

## ***Halāl* linguistic meaning understanding among Non-Muslim in Malaysia**

### ***[Kefahaman makna linguistik halal di kalangan Orang Bukan Islam di Malaysia]***

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*Halāl, Discourse, Linguistic, Understanding, Non Muslims, Malaysia*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Halāl discourse is not only familiar to Muslims, but also non-Muslims in Malaysia. This study discusses the response from non-Muslim in Malaysian halāl discourse, with the objectives of identifying the halāl linguistic meaning among non-Muslim in Malaysia. The discussion of meaning is based on the language interpretation which used in Sunni pragmatic research, such as how language is perceived either literal or figurative meanings based Mohamed & Yunis (2013) and Russell (1940) approach that focuses on the meaning and fact in his language theory. The data in the discussion related to the non-Muslims response towards 5 categories of halāl implementation, namely halāl food, halāl certification, halāl sign, halāl name or brand of the product, and halāl supply chain. The data were the controversial halāl issues from 2014 to 2018 taken from local newspapers such as Star Online. The discussion demonstrates that the understanding of non-Muslims linguistically can be traced from the keywords, such as understanding, compliance, awareness, acceptance and recognised which are denotatively having positive meanings. However, there are other words denotatively having negative meanings such as confusion and sensitivity. The result also shows halāl does not only concern Muslims but non-Muslims as well. In principle, Islam does not prohibit non-Muslims from consuming the products offered based on guidelines recommended in Islam. The findings reveal that halāl understanding in Malaysia still needs to be strengthened among non-Muslims. Therefore, the understanding and knowledge of halāl implementation is the main pillar in maintaining the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in this society.*

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**Kata Kunci:**

Halal, Wacana, Bahasa, Kefahaman, Orang bukan Islam, Malaysia

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**ABSTRAK**

Wacana halal bukan sahaja dikenali bagi orang Islam, tetapi juga tidak asing dalam kalangan orang bukan Islam di Malaysia. Kajian ini membincangkan makna linguistik halal di kalangan orang bukan Islam di Malaysia. Perbincangan makna linguistik halal ini menggunakan pendekatan Mohamed dan Yunis (2013) yang mengkaji bagaimana bahasa ditafsir melalui makna literal atau kiasan serta Russell (1940) yang memfokuskan pada makna dan fakta dalam teori bahasanya. Data dalam perbincangan ini berkaitan dengan tanggapan orang bukan Islam terhadap 5 kategori

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pelaksanaan halal, iaitu makanan halal, pensijilan halal, tanda halal, nama atau jenama produk dan rantaian bekalan halal. Data tersebut memaparkan isu halal kontroversial dari 2014 hingga 2018 yang diambil dari surat khabar tempatan seperti Star Online. Perbincangan menunjukkan bahawa kefahaman orang bukan Islam secara linguistik dapat dijejaki dari kata kunci, seperti pemahaman, kepatuhan, kesedaran dan penerimaan terhadap halal dan pengakuan secara epkplisit yang mempunyai makna positif. Namun, ada perkataan kata kunci lain yang menyatakan bahawa eksplisit mempunyai makna negatif seperti kekeliruan dan kepekaan. Hasil perbincangan tersebut menunjukkan bahawa halal bukan sahaja popular dalam kalangan orang Islam tetapi juga dalam kalangan bukan Islam. Pada prinsip dasarnya, Islam tidak melarang orang bukan Islam untuk menggunakan produk halal yang ditawarkan berdasarkan garis panduan yang telah disyorkan dalam Islam. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pemahaman halal di Malaysia masih perlu diperkukuhkan dalam kalangan orang bukan Islam. Oleh itu, pemahaman dan pengetahuan mengenai pelaksanaan halal adalah tunjang utama dalam menjaga hubungan antara orang Islam dan bukan Islam dalam masyarakat ini.

