

Verbal Harassment in Selected British Reality TV Shows: A Sociolinguistic Study

Amwaj Shakir Mahmoud*

Department of English, University of Babylon, Hilla, Iraq

Salih Mahdi Adai

Department of English, University of Babylon, Hilla, Iraq

Abstract—This study conducts a sociolinguistic analysis of verbal harassment in British reality television. It focuses on the reality show *Big Brother* (first aired in 2000). Through the examination of selected episodes, the study investigates the construction, perception, and representation of verbal harassment within the competitive and unscripted context of reality TV. The study aims to: (1) identify the sociolinguistic structure of verbal harassment in reality TV shows, (2) determine the primary factors that contribute to verbal harassment in *Big Brother*, and (3) uncover the triggers employed by harassers in these shows. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the analysis reveals humiliation, insults, and mockery as core structures of verbal harassment, driven by sociolinguistic variables such as power and ethnicity. Findings indicate that power imbalances and lack of empathy are the dominant triggers that result in consequences such as stress, depression, and reduced productivity among victims. This study enhances understanding of the linguistic and social dynamics of harassment in media contexts to highlight the role of reality TV in reflecting and amplifying societal power structures.

Index Terms—reality TV, verbal harassment, sociolinguistics, power dynamics, *Big Brother*

I. INTRODUCTION

Reality television (RTV) has emerged as a prominent genre that captivates global audiences by showcasing unscripted interactions among ordinary individuals in contrived social settings. British RTV, exemplified by the iconic show *Big Brother* (first aired in 2000), often amplifies interpersonal conflicts, making it a fertile ground for studying verbal harassment—a pervasive issue that mirrors broader societal dynamics. Verbal harassment, characterized by linguistic acts such as insults, humiliation, and mockery, serves as a tool for asserting dominance and control, frequently rooted in power imbalances and social variables like ethnicity, gender, and class (Einarsen et al., 2011; Niko et al., 2020). While RTV is celebrated for its raw depiction of human behavior, it has faced criticism for normalizing harmful behaviors, exploiting participants, and glamorizing conflict-driven narratives (Graham, 2017).

This study undertakes a sociolinguistic analysis of verbal harassment in *Big Brother*, focusing on its linguistic structures, contributing factors, and triggers. By examining how harassment is linguistically constructed and socially contextualized, the research addresses three central questions: (1) What is the sociolinguistic structure of verbal harassment in RTV shows? (2) What are the primary factors driving verbal harassment in *Big Brother*? (3) What triggers are employed by harassers in these shows? The objectives are to uncover the linguistic strategies underpinning harassment, identify the social variables that facilitate it, and explore the psychological and social consequences for victims. Adopting a pragmatic perspective, the study views RTV as a microcosm of societal interactions, where carefully orchestrated conflicts reveal strategic uses of language to assert power and demean others. This investigation not only contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship but also sheds light on the broader implications of media representations of harassment in shaping cultural perceptions and social norms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Sociolinguistics

According to Yule (1996), sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that examines how language functions in relation to social and cultural phenomena within a society. Language, society, and topics pertaining to the social sciences psychology, anthropology, and sociology in particular are typically explored. However, when sociolinguistics gained popularity in the late 1960s, it was known by two names: *language sociology* and *sociolinguistics*, and these terms were used interchangeably. Lastly, a distinction between sociology and sociolinguistics is made (Nida, 1949). Besides, Yule's proposal is consistent with Trudgill's ideas as well. He claims that because language is shaped by social context, sociolinguistics research is connected to cultural phenomena and can impact how people speak or converse (Trudgill, 2000).

*Corresponding Author. Email: hum581.a.shakiar@student.uobabylon.edu.iq

Furthermore, language sociologists, along with a small number of linguists, are primarily responsible for characterizing and forecasting language phenomena at the group level in communities. Moreover, the study of sociolinguistics has always been popular and significant, and today the majority of its subfields can be considered to be fields unto themselves, with their own textbooks, newspapers, and lectures. These subfields include pragmatics, language and sex studies, pidgin and creole investigations, language arranging and strategy studies, and training of phonetic minorities (Nida, 1949).

