

THE CONTROL OVER PERCEPTION OF MASS VIOLENCE THROUGH STRATEGIC LABELLING

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Abstract: This paper examines the creation and use of names that refer to a mass violence in Indonesia that occurred in May 1998 in several cities. The media has dubbed the event the *May 1998 riots*. Alternative names have been widely used and each represents either a different portrayal of the event or social political stance towards the event. Using discourse analysis, this paper will demonstrate how the choice of names affects presentation of the event, recognition of what actually happened, and the identification of parties involved, both the perpetrator and the victim. The labels assigned by the media to the event serve to promote certain points of view, shape social narrative and influence readers' understanding of mass violence. This paper found that the use of *May 1998* as the token has blurred the nature of the event that is arguably politically motivated and downplayed the violence suffered by a particular group targeted during the riots.

Keywords: *May 1998 riots*, discourse analysis, language, strategic labelling, discrimination, mass violence, power

Abstrak: Tulisan ini meneliti penggunaan nama untuk peristiwa kekerasan massa di Indonesia yang terjadi pada bulan Mei 1998 di beberapa kota. Media massa pada umumnya menggunakan nama *Kerusuhan Mei 1998* untuk merujuk pada peristiwa tersebut. Beberapa nama alternatif juga dipergunakan secara luas dan masing-masing nama merepresentasikan gambaran atau pandangan sosial politis yang berbeda terhadap peristiwa tersebut. Penulis akan menggunakan analisa diskursus untuk menunjukkan bagaimana penamaan berpengaruh terhadap presentasi peristiwa, pengakuan atas apa yang terjadi dan pengidentifikasian pihak-pihak yang terlibat, baik sebagai pelaku maupun korban. Label yang diberikan oleh media massa terhadap

peristiwa tersebut berperan dalam membentuk narasi sosial dan mempengaruhi pemahaman pembaca akan kejadian tersebut. Tulisan ini menemukan bahwa penggunaan *Mei 1998* sebagai penanda pada penamaan telah mengaburkan peristiwa yang dilatarbelakangi unsur politis tersebut dan juga menyampingkan kekerasan yang dialami oleh kelompok tertentu selama kerusuhan.

Kata kunci: Kerusuhan Mei 1998, analisis wacana, bahasa, strategi penamaan, diskriminasi, kerusuhan masal, kekuasaan

INTRODUCTION

Novelist George Orwell wrote of how language is used as a tool to manipulate our perception.¹ Such use of language has been known as 'doublespeak,' strategy of which includes euphemism and obfuscating reality through word selection.² Linguistic choices can reverse reality simultaneously from one version to another. In an article published by *The New York Times*, Najla Said, the daughter of Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, said that she would call Palestine what her friends would call Israel on the map.³ The choice of whether one calls it Palestine or Israel reveals one's political stance towards the Middle East's long-standing crisis. Different names represent a different acknowledgement of what has happened.⁴ A single piece of information can be organized and conveyed through different linguistic choices so as to reveal or distort and hide the truth.

This paper will look into how different name assignments and categorization of the event that occurred in May 1998 affects the whole portrayal, representation and perception of what transpired during the fateful month. The May 1998 event has cast a dark shadow over the enforcement of human rights and justice in Indonesia, with the spectre of the event

1 William Lutz, *Doublespeak* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p. xi.

2 Lutz, *Doublespeak*, pp. 1-2.

3 Rachel Saltz, "So Many Identities, So Little Times", *New York Times*, February 19, 2010. http://theater.nytimes.com/2010/02/19/theater/reviews/19palestine.html?_r=0

4 Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).

still looming large. As the narrative of the event has been controlled by the media, the linguistic choices they made in their news reports need to be looked at with a critical eye. This paper will investigate the use of the label *May 1998 riots* by the local media to refer to the event.

To examine how different names encapsulate the description of an event and represent it, the author will consider and compare different choices of names and how they project a discrete angle or version of a single event. Names can be chosen by the media to captivate readers' attention and direct them to focus on a certain aspect of the event. In the same vein, alternatives to those names may also be chosen in order to deflect readers from the main substance of the event.

Different expressions pointing to a single referent serve to highlight different aspects of the event. This results in a different presentation and evokes different sense and evaluation. For example, the name *May riots* has been alternatively referred to as the *May tragedy*. The word *riot* would entail a large mass of people and presumably involve an act of violence, while *tragedy* may entail either an individual or large group but does not necessarily involve violence. The word *riot* would give more information than *tragedy* as *tragedy* focuses on how one sees the end of something. *Riots* meanwhile focuses on what happens and not about how one perceives the whole event.

