the complex conflicts in society. Hence, this paper seeks to understand the rhetoric of the Iraqian postgraduate students through a qualitative approach. The following research question was formulated:

**RQ:** How do you describe your experience in war situations in relation to interaction with others and peace?

## 3. Methodology

For this paper, the discussion is based on the qualitative data of a pilot study.

### 3.1 Participants

A total of nine respondent(s) participated in the pilot study. They are postgraduate Iraqi students studying in a public Malaysian university. Based on a purposive sampling, the respondents chosen met the following criteria: (i) They have experienced war situations in Iraq; (ii) They come from various regions; and (iii) they are able to articulate their experience freely given the maturity of their age. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants. The following profile indicates the background information of students including their gender, year and discipline of study, and war experience as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1:** Focus Group Participants' Profile

| Participant (P) | War Experience | Program of Study | Semester | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Lost Family Member | PhD | 5 | Male |
| P2 | Lost Brother | PhD | 5 | Male |
| P3 | Lost Brother | Master | 2 | Male |
| P4 | Lost Uncle | Master | 3 | Male |

Source: First Authors' Research Data (2017).

**Table 2:** In-depth Interview Participants' Profile

| Participant (P) | War Experience | Program of Study | Semester | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P5 | Lost Family Members | PhD | 9 | Male |
| P6 | Lost Properties | PhD | 9 | Male |
| P7 | Lost Uncle | Master | 2 | Female |
| P8 | Lost Father | PhD | 7 | Male |

Source: First Authors' Research Data (2017).

### 3.2 Procedure and Instrumentation

Two qualitative approaches were employed to enable rich data to be collected, the focus group interview and the in-depth face-to-face interview. The former was conducted with four participants whilst the latter involved four participants as well, one at a time, each at their convenience. The respondents narrated their past tragic experience of war situations. Before the actual session, the participants were informed about the place of the interview. The study used purposive sampling in which a list of postgraduate students was obtained from the university where they study. The schedule interview was given to them in order to prepare for discussion. The focus group session took nearly 40 minutes to one hour. The respondents were briefed on the research intentions. The focus group interview can generate rich responses that the researcher might not obtain through the face-to-face encounters (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003; Cameron, 2005). Meanwhile, the face-to-face interviews took approximately twenty minutes for each participant. The venue chosen for face-to-face interviews was done at their respective homes as they preferred. The interview sessions were conducted in Arabic language for easier interaction and to enable the participants to feel at ease sharing their personal experiences.

### 3.3 Analysis of Data

Both interview sessions were audiotaped and transcribed for a content analysis of the spoken data. They were translated into English language. The transcriptions were then transcribed back into Arabic language to check the accuracy of the data. The themes that emerged from the questions were coded by applying the thematic content technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The description of thematic content was employed to identify the relationships of themes and the perspectives and past experiences of the respondents. The sorting out and analysis of data procedures were done using Nvivo12 software programme.