Besides, sociolinguistic is used to study how language and society interact (Holmes, 2001). Their interest lies in elucidating the reasons behind the linguistic variations people exhibit in different social contexts. They are also linked to the differentiation of language's social function and the modes of social meaning transmission. Analyzing how people use language in different social contexts provides valuable insights into how language functions, how social relationships within a group are formed, and how people use language to express aspects of their social identities. Holmes (2001), one of those two linguists, states that linguists are likely to focus on characterizing individuals' various speech patterns in various social surroundings. Furthermore, according to Holmes, sociolinguists also look into how language is used to transmit messages. There must be social interactions among community members for language to serve as a means of communication. The relationships between the participants can be inferred from their social interactions. In order to understand how members of a society interact with one another, sociolinguistics is crucial.

B. Sociolinguistic Variables

A linguistic characteristic that is used differently by various social groups is known as a sociolinguistic variable. People in society tend to associate the use of certain sociolinguistic variables whether consciously or unconsciously with the social group that the speaker uses them to. This means that people treat certain sociolinguistic variables as socially diagnostic (Gumperz et al., 2008).

That is to say, research on language variations between groups divided by social variables (e.g., ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, etc.) and/or geographical barriers (a mountain range, a desert, a river, etc.) demonstrates the historical relationship between sociolinguistics and anthropology (Gumperz et al., 2008).

(a). Social Class

A division of society according to social and economic status is called social class. It is frequently influenced by a number of variables, such as social network, wealth, income, education, and occupation. Following the political and industrial revolutions of the late 18th century, the idea of social class was first widely applied in the early 19th century. According to Trudgill (1995, p. 23), "a term used to refer to any hierarchical ordering of groups within a society is the social class".

Sociologists have long focused heavily on the idea of social class, which helps to explain social dynamics, resource access, and life opportunities (Giddens et al., 2017). Besides, Ancient societies with their predominance of hierarchical structures are where the concept of social class originated. For instance, in feudal societies, the nobility, clergy, and peasantry were all clearly divided into separate groups. The bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, and the proletariat, or working class, emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which brought about many other important changes that eventually led to the creation of the contemporary class system (Giddens et al., 2017).

(b). Gender

Prior to the advent of variationist sociolinguistics, the majority of dialectologists virtually solely used the speech of men as the basis for their research, leaving out women. Sociolinguists focus their attention on the language used by men and women, and as they show that in many social orders, men's speech differs from women's speech in certain contexts, they grow more concerned with language and sexual orientation. Men have distinct facial expressions that women are aware of but never use (Jespersen, 1922).

However, women often use different dialects in discussions than men do, and they also have words and expressions that men never use (Jespersen, 1922). In their analyses of the New York speech and the Norwich dialect in England, Labov and Trudgill discover that, while their male informants are more slang-oriented, their female informants typically employ more "prestige" or high-status dialect traits within each social class group and throughout each stylistic form examined (Jespersen, 1922).

According to Trudgill (1995), a woman's expression resembles a standard variety or a prestige accent more than a man. Males use more of the [In] variant, which is a variant of vernacular or non-standard English, and females use more of the [Iɪn] variant, which is a variant of standard English, according to Trudgill's Norwich English studies.

Hence, Trudgill (1995, p. 72) says: "*It has been pointed out that working-class speech, like certain other aspects of working-class culture in our society, seems to have connotations or associations with masculinity, which may lead men to be more favourably disposed to nonstandard linguistic forms than women*".