Several scholars have looked at the use of different references or names for a single referent. Lee⁵ and Chilton⁶ look at how different references generate different connotations. Fowler considers how reality is presented in news in a way that may favour a certain group and discredit the other.⁷ Nossek et al. focuses on linguistic choices made for references

5 David Lee, *Competing Discourse: Perspective and Ideology in Language* (London: Longman, 1992).

6 Paul Chilton, *Analyzing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

7 Fowler, *Language in the News*. p. 24.

in political violence discourse and also how news outlets project a certain standpoint when reporting political violence.⁸

Lee wrote that “language is an instrument for the assignment of the phenomena of human experience to conceptual categories; it is clearly not simply a mirror that reflects reality. Rather, its function is to impose structures on our perception of the world.”⁹ Different words denoting actions and situation, such as *massacre* versus *tragedy* and *riot* versus *chaos*, convey different ideologies and imply different levels of wrongdoing and different extents of social impact. In his study of word classification, he examined the differences in the application of the term *European settlement* versus *European invasion* in the context of the European arrival in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ It is evident that the word *European settlement* was a term used by the Europeans to describe their peaceful migration to Australia in search of a better life. The latter term was used by the Aboriginal Australians who saw the arrivals as a threat to their existence. Lee stated that “whether speakers use *settlement* or *invasion* now provides some indication of their political viewpoint”.¹¹

Fowler examines the concept of transitivity in the language of news reports to show how a certain reality is more prominently portrayed than others.¹² He states that “transitivity is the foundation of representation... and transitivity has the facility to analyze the same even in different ways”.¹³ Transitivity strategy covers the inclusion of certain modifiers in the noun phrase as part of the agent or patient (recipient), omissions of certain participants in the form of nominalization and types of predicates (passive or active constructions). Other elements that Fowler looked into are lexical choices and structure in terms of how they affect meaning, both

8 Hillel Nosssek, *Media and Political Violence*, ed. Annabelle Sreberny and Prasun Sonwalkar (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2007).

9 Lee, *Competing Discourse*, p. 8.

10 Lee, *Competing Discourse*, p. 8.

11 Lee, *Competing Discourse*, p. 15.

12 Fowler, *Language in the News*, p. 71.

13 Fowler, *Language in the News*, p. 71.

literal and connotative meaning. He also considers modality in the study of news language. The same author also conducted a study on names or titles used to refer to or address a person. He focuses on how a certain calling or addressing term may be either abusive or glorifying. He states that “newspaper...sorting people into categories, and placing discriminatory values on them”.¹⁴ He uses news reports from several newspapers on Libya and US conflicts in 1986 for his study of addressing terms. His analysis shows how opposing government members are addressed with either diminutive or honorific titles depending on whether the newsroom supports or disapproves of the discussed policy.

While many studies using the approaches outlined above have focused on references to persons or activities, there appears to be a lack of studies which analyze the use of event names. To fill the research gap, this paper will examine the choice of names in the media to refer to the event of May 1998 using several analytical tools. To analyze naming strategies in the media, this paper utilizes lexical semantics analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Lexical semantics analysis will help explore the multi-dimensions of meaning and the extent to which readers are led to different understandings by different names. Discourse analysis is utilized to uncover the ideologies behind name choices in the media. The visual aspects of all of those names will be compared and examined to see how visual aspects intervene with the semantic meaning and finally how they affect recognition and understanding of what happened.

THEORY

This paper will utilize several tools of analysis to look at strategic labelling to refer to an event and analyze the choice of names, the perceived impacts of such assignment and the motive behind it through the lens of discourse analysis.

In semantic analysis, reference means the acts of referring to or denoting an entity (which will be called referent) through means of linguis-

¹⁴ Fowler, *Language in the News*, p. 110

tics features.¹⁵ Theory of reference tries to attend to the questions of what relations a reference has to its referent. A reference does not only function to refer or point to an item but it also covers semantically relevant relations.¹⁶

Saeed states that there are two approaches we use in the way people talk about the world: the first is the referential approach and second is the representational approach.¹⁷ The referential approach tries to answer questions regarding the relations between expression and the world they refer to. In other words, the reference approach considers how a certain word points to the world or the reality. Meanwhile, the representational approach tries to attend to the issue of how our mind projects the reality as expressed through the reference; what is the mental model of a situation or a thing.¹⁸ The reality or the thing out there may be the same but there are different ways of expressing that reality or thing. Reference and representation are two different things. A reference assigns a name as the identity of a referent while a representation assigns a certain perception towards a referent.

Names are labels for people and places which we use to talk about individuals or locations.¹⁹ The use of names is normally bound by context in the assumption that the audience can identify the referent. Names can work to identify something or someone because of the shared knowledge between the speaker, who uses the name, and the addressee. There are two approaches in looking at how names work. The first is description theory and second is causal theory.²⁰ Description theory says that a name is a label for one or more definite descriptions about something. A name provides a description for an entity. Meanwhile, causal theory emphasizes

15 John I. Saeed, *Semantics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2016).

16 Sebastian Löbner, *Understanding Semantics* (London: Arnold, 2002).

17 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 23.

18 M. Lynne Murphy and Anu Koskela, *Key Terms in Semantics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

19 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 26.