### 4. Findings

The spoken data lead to six emerging themes; politeness, harmony, forgiveness, peaceful co-existence, good neighbourliness, and social awareness. The above themes reflect the positive aspects that depict the language of peace from the participants' narration of tragic experiences (Figure 1).
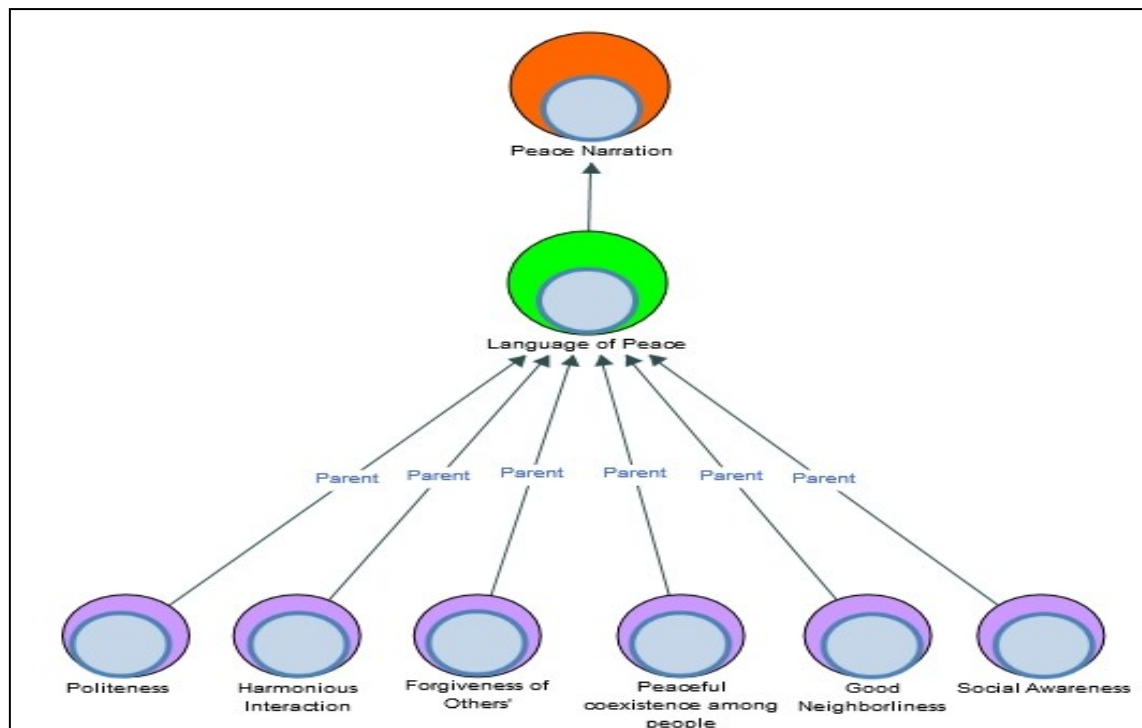
**Figure 1:** Sub-Themes of Peace Language

**Theme 1: Politeness**, that is, pursue of using positive language through their commitment to the good and benevolent rhetoric that enter the hearts and encourage people to commit an atmosphere of love between the sects and avoid hurting the feelings of others.

As the following excerpts reveal, the respondents narrated the need for polite language to overcome the tragic experience in life. For instance, Participant 1 claimed that the polite utterance in daily activities is the better solution to avoid grudges that people witness. Participant 2 also indicated that politeness is vital among individuals and it is the main key for their social development. Participant 4 echoed on how the politeness language opens up and expanded the prospect of reconciliation. Meanwhile the others seemed determined to use the language of politeness to create the positive surrounding with others in their life (participant 6 and 8).

> P1: *"I can confirm that the tragic actions that created the grudge among Shia and Sunni ... we realize that the polite utterance is solution to all crises."*

> P2: *"I lost my brother in the sectarian events ... I would like to say that the conflicts and underdevelopment will go away if we habituate ourselves to speak in polite way with others ... For me, just talk in calm and respect way to the people that you interact with, of course will generate impression of diplomatic utterance."*

> P4: *"I can say, politeness rhetoric is the key factor for positive people development and open horizons for peaceful communication on the bases of nationality."*

P6: *"Of course. When we speak polite language in our community, they will be close to us."*

P8: *"I will try to talk using polite language. So that sometimes when you use this language with the people, definitely, they will feel familiar with you and then they will be more interested to speak with you in the same tone and this is one way of promoting the reconciliation among sects after the tragic events that we faced in our society."*

**Theme 2: Harmony**, that is, the idea of spreading the spirit of agreement and affection in social relationships as demonstrated by the following excerpts. They tended to reveal the positive attitude and determined to build better human interactions through peaceful language:

P3: *"I would like to say that the sense of harmony exists and represents the good connections that depict the peace communication of Iraqi nation."*

P6: *"I can say that optimism in our utterance in our daily life will enhance the concept of harmony in our dealings that create the peace in the near future."*

P7: *"In this case, I can say that the issue of harmony as a positive and good attitude among people, surely, would promote the harmonious interactions after all the tragic events."*

P8: *"I confirm that the sense of harmony shown through the friendships and intermarriage between Iraqis' provide the peaceful interactions after the sorrowful events against civilians."*

