

Lavender Linguistics Abstract

Title: “Don’t Get Rubbed the Wrong Way”: A Pragmatic Analysis of Anti-molestation Posters in Singapore

Word Count: 237 words

In Singapore, while there is an absence of rape prevention discourses, anti-molestation posters put up by the government are difficult to miss. I postulate that the anti-molestation posters serve as an innocuous outlet for socially taboo rape-related discourses to manifest hetero-normative ideals set by the state. The anti-molestation posters also form a site where ideas about male sexual deviance (molestation), and female sexual modesty are evoked in order to naturalise the state ideology on gender and sexuality. I analysed the state’s official anti-molestation posters between 1980s and 2016 targeting both adult women and girls. Drawing on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) and Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1975), I argue that a strong social control force of the messages drives a consistent victim-blaming discourse in different posters across time. That is, the female is responsible for crime prevention through actively regulating her public behaviour, instead of the passive sexually deviant male perpetrator. Additionally, through analysing multimodal elements as pragmatic contextual cues, I explore how victim-blaming discourse is rationalised through constructing a socially-naturalised situation of molestation. Singapore is a patriarchal society where a strong sense of social order is reinforced through strict punishments, resulting in generally low crime rates. Taken as a part of the state’s social control strategy, the anti-crime posters are carefully designed to fit within citizens’ comfort zones in terms of conceptualising target

crimes. Thus, the seriousness of the sexual assault is downplayed, addressing molestation instead of rape, in the posters.

References

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