20 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 26.

es the act of naming. An entity obtains its name because someone assigns the name to the entity. Description theory focuses on what a name can tell about the entity it refers to while causal theory concerns the fact that a name is obtained through an assignment process.

A name does not only refer to an object or a concept, but it also has meanings that come from cognitive signifying. The referent of a proper name is bound by the reference, but sense is not bound by references. A name may refer to a certain physical object only – names have limitations of objects they can denote – but a name has no limitation towards how many senses it can generate.

Saeed pointed out that sense is an extra dimension to meaning, which comes between words and the world it refers to.²¹ Sense evokes mental representations about the referent through the uses of different names.²² Human capabilities to denote or to put meanings into an expression are enabled by this sense function. Sense may evoke images or visuals but more often it refers to a concept (non-visual features) of a name or reference. The concept or image of an entity will be different from one person to another. For example, the mental representation of a table for one person might be different from another. Similarly, the mental representation of an abstract idea such as democracy or marriage also varies from one person to another. Saeed cites Fillmore and Lakoff's claim that speakers have theories about the world based on their experience and rooted in their culture.²³ In addition, sense also helps us classify things into different categories. Löbner stated that human beings "assign everything that enters our minds to one or more categories."²⁴ An entity may have several categories.

In this study, the semantics analysis, which looks into the use of names and what they represent, will be conducted in line with Critical

21 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 30.

22 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 31.

23 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 35.

24 Löbner, *Understanding Semantics*, p. 173.

Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a methodological tool to help examine the use of language that helps promote an ideology through strategic text production by social institutions and the controlled process of reading and understanding of texts by readers. Fairclough discusses the social conditions of production and social conditions of interpretation that constitute the meaning making process.²⁵ He said when people are analysing texts in their head as part of individual cognitive processes, they are bound by social practices ingrained in them. Similarly, the production mode of a text is also within the confines of social practices. He argues that we are never independent of the dictates of social context in our process of producing, reading. This paper will consider the social practices underlying the carefully chosen linguistic expressions.

Young and Fitzgerald state that “CDA focuses on linguistics analysis to expose misinterpretation, discrimination or particular position of power in all kinds of public discourse such as political speeches, newspaper and advertisements.”²⁶ One of the CDA features that will be used for the analysis here is appraisal theory. Appraisal theory looks at how the choice of words reveals the attitude of the speakers. Appraisal theory allows a focus on the way a speaker evaluates a situation, whether it is in a positive or negative light. Evaluation can be expressed directly or implicitly.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study in this paper will be conducted using a content analysis method. The author will read articles across major newspapers containing different labels referring to the event and come up with a list of common labels. The author will then determine the frequency of each name and to confirm that the popular label of “May riots” is indeed the most common name. To determine the most frequent words as part of quantitative studies in linguistics and language²⁷, a researcher can use established cor-

25 Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 24.

26 Lynne Young and Brigid Fitzgerald, *The Power of Language: How Discourse Influence Society* (London: Equinox, 2006), p. 8.

27 Tim Grant et al, *Quantitative Research Methods for Linguists* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 79.

pus as the primary data or select a number of relevant articles from the media which the study will be based on. Corpus is a collection of texts on particular subjects developed either by an institution, for example, the British Library, or a team of researchers. This paper, however, will not use a corpus to determine the frequency between different names referring to the event because of the absence of a corpus that covers the terms surrounding it. The search for phrases, both in Indonesian, “Kerusuhan Mei 1998” and “Kerusuhan Mei” in a corpus developed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education came up with no results. As such, the frequency of the Indonesian phrases that become the labels for the event is determined using Google search. This method is used to ensure that the author is not relying on her impression about the most common label but has an empirical validation by means of Google search results.

As this research is focused on examining how different media or information portals have assigned different names to one single political event, the data will be taken from several different news outlets across the globe. The data is taken from transnational media to show how the media outside the country where the event occurred have translated or adopted new names to refer to the same event. The author will have one article as a reference to the usage of a particular label that becomes an alternative to the common name. She will refer to the content of the article and the context of its publication as a sample to compare and discuss the different representations of the event, what could have motivated the choice and how common name and its alternatives influence the perception of what transpired in the event.

The author of this paper may have to resort to the usage of a more famous name in referring to the event in this study. The author realizes this may lead to a slight bias as she chooses a certain name over other alternatives when referring to the events in this paper. However, she will try to maintain neutrality in analysis, although the names she chooses as the general reference in this paper may reflect a certain stand point or ideology.

ANALYSIS

BACKGROUND

The event occurred in Jakarta and several other major cities in Indonesia, such as Solo and Medan. The riots, which broke out on May 13, 1998 and lasted three days, started after students in Jakarta were shot in a protest against the then president a day earlier. The media published reports that the mob targeted Chinese residences and shops in Chinatown. Shops and residences alike were broken into, ransacked, and raided. They looted everything from groceries to electronics, destroying the property in the wake of it. The racial violence in the Chinese enclaves has not only left the community with financial loss but also subjected them to trauma, sexual and physical violence, and eventually death. In the aftermath of the event, the media reported accounts of rapes and other forms of sexual violence that occurred across several cities and their vicinities. The Volunteer Team for Humanity received 168 victims of rapes who came forward and gave their statements voluntarily.²⁸ The actual number of victims could not be established because of the challenge of getting statements from traumatized victims. The team documented not only sexual assaults against Chinese women but also acts of evil that mount to manslaughter after these women were raped. The riots eventually led to the resignation of the then president Soeharto, on May 21, 1998 after being in power for 32 years.