(c). Power

As a social variable, power describes a person's or a group's ability to direct, influence, or maintain control over the actions, attitudes, and beliefs of others. A variety of strategies, including authority, coercion, persuasion, and manipulation, can be used to exert this influence. In sociology and political science, power is a fundamental concept that shapes social relations and structures. Since the beginning of sociological thought, the idea of power has been fundamental. Max Weber,

Karl Marx, and Émile Durkheim were among the early sociologists who studied power in relation to authority, class conflict, and social order. Because of societal shifts and theoretical developments, the study of power (Rahmaniah et al., 2023).

However, there are certain factors that impact harassment. That is to say, harassment is rooted in power imbalance as multiple studies have linked power imbalances to its occurrence (Niko et al., 2020; Rahmaniah et al., 2023). Such act can occur in a variety of relationships, such as those between coworkers, lenders and debtors, or even just friends. Possessing authority gives people the ability to direct or control the behavior of others to suit their needs, which may result in sexual assault, mockery and humiliation (Meliana et al., 2024).

Moreover, the main cause of this power imbalance is the ability of a more powerful people to impose unfavorable terms on weaker. Besides, Power can also be understood more broadly as people's perception of their ability to influence other people's experiences and outcomes Nevertheless, power plays a critical role in how it interacts with other relationship structures; power has a significant impact on the degree of commitment and confidence between parties.

(d). *Ethnicity*

A collection of people who share characteristics, historical, genetic, social, political, linguistic, and religious, constitute an ethnic group. Language is one of these factors that most clearly sets human groups apart from other species. Party membership and cultural identification are fundamentally based on language (Trudgill, 1995).

C. *Verbal Harassment*

The word "harassment" has its roots in the Old French word "harasser" which means to *tire out* or *exhaust*. When the phrase first appeared in the English language in the late 16th century, it was used to describe behaviours that irritated, harassed, or tired someone by frequent assaults. The definition of verbal harassment has changed over time to include a wider variety of actions intended to frighten, threaten, or upset other people. In the 20th century, the term was used more widely to refer to a variety of unwanted and persistent behaviours, especially in social and professional settings (Mackinnon, 1979).

Besides, this covers actions like physical violence, threats, verbal abuse, and unwanted approaches. The impact of harassment on people has become more widely acknowledged in the legal and social spheres, especially when it targets people based on personal characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristics (Mackinnon, 1979). Many people attribute the public awareness of verbal harassment to MacKinnon's book (1979), which also served as a basis for numerous Supreme Court decisions and guidelines regarding the subject. Furthermore, the term "harassment" was first defined with reference to research in MacKinnon's (1979) book. Her groundbreaking book came out at a time when research interest in the two primary areas where society is focusing on sexual harassment was on the rise. Besides, harassment may occur in numerous forms. These include relational harassment (such as social exclusion, spreading rumours), verbal harassment (such as name-calling, threats, teasing, and sexual remarks), and physical harassment (such as hitting, shoving, spitting, damaging, or stealing property) (Monks & Smith, 2006).

Verbal Harassment is a form of harassment that targets a victim's mind or emotions. Harassment labeling, insulting, humiliation, mockery and excessive yelling are examples of verbal harassment. It is a pattern of consistent mistreatment with the aim of creating and maintaining control over another person. Moreover, there are different forms that the harasser employs to harass his victim, namely, calling names, mobbing and jokes. People use the expression normally to irritate others, for whatever reasons encourage them to do so. However, there is certain structure for harassment, that is to say, humiliation is one of the structures of harassment. Humiliation has been referred to as the "nuclear boom of emotions" because of the profoundly detrimental effects it has on both the general health of our social life and the psychological wellbeing of those who experience it (Lindner, 2006). Additionally, it has been suggested that humiliation is a major contributing factor to intense intergroup conflict and a major precursor to both genocide and terrorism (Lindner, 2006).