**Theme 3: Forgiveness** appears in the following excerpts which explain the positive feelings among the respondents that assist them to improve their interactions with others:

P2: *"I conclude from the previous events, that the tragic actions that we witnessed led us to believe in the stage of forgiveness as a step towards building a good coexistence with others and avoid harmful discourse."*

P5: *"Based my experience, if we believed in the concept of forgiveness with others as the ideal solution for all the conflicts that take place in our community, of course, we will live in harmony and practice goodwill."*

For P8 (the only female in the group), for instance, she sees the forgiveness of others as the persons positive expression which is important in building peaceful interactions and having the knowledge of coexistence that will create positive attitudes with the other.

P8: *"… I would like to say that forgiveness sense is the main key for promoting peace after the tragic events that took place among Iraqi sects … from that we try to build good relationships with other sects, be nice to each other and be confident to build peaceful conversations … I just smile when I meet them … I think goodwill can be achieved among Iraqis if the citizens believe in forgiveness strategy."*

In the same vein, participant 1 further mentioned that the concept of forgiveness is the main goal of achieving peaceful utterances in the community.

P1: *"The concept of forgiveness in society can create peaceful conversations, favorable attitudes and enable the civilians to improve their positive rhetoric with the others."*

**Theme 4: Peaceful Co-existence**; reflects the desire among the participants to coexist and accept others in an attempt to embrace humanity. Their narratives represent the idealized image of establishing a stable and harmonious society.

P1: *"I just to want to say that peaceful coexistence is the basis element that reflects the real peace after the tragedy that we went through … just smile, you will help in promoting peace."*

P3: *"I think that believing in peaceful coexistence is the nearest solution to avoid the awful memories."*

P5: *"I am open minded and understand that there are complex problems with other sects [Shia and Sunni] in our community … The Shia sect says this … and Sunni sect says that … for me it's ok to be ideologically different even though we belong to the same religion … on this issue, I want to say that the fundamental element in promoting peace among citizens is to have a peaceful coexistence."*

Meanwhile, the narratives below display the importance of having positive mindsets to have peaceful coexistence with others.

P7: *"…if we want to live in peace after we lost it, we should support and promote our foundation (errr), how to say…*

**Researcher**: *"Did you mean coexistence?"*

P7: *"(yaaa) the peaceful coexistence and positive discourse in the mind of individuals."*

P8: *"I can say that the 'positive coexistence' is the main issue that promotes peace in the minds of people after the tragedy … as well as it promotes positive dialogue and cooperation between different nations."*

P2: *"If we focus on violent acts in our life that will not reach good human development… I mean positive mindsets that create agreement among sects, as such; I think this solution is the basis to achieve this."*

**Researcher**: *"Which solution do you mean? Is it the coexistence or something else?*

P2: *"Yeah … of course, the ideal solution to avoid the sectarian memories is coexistence in order to live in peace and harmony with others… without positive thinking or mind, I can say and as I witnessed, there is no peaceful coexistence in any country."*

**Theme 5: Good Neighbourliness;** as reflected in the narratives reveals the idea of strengthening social relationships that brings together the public interest and fruitful cooperation among them, which in turn, will help to promote a friendly speech among people.

The following excerpts demonstrate the students' positive language in which they hope to create a cohesive and good society; a society that loves each other, and care for each other. They believed that such good attitude should not be confined to the Muslim neighbours only; it is the duty of all persons to be good to everyone.