In Indonesia, *May 1998 riots* (Kerusuhan Mei 1998) is the most common name used in the media to refer to the event, with some variations including *May 1998 tragedy* (Tragedi Mei 1998) and *May 1998 happening* (Peristiwa Mei 1998). Its alternative is *Anti-Chinese riots 1998*, which was mostly used by local English and foreign media.²⁹ Google searches in Indonesian for keyword 'Kerusuhan Mei 1998' yielded 86,800 results while keyword 'Tragedi Mei 1998' 37,600 results and 'Peristiwa Mei 1998' 19,

28 The Volunteer Team for Humanity, Appendix to *The Findings of Joint Fact-Finding Team on the Event of May 1998 Riots* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).

29 Jemma Purdey, *Anti Chinese Violence in Indonesia: 1996-99* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006).

400 results. There are only 4 search results for 'Kerusuhan anti Cina 1998' (searches as of July 26, 2022).

Although the name may suggest that the May riots was an isolated event, the May riots has been closely linked with the fall of the then president Suharto. In local media reports, the May riots were reported to be part of a string of political events that started with the shootings of students during the Trisakti tragedy or Trisakti shootings. As the May riots covered a wide political, economic and social spectrum, books or media reports adopted slightly different emphasis on defining what constituted the riots.

In a report prepared by a government-sponsored team formed shortly after the riot, the event was defined more as a political crisis derived from the 1997 presidential elections although it also made a reference to the economic crisis that gripped the nation at that time.³⁰ The report provided findings and analysis of how the riots in different cities were organized and an identification of groups involved. The anti-Chinese nature of the riot was not the focus of the reports. Although it stated that the local Chinese people were the main target, it was mentioned in passing and without further identification of the motive behind the choice of the victim group. By contrast, another report prepared by the Volunteer Team for Humanities documented a more detailed description of the plight of the local Chinese during the event. It chronicled individuals in different mobs yelling anti-Chinese slurs when inciting bigger crowds to launch attacks.³¹ By large, the local media fell short of identifying the race of most of the targeted people in their news reports. In comparison, books or media written in English, either local or international, have placed greater emphasis on the Chinese aspect as the main target in the riots.

In his book on Indonesian politics, Michael Vatikiotis, a former journalist who was in the country during the event to cover for the now-de-

30 Joint Fact-Finding Team, *The Findings of Joint Fact-Finding Team on the Event of May 1998 Riots* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 1999).

31 The Volunteer Team for Humanity, Appendix to *The Findings of Joint Fact-Finding Team on the Event of May 1998 Riots*.

funct *Far Eastern Review*, wrote a chapter on the way in which the Chinese had become the main target in the riots. The book saw its first print in 1998 and an updated version to include the riot was published shortly after the crisis. The book does not contain the term *May 1998 riots* and Vatikiotis uses *Jakarta rioting* when referring to it.

When he [president Suharto] returned on 15 May, it was to a city ravaged by three days of rioting and looting and a political situation that was untenable. The Jakarta rioting was sparked by the Trisakti shootings. Both events essentially drained Suharto... Then the rioting began. Shops and banks were smashed opened and looted, cars were stopped on the toll-way and some of their occupants dragged out and beaten if they were Chinese.³²

The index in the book does not contain the term *May riot* and it only records the term *violence against Chinese*. It is interesting to note that no international or English media source adopted the name *Jakarta riots*.

Besides calling it *riots*, news outlets have also used a variety of other nouns to categorize the event. In a news article by *The New York Times*, the event is referred to as *the economic chaos, anti-Chinese mobs [raged in] 1998* and *the chaos of 1998*.³³

NAME PATTERNS

The use of the name *May* to refer to the case appeared in a local English newspaper as early as July 17, 1998 or roughly two months after the event. In an opinion piece written by Julia Suryakusuma for *The Jakarta Post*, the title of the article uses the word *May*: "May rapes become political issue."³⁴ *May rapes* refers to the rapes which occurred during the riots.

32 Michael Vatikiotis, *Indonesian Politics Under Soeharto: the Rise and Fall of the New Order* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 226.