However, studies reveal that humiliation predicts feelings of helplessness and powerlessness among members of stigmatized groups (Leidner et al., 2012) as well as a tendency towards passivity and inaction among victims of severe intergroup conflict (Ginges & Atran, 2008). The complexity of this emotional phenomenon, which shares core appraisal with shame and anger (Fernández et al., 2015), and the surprisingly small amount of scientific research that this topic has accumulated (Jonas et al, 2014) are likely the main causes of this apparent contradiction in the outcomes of humiliation.

Another structure for harassment is Mockery. According to Thomas (1995), mockery is the act of making fun of, mocking, and subjecting to contempt through mimicry, insincere imitation, and falsely putting on an act of earnest or counterfeit appearances. People frequently use this expression to annoy other people, for whatever reason that motivates them to do so. That is to say, mockery is a function of harassment in which an individual makes fun of, taunts, or ridicules another person, frequently with the goal of dehumanizing or degrading them. This conduct can be damaging and cause humiliation, particularly if it is repeated or carried out in public. Besides, Insult is another structure of harassment. That is to say, it is written and spoken by those who consider themselves to be "superior" and takes the shape of pseudo-humorous pamphlets, rhymes, and screenplays. These works are full of chauvinistic and disparaging cliches and jokes that are typically directed at members of minority groups or people of other races or cultures. Individuals have the ability to "duel" with words, insulting and being insulted until one person wins and silences the other (Murray, 1983). Because of their intensely emotional context, oral insults rely on the well-practiced and experienced repertoire that most language

users possess. Insulters select the best ones based on the communication context and speech event. However, women have been less likely to insult than men. Women are reluctant to use insults because they feel like they are contributing to their own denigration because many of them are sexist and directed at women (Saporta, 1988).

However, there are certain triggers of verbal harassment, according to Einarsen et al. (2011) the factors that trigger harassment, namely: lack of empathy, Low self-esteem, insecurity and control. That is to say, harassment motivated by elevated traits of entitlement, privileged status, power, exploitation, low empathy. Besides, *the* consequences of being harassed at work can affect one's physical and mental health, including PTSD and life satisfaction, and they can also affect one's quality of life outside of the workplace (Munson et al., 2000). Understanding the concept of sexual harassment, its causes, its manifestations, and the potential consequences for individuals who encounter it in or outside of the workplace becomes difficult as a result.

III. METHODOLOGY

The data for the present study consist of British reality TV shows, with a central focus on verbal harassment. Specifically, the data include a selection of scenes randomly extracted from The Big Brother reality TV shows, where contestants compete to win. The selected scenes vary in length and were chosen for their richness and representativeness, as they encompass multiple stages and forms of verbal harassment throughout the episodes. The analysis relies solely on the spoken discourse within the shows as the primary textual source. Besides, this study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods in analyzing the data.

IV. ANALYSIS

The analysis focuses on two episodes from *Big Brother* to illustrate the sociolinguistic structure, factors, and triggers of verbal harassment.

Show 1: *Big Brother* Season 20 (2018)

Dialogue:

- **Bayleigh:** “Okay, let me ask you this, Is there a difference between a midget and a dwarf?”
- **JC:** “The people who are little [people] or dwarves are people who have a genetic condition. I’m just a short guy.”
- **Bayleigh:** “Okay, but isn’t it like offensive to say ‘midget’ though? Like, isn’t that a word people don’t use anymore?”
- **JC:** “The m-word is derogatory, and it is compared to specific slurs for gay people and black people.” (Bayleigh, who is Black, looked stunned.)

A. Triggering Stage:

Bayleigh’s question (“Is there a difference between a midget and a dwarf?”) initiates harassment by using the derogatory term “midget,” which discriminates against JC based on his height.

- **Sociolinguistic Variable:** Ethnicity. The term “midget” targets JC’s identity as a short person, a marginalized group, highlighting ethnic and physical differences.
- **Trigger:** Control. Bayleigh’s question seeks to assert dominance by questioning JC’s identity in a demeaning manner.

B. Developing Stage:

Bayleigh’s follow-up question (“Isn’t it like offensive to say ‘midget’ though?”) escalates the harassment by feigning ignorance while reinforcing the insult.