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#### 1. Introduction

*Halāl* is now a standing order and not only gaining serious attention in the local, global and international business market. According to Shariff and Lah (2014), *halāl* is also an emerging frontier in products innovations, manufacturing, supply chain management and logistics on *halāl*; as well as new areas for research and publications. The *halāl* principles are not only being perceived as a religious ritual (Shariff & Lah, 2014). *Halāl* now has created a new paradigm concerning global issues such as sustainability, environmental awareness, food safety and animal welfare encompassing food processing, transportation and distribution too (Badrudin et al., 2012). According to Omar et al. (2017), every single living creature depends on food in order to sustain their lives, including human being. It is undoubtedly that food is a very crucial element of social life.

The non-Muslims are not only just and fair in business transactions but also for caring for animals, the environment, sustainability, social justice and animal welfare. Hence, similar to the Muslim community, non-Muslims perceive *halāl* as the standard of choice (Aziz & Chok, 2013). According to Hab Halal Department of JAKIM (2015), the non-Muslims show a high percentage in the implementation of *halāl* certification that 68% in 2015 compared with the Muslims and have been extensively used for their products marketing purposes. Hassan, Arif and Sidek (2015) found that non-Muslims are aware of the *halāl* concept and the increasing trend of *halāl* implementation among non-Muslims is largely in the food industry.

This study aims to identify the *halāl* linguistic meaning among non-Muslim in Malaysia. In linguistics, the meaning is the information or concept that a sender intends to convey, or does convey, in communication with a receiver (House, 2009). Indeed, a striking observation to have been made by a wide range of scholars from several different traditions and theoretical perspectives is that the 'meanings' associated with words are protean in nature. That is, the semantic values associated with words are flexible, open-ended and highly dependent on the utterance context in which they are embedded (Evans, 2006).

In this study, meaning refers to denotative and connotative meanings. Sonesson (1998) mentioned in the study that denotation is the actual definition of a word and is considered to be a part of the content that is taken to be in one-to-one correspondence with the referent. By contrast, when the denotation is removed from the content, the connotation remains. Connotation can have a variety of descriptions affected by mood, emotion, experience, and season, among other factors (Sonesson, 1998).

## 2. The Concept of Meanings

The term ‘meaning’ is used to refer to object words, such as the words of this language (Russell, 1940). In linguistics, meaning refers to the information or concepts that a sender intends or does convey when communicating with a receiver (Urdang, 1968). In Russell’s philosophy of language, he proposed the meaning and truth approach, namely the meaning indicated by the physical presence of vocabulary and the truth as a result of language use (Russell, 1940).

Meaning has long been considered a significant pivotal variable in human behaviour and interaction. Thus, according to McGregor (2015), the ‘meaning’ is concerned with and expressed by the sentence, utterance, and their language components. The message or thought in the mind of a speaker is encoded in such a way that it sends a signal to the hearer and allows the message to be received. According to McGregor’s perspective on meaning, both the speaker and the hearer contribute to giving a word or expression in a language the appropriate meaning (McGregor, 2015). According to Nordin (2015), the proper meaning of keywords has been provided, as well as the internal semantic meaning. The meaning given represents the person involved in the interpretation’s belief and value (Nordin, 2015). Apart from this, semiotics and syntax also apply to the *halāl* discourse, where belief and identity rhetorically take part in the meaning.

Brownell et al. (1984) agreed that one way to investigate the various aspects of meaning inherent in a word is to contrast it with others that highlight either denotation or connotation. Merriam-Webster (2000) identified the denotation of a word is which is what the word ‘stands for’. A word’s connotation is what the word suggests, or what we associate the word with, that goes beyond its formal definitions (Brownell et al., 1984). The terms ‘connotation’ and ‘denotation’ are sometimes wrongly interchanged because of their close resemblance in terms of sound pronunciation. Nevertheless, the two should be treated differently as they are used distinctively in philosophy, linguistics, and grammar.