33 Aubrey Belford, "Chinese Preachers' Bridge Indonesia Ethnic Gap", *New York Times*, July 14, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/15/world/asia/15iht-indo.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

34 Monica S. Winarnita, "The Politics of Commemorating the May 1998 Mass Rapes", *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, [e-journal] 45 (January 2011): 133-64. http://www.academia.edu/1785491/The_Politics_of_Commemorating_the_May_1998_Mass_Rapes

Similarly, the fact-finding commission that looked into the case also gave a title to their findings by using the word *May*. The report, which was completed and submitted to the government on October 23, 1998, is called "Report on 13-15 May Riots Event". Although there is no evidence that the report is the first Indonesian publication referring to the event with the term *May riots*, it is likely that the adoption of the term by an official commission helped popularize the term.

The term *May riots* became a popular option amid a range of other possible combinations such as *Jakarta 1998 riots* or *Anti-Chinese riots*. The main reason behind the popularity of the usage of *May riots* is probably because the name conveniently represents all the riots that occurred across the country at that time and does not prominently highlight a certain group as the victim. The commission that looked into the case reported that violence occurred in major cities such as Medan, Solo and Surabaya and casualties came from various ethnic backgrounds, although the report confirmed that rioters mainly targeted the Chinese. The use of the term *May riots* is considered to be more inclusive than *Jakarta riots* or *Anti-Chinese riots*, location focused and victim focused, respectively. In addition, the use of *anti-Chinese riots* was not encouraged because it would have created controversy and debate regarding the assumption that the riot exclusively targeted a group with a certain profile. The government has never openly admitted any Chinese discrimination in the rioting.

Conversely, international and local English media may have primarily used the term *Anti-Chinese 1998 riots* for several reasons. The name *Anti-Chinese 1998 riots* provide better identification of the nature of the event, while the term *May riots* tends to be more elusive. The term *Anti-Chinese riots* is more self-explanatory for foreign readers, who have no or little background knowledge of the situation. In addition, the name *Anti-Chinese 1998 riots* appeals more than *May 1998 riots* because the first is more indicative of discrimination issues. Race discrimination is considered as a type of news material which readers are sensitive to.

News reports have linked both the Trisakti Tragedy and the fall of then president with the May 1998 event. The riot is chronologically sandwiched between those two events. The Trisakti Tragedy refers to the shootings by the army towards students who were protesting against the then president in the surroundings of the Trisakti University. The Trisakti Tragedy occurred on May 12, 1998, and nine days later, on May 21, 1998, president Suharto announced his resignation.

It is worth noting that the shooting has been referred to by using the name of the location of the university. The event is alternatively referred to as *Trisakti Shooting*. In comparison to the *May riots*, the shooting does not get named as the *May Tragedy* or the *May Shooting*. One possible argument is that the shooting happened in a well-known location. Unlike the riots, which occurred across the country, the shooting was concentrated only in a particular famous spot. Thus, the media may have no difficulties in choosing the name as the shooting is limited within the boundary of the university. Similarly, the media does not call it *Jakarta Shooting*. Examples show that the media tends to stick to a landmark for naming if the event occurred there, without considering whether the event actually spread to a wider location or had a wider impact.

There is some evidence that the capital city is rarely used as a name even if that is where the event is taking place or it is affecting the whole city or is of a scale that affects the government located in the capital city. The May riots occurred mainly in Jakarta and also affected the government stability. Thus, using the name *Jakarta riots* in the way that Vatikiotis did, just appears to be a common-sense choice. However, the name *Jakarta riots* never took off. For readers living in a capital city, the name of the capital city is an internal premodifier that does not provide a clear frame of reference when being used as names for events. They need a premodifier or an identity that can be looked at externally and pointed at when using the name. As a premodifier, it has to be an entity beyond the reader (not an entity where the readers are positioned) such as a landmark, a month or another city.

Foreign media may have to resort to descriptive names, such as *anti-Chinese riots*, because they are writing for readers who do not have much background on the issue. The other possible reason is that foreign media has more freedom in using a descriptive name as they do not come under readers' scrutiny the same way the local media does. For example, local media have refrained from using *anti-Chinese riots* because group identification may be deemed to be too sensitive. Instead, the Indonesian media has used date-based names for the event of riots; names which contain participants are less likely to be used. An example is the *Tanjung Priok riots* in Jakarta in 1984, in which Tanjung Priok is the place where the riots occurred. Similarly, when racial conflicts erupted in Central Borneo and Maluku provinces in Indonesia, local media used the location to refer to the events. The first event was dubbed the *Sampit riots* while the latter is referred to as the *Ambon riots*. Racial profiling is not encouraged in the media to avoid retaliation from both conflicting sides. By contrast, foreign media has identified races or origins to refer to those conflicts in their news reports because it provides better background information for foreign readers. Foreign readers are less likely to have a personal interest and may have little possibility of involvement in the conflict and so retaliation issues are not a major concern. While local media tries not to provoke anger in their news reports by choosing toned down names, the foreign media has used stronger names or categorization to describe the events. An example is the BBC, which referred to the *Sampit riots* as the *Borneo massacre*.³⁵ Owing to its proximity with the subject of the coverage, the local media may subject themselves to self-censorship. The use of the noun *massacre* is not popular for the similar reasons of avoiding retaliation. In the example of the *Borneo massacre*, the name Borneo is chosen because it is more familiar to foreign readers rather than Sampit, which is just a small city in the island of Borneo.