- **Structure:** Insults. The use of “midget” is a deliberate attempt to humiliate JC.
- **Sociolinguistic Variable:** Power. Bayleigh leverages her perceived social dominance to demean JC, associating his height with inferiority.

C. Reactive Stage:

JC’s response acknowledges the derogatory nature of the term, comparing it to slurs targeting other marginalized groups. His reaction reflects depression and discomfort.

- **Consequence:** Depression. The harassment undermines JC’s self-esteem, highlighting the emotional toll of identity-based insults.

Show 2: *Big Brother* Season 8 (2007)

Dialogue:

- **Chanelle:** “You’re always looking for an argument, Charley! Why do you have to be so aggressive all the time?”
- **Charley:** “Me, aggressive? Are you kidding? You’re the one who’s always crying like a little baby every time something doesn’t go your way!”
- **Chanelle:** “The truth? You’re just a bully, Charley. You pick on people because it makes you feel better about yourself!”
- **Charley:** “Bully? No, honey, I’m just being real. If you can’t take it, that’s your problem, not mine.”

A. Triggering Stage:

Chanelle's accusation ("You're always looking for an argument, Charley!") initiates harassment by labeling Charley as aggressive, damaging her reputation.

- **Sociolinguistic Variable:** Power. Chanelle exploits her social influence among contestants to demean Charley.
- **Trigger:** Lack of empathy. Chanelle's accusation disregards Charley's perspective, escalating interpersonal conflict.

B. Developing Stage:

Chanelle's statement ("You're just a bully, Charley") intensifies the harassment by reinforcing the insult.

- **Structure:** Insults. The term "bully" targets Charley's identity to portray her as malicious.
- **Sociolinguistic Variable:** Power. Chanelle's dominant position enables her to shape others' perceptions of Charley.

C. Reactive Stage:

Charley's defensive response ("Bully? No, honey, I'm just being real") reflects her attempt to reclaim agency but reveals diminished confidence.

- **Consequence:** Low productivity. The harassment reduces Charley's self-esteem, potentially affecting her performance in the competitive environment.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yields quantitative insights into the triggers, sociolinguistic variables, structures, and consequences of verbal harassment in *Big Brother*.

TABLE 1
INITIATING STAGE IN *BIG BROTHER*

No.	Social Variables	Frequency	Percentage	Triggers	Frequency	Percentage
1	Ethnicity	1	25%	Control	1	25%
2	Power	2	75%	Lack of Empathy	2	75%
Total		4	100%		4	100%

Power is the dominant sociolinguistic variable (75%), reflecting harassers' reliance on social dominance to demean victims. Ethnicity (25%) is less prevalent but significant in targeting marginalized identities. Lack of empathy (75%) is the primary trigger, as harassers disregard victims' emotional experiences, while control (25%) reflects attempts to impose dominance.

TABLE 2
DEVELOPING STAGE IN *BIG BROTHER*

No.	Structure of Verbal Harassment	Frequency	Percentage
1	Humiliation	1	25%
2	Insults	2	50%
3	Mockery	1	25%
	Total	4	100%

Insults are the most frequent structure (50%). They indicate harassers' preference for direct verbal attacks. Humiliation and mockery (25% each) are equally employed, amplifying victims' emotional distress.

TABLE 3
REACTING STAGE AND CONSEQUENCES OF VERBAL HARASSMENT

No.	Consequences of Verbal Harassment	Frequency	Percentage
1	Low Productivity	1	25%
2	Depression	1	25%
3	Stress	2	50%
	Total	4	100%

Stress is the most common consequence (50%), reflecting the emotional toll of harassment. Depression and low productivity (25% each) further highlight the detrimental impact on victims' psychological well-being and performance.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The study yields the following conclusions:

1. Verbal harassment in *Big Brother* follows a three-stage process: triggering, developing, and reacting. The triggering stage involves the harasser's initial provocative act, the developing stage escalates through linguistic strategies, and the reacting stage reveals the victim's response and the harassment's consequences.