According to Sonesson (1998), the connotation is identical with the content, or with a detailed feature analysis of the content, whereas the denotation is another name for the referent, or the relation connecting the content to the referent, or, in some conceptions, starting directly from the expression. This means the connotation is the emotion that a word generates in addition to the actual meaning. Connotation can have a variety of descriptions affected by mood, emotion, experience, and season, among other factors (Sonesson, 1998). Besides denotation is the actual definition of a word. Denotation gives a more limited yet descriptive definition of a term (Brownell et al., 1984). Sonesson (1998) agreed that denotation is regarded as a component of the content that is assumed to be in one-to-one correspondence with the referent. However, connotation and denotation are ordinarily supposed to be different kinds of content, where psychological predicates define the possible content categories.

## 3. The *Halāl* Linguistic Meaning

Today, *halāl* is no longer a mere religious obligation or observance but is considered as the standard of choice for Muslims as well as non-Muslims worldwide. Furthermore, non-Muslims are familiar with the concept of *halāl*, particularly those in Malaysia, a well-known Muslim country. According to the study by Sanep, Mohd and Lidia (2014), *halāl* issues or problems arise when the concept of *halāl* is not understood in its true context. Sanep et al. (2014) added that *halāl* is not limited to alcohol and pork, but it covers the aspects of food content and also aspects of food preparation.

In fact, non-Muslims are becoming more interested in *halāl* products due to concerns about animal cruelty and the perception that *halāl* products are healthier and safer. As for the non-Muslims; *halāl* products are quality products based on *halālan tayyibān* (*halāl* and wholesome) concepts as it integrates the Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) (Shariff & Lah, 2014). However, according to Mathew (2014), there is no doubt that many non-Muslims still regard *halāl*-labelled food products from a religious standpoint. Non-Muslims have yet to recognise the underlying benefits of *halāl* products, which include a hygienic process that *halāl* products must go through before reaching the market (Mathew, 2014). In addition to this, *halāl* products have to undergo a thorough inspection to ensure a clean and hygienic manufacturing process (Ambali & Bakar, 2014). *Halāl* values can be popularised among non-Muslim consumers if society as a whole becomes more aware of issues relating to health, animal rights and safety, the environment, social justice, and welfare (Golnaz et al., 2010).

Understanding each culture is crucial to promoting a harmonious and tolerant society in Malaysia’s multi-racial and culturally diverse society. The Muslims are very sensitive about *halāl* issues, especially about the preparation of their food. For this reason, Non-Muslims in Malaysia must be understood and be familiar with

*halāl* principles. Rezai et al. (2012) stated this should not only be from the perspective of the slaughtering of animals or the prohibition of alcohol food items but also from the perspective of sustainability. This should be promoted by encouraging non-Muslims to interact with Muslims socially as well as supporting other factors that might improve non-Muslims' understanding and familiarity with *halāl* principles (Rezai et al., 2012).

#### 4. Methodology

The meanings analysis in the discussion is based on Russell (1940) approach of meaning and fact in his language theory. The meaning is inferred by the physical presence of the word and the facts as a result of language use (Russell, 1940). There are analytic questions that are focusing on meaning:

- i. How do non-Muslims speak and understand *halāl*?
- ii. How do non-Muslims describe what they feel or are aware of *halāl* in the industry?

In addition to this the interpretation method or the word *al-lughah* (language interpretation) used in *Sunnī* pragmatic research, such as how language is perceived, either in literal or figurative terms (Mohamed & Yunis, 2013) or in denotative or connotative terms (Murphy, 2010, p. 32-33), is often used in the analysis of meanings. Meaning is not a function of language per se but arises from language use. In this study, meaning refers to the denotative and connotative meanings constructed by the language from the perspective and understanding of its users. Sonesson (1998) has mentioned that denotation is the discussion of the true meaning of a term and is assumed to be part of the substance that is in one-to-one correspondence with the referent. By contrast, the connotation refers to what remains of the content after the denotation is simplified. Connotation can have a variety of descriptions affected by mood, emotion, experience, and season, among other factors (Sonesson, 1998).