35 BBC, "Horros of Borneo Massacre Emerge", February 27, 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1191865.stm>

THE LACK OF IDENTIFICATION OF PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED

Semantically, the noun *riot* in the *May riots* does not specify whether it involves two opposite parties, in a way that a noun such as *fighting* or *violence* would. *Riot* can simply point to a chaotic situation where a large number of people gather and do something violent towards something. The Oxford dictionary defines *riot* as: a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd (Pearsall 2013). It does not particularly specify whether the violence involves destructive force towards animate participants. Even if there are animate victims, they are not the main target of the action. Otherwise, it would be referred to with a more direct noun such as *shooting*, *fighting*, or *attack*. Thus, a riot is just a violent disturbance that may involve animate victims as the consequence of disturbance. The noun *riot* does not indicate that someone is actually responsible in the way the word *violence* would indicate a perpetrator. In terms of description, the name would simply suggest that a riot occurred in May 1998. In contrast, the name *anti-Chinese riots* contains a stronger message that informs that a particular group has discriminated against the Chinese.

Both *May riots* (or alternatively *May Happening* “Peristiwa Mei”) and *Anti-Chinese riots* are derived through a nominalization process. In the transitivity model, the nominalization process shapes the way information is presented by taking away participants, either agent (the doer) or recipient (the target). The process allows certain aspects such as perpetrator to be omitted from the sentence. The noun phrase *May riots* is the nominalization from sentences “The riots occurred in May 1998”. The noun phrase *Anti-Chinese 1998 riots* is also the result of nominalization. The original sentence could read “Chinese became the target in the riots in 1998.” These sentences do not say who targeted the Chinese or who constituted the mob. This process allows information to be distributed partially in order to control the narrative and consequently readers’ perception of the event.

Some may contest this aforementioned argument, saying that the use of different names, either *May riots* or *anti-Chinese riots*, have little impact on recognition because most Indonesians would have had knowledge on the background to this event. The media reported about the case, including informing the public on what happened. Readers had information on who were implicated and who were the victims. Thus, it could be inferred that the label *May riots* had little effect in the whole discourse compared to the content of the news itself. However, even when one ignores the role or influence of the name in perceiving the narrative of the event, it is evident that the name indicates what sort of evaluation or sentiment the media has towards the happening. The Chinese as the victims are rarely mentioned prominently in the news reports, although reports from the fact-finding commission and other stories indicate the discrimination.³⁶ Looking through the lens of appraisal theory, the choice of *May riots* suggests that the media is not critical towards the perpetrator; the name may come as a result of self-censorship when the media does not want to unequivocally identify the involved parties for a mix of possible factors. The use of month instead of who was targeted in the riots is a euphemistic expression that purportedly masks the racial tension.

THE CONTROL OVER PERCEPTION OF THE EVENT

Different labelling that has been discussed in this paper evokes different mental images and perceptions, even for a single person who already has her or his own knowledge of what the May riots were. In Indonesia, *May riots* may have more association with the political aspects of the crisis, such as the downfall of Soeharto, than the violence against the Chinese. The term *May riots*, with the use of the name of month, encourages readers to see the event in a more chronological way, as a crisis that started with protests and ended with the fall of Suharto. Meanwhile the name *anti-Chinese* itself would be more focused on the violence against the Chinese than the downfall of Soeharto. As suggested through the name, the highlight is on the plight of the Chinese. International me-

36 Purdey, *Anti Chinese Violence in Indonesia: 1996-99*.

dia usually gave a brief introduction or explanation of what the event was all about regardless of what name they used to refer to it. In most cases, the media described it as “an anti-Chinese riot that was followed by the fall of the then dictator Suharto”. The Indonesian media sometimes provided a brief description or left it out altogether in an assumption that readers knew what it referred to.

All of those names and accompanying descriptions encapsulate different pictures and lead to various perception of a same event. They represent a reality according to the concept or mental model of the language.³⁷ The linguistic choice becomes the structure of our reality. The use of the name *May riots* may not conjure up a graphic description unless one has been widely exposed to the event. Unlike *anti-Chinese*, the pre-modifier *May* can be replaced with any other month without changing or influencing understanding of the event. The use of date as a pre-modifier removes the visual hook with which readers establish cognitive perception. In comparison, the name *Jakarta riot* may actually be more encapsulating as it provides an immediate vision of a riot in a capital city.

Fairclough states that analysing a text involves considering texts, processes of interpretation and their social conditions.³⁸ The event, conveniently framed with a month and year as the token, discourages readers from an interpretation that will pit the minority against the majority. This brings us to the question of whether the assignment of labels to an event is a well thought out practice or is it a matter of convenience? Does the media, subjected to a particular social condition, inadvertently reproduce social narrative that shields parties implicated from public scrutiny?³⁹ Does the production of the text lean towards de-escalation of a burgeoning conflict as an effort to control the processes of interpretation on the readers’ part?