P1: *"I think that if we focus on good-neighborliness among sects, we will live in peace with other tribes."*

The other participants echoed:

P4: *"I agree with my colleague that good neighborliness is another act to promote peace in the community."*

P5: *"On this case, we say that the issue that prevents the violence and conflicts among citizens in any community is to have positive discourse with our neighbours whether they are Muslims or not."*

P7: *"We are aware that the continuing violence among people is because of their tendencies to speak towards violence, so I say, if we strengthen the language of respect and affection with our neighbours at least, if they are Christians, Kurdish, Turkmen, or other sect, or whatever, we will promote tolerance and coexistence well."*

**Theme 6: Social Awareness;** reflects positive awareness among the respondents to have the desire to peaceful development and learn other sects' cultures, education and even the rhetoric that influences them:

P1: *"Consciousness is very crucial in society to have a peaceful interaction … I feel like it is good when we learn the good language that impacts the others … For me, I think social*

*awareness is another issue which leads to peaceful development after the conflicts and crises in our cities."*

P6: *"I actually like to learn about the others, learn the language that might influence the feelings of others, for instance, the word 'Shi' represents an insult to the community, Mandaean … so, when you improve your awareness, especially social consciousness … you will be careful with the language and words that you use, in this case, we will contribute to promote harmonious interactions."*

P7: *"I believe that social awareness will produce positive communication in the community... I think social awareness will promote good moral values among citizens … if the government educates people on the importance of being mindful in talks, attitude, manner, and so on, we will achieve harmony."*

## 5. Discussion

The respondents tend to be positive when revealing their experiences. Despite facing terrible tragedies in their country, they attempt to be different and are very much against the harmful rhetoric. This can be observed during the focus group and interview sessions in terms of their manner of portraying the tragic events, and even their ways of articulating the narratives. Some of the participants pay attention to non-verbal peaceful communication and others' reactions that depict their inner peace with others. They seem concern about social awareness factor, in particular, of using good language among people as that can result in harm or harmonious interactions. The respondents also emphasise the importance of embracing the positive mindsets which can lead to peaceful co-existence. Such revelation raises a few pertinent keys which include, being prepared to be polite with the others, and being alert of the people's beliefs, different views of religion. More important, the language that people use is one of the main factors that can maintain a harmonious situation among people which enables the idea of coexistence, hence, makes people to be more aware of the others and to be able to communicate with them in a better way. Obviously, the participants' positive voice entails the need for peace language to be embraced in achieving understanding among culturally and religiously diverse people.

## 6. Implications and Conclusion

The paper has shared the Iraqi postgraduate students' narratives of their war experiences in their country. As Muslims, they all want peace and believe that peace can be achieved. The idea of harmful rhetoric seems to be rampant in communities where the war and violence occur amongst civilians. People believe that conflicts can be solved. They are no longer passive; rather, the very notion of positive language or peace language among lay persons ought to be deeply explored as more violence and ideological disputes tend to occur across the globe that might also be due to language

that promotes uncomfortable feelings and hatred. A positive rhetoric will enable the speakers to develop good relationships as they will tend to communicate with feelings of goodwill and love.

More studies need to be done in exploring the positive language that embraces peace or promoting peaceful communication. The language should be able to expose people especially students in the tertiary education to language of diplomacy, and the skills of mediation, which are required in conflict resolutions and dispute settlements. This language of peace combined with required skills for effective mediation is needed in solving controversial issues as it enables us to find common ground between disputing parties to reach a win-win situation. Such skills ought to be taught to encourage students to understand that the road to peace is everyone's responsibility, not simply the authority or those who govern. Students can be educated in terms of who is involved, what it is about, where it is occurring, when it occurs, and why such a conflict arise in a country or between and among countries. Similarly, the language of peace can also be explored in any dispute areas, for instance, a conflict about bus seats between two persons, competing for parking spots in public spaces, and customers' dispute.

Communication should be viewed as an important tool in resolving conflicts. A simple language of peace includes smiling when meeting people, greeting someone positively, displaying positive attitude and behaviours as shown by the respondents in the study. Obviously, one cannot not communicate as posited by a communication scholar, Karl Watzlawick. Issues of concerns should be; for example, how do we ensure that we use polite words in a dispute? How do we educate people to choose language that increases peaceful atmosphere with others? How do educators instill good values in communication for students to learn from? Obviously, our language, mannerism and facial expressions speak volumes. As such, exploring the language of peace, polite strategies and hospitable acts are necessary in today's digitized world given that messages can be disseminated within seconds. It is timely that we bring about change in the education by understanding, deliberating, promoting, and embracing the language of peace at schools and higher education institutions.

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