The selected data is collected using a soft copy of the Star Online newspaper published on its official website along with the hard copy. This method of data collection is preferred because it is simple, inexpensive, and articles can be copied and pasted directly, as well as for time management. The data in the discussion related to the five categories of *halāl* issues in Malaysia which are interpreted as having a denotative and connotative meaning of words and texts within the past five years (2014-2018). For the purpose of reliability, inter-rater checking and rechecking will be made. There are five categories of the *halāl* issue in the analysis such as:

- a. *Halāl* food (HF),
- b. *Halāl* certification (HC),
- c. *Halāl* sign (HS),
- d. *Halāl* name or brand of product (HNB),
- e. *Halāl* supply chain (HSC).

#### 5. Findings

The findings emphasise the *halāl* linguistic understanding among non-Muslims in the text.

##### 5.1 *Halāl* Food (HF)

In Malaysia which has a population of over 30 million, of which more than 60 per cent are Muslims, food manufacturing companies will feel it is very important to ensure that the sensitivities and concerns of this majority group are well considered in whatever business decisions are taken. On the report of Star Online (8 August 2017), the Malaysian International Food and Beverage Trade Fair (MIFB) is taking place from August 9 to 11 at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) in Kuala Lumpur. It is the best way to explore business opportunities in this industry. This trade show will continue to highlight the F&B industry in three key segments such as general food and beverage, seafood and fishery, and food technology. Subatha Supromaniam, senior marketing manager at fair organiser Sphere Exhibits Malaysia Sdn Bhd, stated that the general food and beverage segment would primarily focus on natural and healthy produce, but the more nutritious ready-to-eat food and services have yet to mature in the Malaysian market as stated in example 1.

(1) HF : (Star Online, 8 August 2017)

As more people become more conscious of what they eat, businesses too are looking into new ways to capture consumers' appetites as well as the food and beverage market.

According to example 2, Star Online (8 August 2017) reported that Subatha Supromanium believes that the general food and beverage segment would largely focus on natural and healthy produce. This means the health of the body includes physical, mental and spiritual aspects. Good nutrition can affect a person's thinking. It makes a person fitter, healthier and his life more secure.

(2) HF : (Star Online, 8 August 2017)

Subatha said healthier ready-to-eat food and services have yet to mature in the Malaysian market, and the fair would be a platform for businesses to look into.

Denotatively, as more people become more conscious of what they eat, businesses (non-Muslims) too are looking into new ways to capture consumers' appetites as well as the food and beverage market. Connotatively, *halāl* food can not only be used by non-muslims, but they can also produce *halāl* food to be enjoyed by Muslim consumers provided it adheres to all the principles outlined by Islam. The non-Muslim believe that *halāl* food not only meets the demands of Muslims but can also expand the business for profit.

### 5.2 *Halāl Certification (HC)*

Malaysia became the first country to have a documented and systematic assurance system with the release of the first *halāl* standards in 2000 (Star Online, 9 May 2016). Since then, the country has come a long way, and the necessary policy framework, institutional support, and industry infrastructure are now in place. Based on Star Online (9 May 2016), *halāl* certification is something that local businesses should strive for because Malaysia's *halāl* stamp is universally recognised and confers a definite advantage in the export markets as stated in example 3.

(3) HC : (Star Online, 9 May 2016)

Malaysia's *halāl* certification and logo are now universally recognised and accepted. With the growing Muslim population in the world, the growth opportunities for *halāl* industries are enormous. Today, 1.6 billion Muslims are comprising 23% of the global population. By 2030, the Muslim population is expected to rise to 2.2 billion or 26%.

Denotatively, Malaysia's *halāl* certification and logo are now universally recognised and accepted. In addition, *halāl*'s practices are well-understood by non-Muslims in the *halāl* certification issues. They are not only following and comply the *halāl* standard but is also good for the multiracial Malaysian spirit of supporting each other. Connotatively, *halāl* is not merely about compliance with regulations set by authorities and getting the relevant certification to sell products and services but there is how the non-Muslims supplying quality products consistently in order to be embraced by consumers in *halāl* markets.