2. Power is the dominant sociolinguistic variable, with harassers leveraging social dominance to demean victims. Ethnicity also plays a role, particularly in targeting marginalized identities. Lack of empathy is the primary trigger, reflecting harassers' disregard for victims' emotions.
3. Insults are the most common structure of verbal harassment, followed by humiliation and mockery. These strategies exploit power imbalances and contribute to victims' stress, depression, and reduced productivity.

The findings underscore the role of RTV as a microcosm of societal dynamics, where verbal harassment reflects broader issues of power, identity, and empathy. Future research could explore additional RTV shows or incorporate multimodal analyses to examine non-verbal harassment cues.

REFERENCES

- [1] Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L. (Eds.). (2011). *Bullying and harassment in the workplace: Developments in theory, research, and practice*. CRC Press.
- [2] Fernández, S., Saguy, T., & Halperin, E. (2015). The paradox of humiliation: The acceptance of an unjust devaluation of the self. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(7), 976–988. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215586195>
- [3] Ginges, J., & Atran, S. (2008). Humiliation and the inertia effect: Implications for understanding violence and compromise in intractable intergroup conflicts. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 8(3-4), 281–294. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853708X358182>
- [4] Graham, S. (2017). The x factor and reality television: Beyond good and evil. *Popular Music*, 36(1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143017000029>
- [5] Gumperz, J. J., & Cook-Gumperz, J. (2008). *Studying language, culture, and society: Sociolinguistics or linguistic anthropology?* *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 532–545. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2008.00378.x>
- [6] Jonas, K. J., Otten, M., & Doosje, B. (2014). Humiliation in conflict: Underlying processes and effects on human thought and behavior. In C. K. W. De Dreu (Ed.), *Social conflict within and between groups* (pp. 37–54). Psychology Press.
- [7] Leidner, B., Sheikh, H., & Ginges, J. (2012). Affective dimensions of intergroup humiliation. *Plos One*, 7(9), Article e46375. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0046375>
- [8] Lindner, E. (2006). *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*. Praeger Security International.
- [9] Mackinnon, C. A. (1979). *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- [10] Monks, C. P., & Smith, P. K. (2006). Definitions of bullying: Age differences in understanding of the term, and the role of experience. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 24(4), 801–821.
- [11] Murray, S. (1983). *Ritual and personal insults in stigmatized subcultures: Gay, Black, Jew*. *Maledicta*, 7, 189–211.
- [12] Nida, E. A. (1949). The identification of morphemes. In *Morphology: The descriptive analysis of words* (2nd ed., pp. 6–61). University of Michigan Press.
- [13] Niko, N., & Rahmawan, A. D. (2020). *Supremasi patriarki: Reaksi masyarakat Indonesia dalam menyikapi narasi seksualitas dan perkosaan kasus Reynhard Sinaga*. *Jurnal Analisa Sosiologi*, 9(1), 137–152.
- [14] Saporta, S. (1988). Linguistic taboo, code-words, and women's use of sexist language. *Maledicta*, 10, 163–166.
- [15] Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. Routledge.
- [16] Trudgill, P. (1995). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. Penguin.
- [17] Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*. Penguin.
- [18] Yule, G. (1996). *The study of language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Amwaj Shakir Mahmood is an assistant instructor and a PhD candidate in English language and linguistics at the College of Education for Human Sciences/University of Babylon. Her research interest includes sociolinguistics, pragmatics, stylistics, contrastive linguistics, and language teaching and learning. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9246-1782>

Salih Mahdi Adai holds a PhD in English language and linguistics. He is an instructor and a professor at the College of Education for Human Sciences/University of Babylon. His research interest is general linguistics including pragmatics, stylistics, discourse studies, and sociolinguistics. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2363-2740>