37 Saeed, *Semantics*, p. 23.

38 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 26.

39 John E. Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

As far as deciding on a name is concerned, different media may refer to it with different names before they finally concur on a single name. Although in some cases, the media may not come to any consensus on a name, each media outlet uses different names to point to a single event. Speaking of choosing names to identify an event immediately after it breaks out, it is inconclusive whether the degree to which a pre-modifier encapsulates the event is a priority in the process of deciding on names in the newsroom. Certainly, in the nominalization process, a pre-modifier is chosen not because of how it can capture the event but more on how it might represent the aspect that is to be highlighted. Clearly *May riots* and *anti-Chinese riots* represent two different perspectives. Readers may not be able to locate discrimination aspects in *May riots* the way they do in *anti-Chinese riots*. Although *anti-Chinese riots* can capture the event better, is more visual and provides a better understanding to readers, it is not seen as a preferred choice because most likely, among other things, the identification of the target may stoke further tension in the already volatile society and the media is well aware of the consequences of pushing forward with an already sensitive racial issue in society. This pattern is also demonstrated when the local media refrained from identifying the ethnicity in other racial conflicts in order to avoid backlash or retaliation. However, the author contends that there could be a different treatment in identifying local Chinese as the target in the riots due to the long-standing history of being an easy target during political and social crises. Retaliation from local Chinese has never been reported and so dismissing the concern of stoking tension. Still, this leaves us with the question of the scope of dynamic that influences the decision to label the event *May riots*. Is there any other sentiment at play that helps settle the name as such? Is there any pattern that dictates the process of selecting a name to identify an event?

A quick examination of the names that are used in the media for other crisis events reveals that choices generally range from those imbued with hype to those with an understatement; and from those with descriptive to those with symbolic qualities. There is no evidence that names are

coined according to a set of clear rules or patterns that would guarantee their adoption by the majority of the media. However, there are sufficient examples that show location and date are the most common choices for tokens in names.

To illustrate the absence of structure that governs name adoption, the author will compare several examples of names used both nationally and internationally. The first is the *Battle of Seattle*, which refers to the strike staged by activists during the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999. The strike turned into minor unrest after the police shot tear gas at peaceful protesters after some others had broken into and raided a number of shops and businesses. The second example is the *events of May 1968* in France, which refers to the strikes in the country led by students and workers. The use of the noun *event* does not offer a clue on what sort of activities took place at that time. Compared to the *Battle of Seattle*, the *events of May 1968* would sound like an understatement. Whilst the *Battle of Seattle* offers a landscape that would indicate a conflict between two or more parties, the latter does not indicate either the nature or the scale of the activity; the only identification that is offered is a date when it took place. Both names contain different values: the *Battle of Seattle* is a hype and the other is an understatement. Despite differences in structure, these two names have penetrated comprehensively into local and international media.

By contrast, the political strike by supporters of the opposition parties in Thailand in 2009 and 2010 has not assumed a single name. The first event in 2009 was conducted by supporters of the then opposition party People's Alliance for Democracy, who were symbolized by yellow shirts. The second, in 2010, was conducted by supporters of the ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose supporters wore red shirts. To refer to the two events, the international and local media simply called them red shirt or yellow shirt protests, or anti-government protests. However, some local media used the alternative of location, referring to the 2010 event as *Ratchaprasong protest*. Other alternatives are *cruel April* or *savage May*. The difficulties of finding a single name to refer to the whole situation may arise from the fact that the uprising took place over a long time

(from March to May 2010) and hence this eliminates the use of a particular month as a name. The strikes also covered a vast area and participants involved two big groups staged the strikes one after another. The local media was also polarized, with both factions controlling their own major media outlets and selectively relaying information according to their newsroom sentiment.

These examples illustrate the diverse landscape of naming practice. When a particular situation occurs, the media will decide on their standpoint and come up with a name. Thus, each name reflects the newsroom's judgment (or lack of judgment) towards an event. Although each name indicates the sorts of judgment news media have, there are no conclusive patterns of how a certain name is chosen over another alternative that could similarly represent the event in the same judgment. It is important to note that the media is also under the spell of social conditions, and it is not far-fetched to argue that they had internalized a self-censorship practice that will see the newsroom being discreet with what kind of identification they make in their news reports.

As far as the May riots is concerned, the linguistic choices have been strategically aimed at deflecting readers from the discriminatory violence that occurred. The choice of word 'riot' is elusive as it does not imply any active conflicting parties as the word 'attack' does. The word 'riot' semantically suggests an unplanned chaos amidst confusion and misinformation among the mob.

However there remains an unsolved riddle as far as these mobs go. Were they really just mobs taking advantage of the situation or were they part of orchestrated groups to create chaos? There is some anecdotal evidence, either the one gathered by the Volunteer Team for Humanity⁴⁰ or news reports, that points to the possibility of them being organized⁴¹ but

40 The Volunteer Team for Humanity, Appendix to *The Findings of Joint Fact-Finding Team on the Event of May 1998 Riots*.