### 5.3 *Halāl Sign (HS)*

According to Star Online (18 Feb 2017), Malaysia has a well-balanced economy with strong commodity and manufactured goods exports. Malaysian domestic consumption is being boosted by a growing middle class of all races, and local businesses are more resilient than they were during the previous financial crisis. Malaysia should have been a developed country by now, given our abundance of natural resources, including oil, well-planned economic development plans since 1970, and harmonious and industrious society. Instead, entrepreneurs are confronted with major internal political challenges, the potential disruption of our federal constitution, an overburdened government and civil service, and growing national debt (Star Online, 18 Feb 2017). Any entrepreneur would not want to miss out on this market because Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country.

Based on the news excerpt the Star Online (18 Feb 2017), non-Muslims have to understand the consumer needs especially Muslim's needs so that the sensitivities of Muslims can be taken care of and not cause confusion among Muslims which is stated in example 4.

(4) HS : (Star Online, 18 Feb 2017)

As a citizen, I am greatly concerned with these developments which look like a very slippery slope towards a failed state. As an entrepreneur, I am trying to understand new consumer needs and new regulations from the authorities.

The attitude of not taking care of *halāl* sensitivities that occurs in Malaysia until various *halāl* sensitive issues arise is due to the difficulty of non-Muslims to understand the psyche and culture of Muslims that occurred in example 5.

(5) HS : (Star Online, 18 Feb 2017)

As a non-Muslim, it is difficult for me to understand the Muslim consumer psyche and as such, I am normally behind in the fast-changing purchasing trends of the Muslim market. As an example, the need to cover up has created a huge market for hijab wear which later transformed into hijab fashion endorsed by local celebrities.

Denotatively, it is difficult for non-Muslims to understand the Muslim consumer psyche without compromising the sensitivity of Muslims. Connotatively, the non-Muslims' misunderstanding of *halāl* certification makes it difficult for them to run a business. However, this issue has made non-Muslims view *halāl* positively. The non-Muslims have to understand and familiarization with *halāl* certification and national *halāl* regulations to run the business.

#### **5.4 *Halāl* Name or Brand of Product (HNB)**

Auntie Anne is yet another franchise company from the United States of America (USA) that was embroiled in a *halāl*-related scandal in 2016. Auntie Anne's *halāl* certification application was previously denied by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) for a variety of reasons (Abdullah, A Rahman & Md Ismail, 2018). The rejection is due to the word 'dog' appearing on one of its food items, specifically the Cheese Pretzel Dog and Jumbo Pretzel Dog.

The editor has reported about the name on the *halāl* food in the news excerpt (Star Online, 28 Oct 2016) that the focus on food items should be on its content, not what it is called. It was reported that Malaysia ordered franchise food outlet Auntie Anne's to rename its pretzel dogs. The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) said Auntie Anne's would have to change the name, among other matters, before it could obtain *halāl* certification based on Islamic dietary laws. The department's *halāl* director of JAKIM believed that it is more appropriate to franchise food outlet Auntie Anne's to rename its pretzel dogs to the use the name 'pretzel sausage' to avoid confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims as stated in example 6.

(6) HNB : (Star Online, 28 Oct 2016)

True enough, it was reported worldwide that Malaysia ordered franchise food outlet Auntie Anne's to rename its pretzel dogs because the name might confuse. The Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) said Auntie Anne's would have to change the name, among other matters, before it could obtain *halāl* certification based on Islamic dietary laws. Jakim appears to have taken issue with the name because the dogs are deemed unclean in Islam.

Denotatively, the user name of pretzel dogs might cause confusion among consumers. Connotatively, Auntie Anne's would have to change the name, among other matters because the dogs are deemed unclean in Islam. Such an issue is also like a massive free promotion for a brand of product. This is because the name of a product is a representation of the personality and appearance that is highlighted to the consumer. Therefore this perception gives rise to consumer feelings towards a brand as happened to the pretzel dog brand which has confused Muslims and non-Muslims.