41 Tempo. "May riots, Sistematis and Planned" (Kerusuhan Mei, Sistematis dan Terencana), September 8, 2003. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/16079/kerusuhan-mei-1998-sistematis-dan-terencana>

the authority has never publicly confirmed this. Regardless of the background of these mobs, the nature of the event is admittedly infused with political power struggle that resulted in violence. Political violence constitutes the involvement of two opposing groups acting in a violent manner in pursuing their political agenda.⁴²

Nossek et al. indicates that political violence will often involve a message that is wanted to be covered by the media, in a way that the media itself can be exploited to serve the interest of a certain group as a part of the political agenda itself.⁴³ The violence occurring in May 1998 warrants a massive coverage by the media but at the same time they also refuse to discredit any parties. Instead, the labelling of the event by the media directs readers' attention to a horizon in which the plight of the Chinese minority is toned down.

There can be little doubt that the creation and usage of names in mainstream texts are controlled by the media. The readers' role is limited at the receiving end. Readers construct their understanding based on news reports that have been interpreted firsthand by reporters, either favorably or not. Echoing what Lee said, the language is not a mirror of reality, but a tool to help us organize information and perception accordingly.⁴⁴ Language is a tool that assigns a phenomenon a certain conceptual structure. To tease out the conceptual structure of the event of May 1998 is to factor in the anti-Chinese sentiment prevalent in the country, mainly prompted by wealth imbalance. Taking this into consideration, the plight of the minority was not a favourable cause to be advocated, especially when the civil unrest was perceived to be triggered by a prolonged economic crisis.

In this regard, the atrocities occurring in May 1998 were treated as just a noise amid a bigger political agenda that should receive the focused attention. To this day, victims have never seen a day of justice. Over the course of time, the governments have been subjected to pressure to settle

42 Nossek, *Media and Political Violence*, p. 46.

43 Nossek, *Media and Political Violence*, p. 46

44 Lee, *Competing Discourse: Perspective and Ideology in Language*, p.8.

the human rights violations occurring in the event, but it has largely concentrated on the justice for students killed during the Trisakti shooting. The loss of the Chinese community and the acts of violence committed against them have rarely been the centre of attention. On their part, there is no evidence of the Chinese community rallying for justice either shortly after the event or years afterwards. For many, the pursuit of justice has never come to the fore considering the history of the Chinese minority becoming an easy target that goes back a long way. As they are no stranger to racial discrimination, the local Chinese have tried to steer clear of further trouble that may come if they push the government and the law enforcement with demands of justice.

The label of *May riots* reflects both the ideology pushed by the government, perpetuated by the media to control the narrative of the event and disempower the local Chinese. At the end of the day, May riots were just some chaos occurring in May. As victims are hardly indicated and perpetrators are not clearly marked, the violence and the manipulative nature of the event were well hidden behind the generic name.

CONCLUSION

Fairclough argued that people internalized what is made available to them through the media. The internalized resources shape the society we live in, leaving a mark in our individual psyche of what happened.⁴⁵ The produced texts and its contents dictate our understanding of what happened. Our interpretations of events are bound by implicit and explicit information in the media. The paper argues that the choice of name the *May 1998 Riots* resulted in the downsizing the scale of the violence. The use of month and year as the token that is attached to the categorization of the event (riots) has blurred the tragedy befallen on the Chinese minority and injustice killing beset by a number of students protesting at that time.

Labelling the event *May 1998 riots* deceptively turns readers' attention from the main violence that was perpetrated by certain groups against

45 Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 24.

others. The name riots suggest the event was an uncontrolled activity by a mob and there was no designated target. The label was heuristically adopted as it was the popular choice of name, and the interpretation of the event was internalized through the controlled social productions.

The use of date as a token in the name is a strategic labelling for controversial events in order to tone down the meaning they carry. *May riots* is a softer, less aggressive and more inclusive version of *anti-Chinese riots*, which is chosen by the media to project the event as being sporadic and not engineered towards a certain group. The use of the latter would prompt a pushback since the government has never confirmed that discrimination took place during the riots. The approach adopted by the media resulted in a narrative that has played down the violence at the expense of the victims. The tone that is carried by *May riots* and the message it relays to the audience is simply restricted to acknowledge that riots occurred during May 1998. The label chosen by the media has inadvertently perpetuated the ideology pushed forward by the government.⁴⁶ While the label may be accurate in terms that the event did happen in May 1998, it strategically promotes the undisputable, neutral aspect surrounding it, leaving obscure the more sensitive nature of the event that calls for accountability.

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⁴⁶ Kate Clark, "The Linguistics of Blame: Representation of Women in The Sun's Reporting of Crimes of Sexual Violence," in *Language, Text and Context: Essays in Stylistics*, ed. Michael Toolan (London: Routledge, 1992).

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