This issue also dragged JAKIM together for allegedly not giving *halāl* certification to Auntie Anne's because the name 'pretzel dog' on their products will confuse consumers so that it becomes the subject of debate and jokes on social media (Star Online, 20 Oct 2016). Although the name 'dog' basically means dog, it is not a major factor that *Halāl* certification is not issued by JAKIM. However, for JAKIM, the concept of *ṭayyibān* which means good must also be present in giving a name, not only good in terms of ingredients and preparation (Yunus et al., 2010).

For instance, according to Rakhmawati et al. (2019), the *halāl* or *harām* status of a foodstuff depends on its content and not its name such as the user name of pretzel dogs might confuse. The efforts to change the name of the product, however, were received with different views and perceptions by Muslims, thus showing that most Muslims are very sensitive to the *halāl* name of the product issue. At the same time, JAKIM needs to improve and enhance the existing *halāl* management system and services as a progressive step towards making Malaysia the world's *halāl* centre.

### 5.5 *Halāl* Supply Chain (HSC)

The *halāl* supply chain is well-understood by non-Muslims. The supply chain has become a religiously sensitive issue as Muslims emphasize the quality of food and products for their daily consumption. The requirements for *halāl* supply chain involve specifications throughout processing, handling, distribution, storage, display, serving, packaging and labelling of the products from the source to the point of consumption.

Mamee Double-Decker (M) Sdn Bhd (Mamee) has collaborated with Shinsegae Food from South Korea to produce *halāl* food products in the Asia-Pacific region (Star Online, 28 November 2017) as stated in example 7. As part of the partnership, Shinsegae will provide its expertise in restaurant and bakery operations, as well as manufacturing technology for ramen and sauces, while Mamee will provide its sales network, operational infrastructure, and export support (Star Online, 28 Nov 2017).

(7) HSC : (Star Online, 28 Nov 2017)

Chief executive officer Tan Sri Pang Tee Chew described the joint-venture company, Shinsegae Mamee Sdn Bhd as the best platform for both companies to strengthen and expand in the Asia-Pacific region due to its vast market by sharing their expertise in the manufacturing and services of food and beverages.

According to example 7, denotatively, the collaboration between Mamee Double Decker (M) Sdn Bhd (Mamee) and Shinsegae Food from South Korea to produce *halāl* food products is the best platform for both companies to strengthen and grow in the Asia-Pacific region due to its vast market by sharing their manufacturing expertise and food and beverage services. This collaboration can be defined as a new world to spearhead Mamee's vision to become a comprehensive food solutions provider to expand our *halāl* food market (Star Online, 28 Nov 2017). It will indirectly increase the demand for South Korean *halāl* food as Malaysia is the pioneer of *halāl* food in the region with the *halāl* food market becoming one of the world's fastest-growing food markets. Connotatively, the question is to what extent of Shinsegae Food's understanding of *halāl* food regulation standards.

### 6. Conclusion

The discussion shows that the *halāl* linguistic meaning among non-Muslims can be traced from words understanding, compliance, awareness, acceptance and recognised. All words are denotatively having positive meanings. However, there are other words denotatively having negative meanings such as confusion and sensitivity.

The result also shows *halāl* does not only concern Muslims but non-Muslims as well. In principle, Islam does not prohibit non-Muslims from consuming the products offered based on guidelines recommended in Islam. This is evident by the participation and involvement of the non-Muslims community where *halāl* is fast emerging as the standard of choice. In addition, *halāl* issues or problems arise when the concept of *halāl* is not understood in its true context. The involvement of individuals or designated as employees, employers or managers whose integrity in following established *halāl* standards is in doubt. This is indirectly seen to have a negative impact on Malaysia in developing *halāl* hubs and inter-religious relations especially between Muslims and non-Muslims will also be severely affected.

The findings reveal that the *halāl* understanding meaning linguistically still needs to be strengthened in Malaysia. Therefore, the understanding and knowledge of *halāl* implementation is the main pillar in maintaining the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in this society. Therefore, it is very important to understand the cultural environment of the surrounding community, especially the understanding of *halāl* among non-Muslims in providing a tolerance in the context of the relationship of the multi-religious society today.

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