

**Deconstructing Power Relations and Language Asymmetry  
in the Documentary *Pesta Babi*: A Critical Pragmatics Analysis**

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**ABSTRACT**

The documentary film *Pesta Babi* (2024) documents contemporary colonial practices in South Papua through the National Strategic Project (*Proyek Strategis Nasional/PSN*) on food and energy, which implicates a network of power encompassing the state apparatus, military, corporations, and religious institutions. This study aims to deconstruct the power relations and language asymmetry operating within the utterance texts of the documentary, employing the framework of Critical Pragmatics. Data were derived from the film's oral transcripts, comprising utterances from state officials, indigenous Papuan communities, corporate representatives, and church leaders. A qualitative method was employed through Critical Pragmatics-based oral discourse analysis. The analysis reveals four dominant patterns: (1) legitimation through institutional euphemisms such as "National Strategic Project" and "national food barn"; (2) delegitimation of indigenous voices through lexical marginalisation; (3) speech act asymmetry in interactions between power agents and indigenous communities; and (4) the indigenous community's counter-discourse as a practice of pragmatic resistance. These findings affirm that language is not merely a medium of communication, but an active instrument that reproduces and sustains structural domination. This study contributes to the development of Critical Pragmatics as an analytical tool for examining the discourse of contemporary colonialism in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Critical Pragmatics; Power Relations; Language Asymmetry; Documentary Film; *Pesta Babi*

**INTRODUCTION**

Language and power have never been truly separable. Every utterance produced by social actors occupying different positional hierarchies invariably carries relational dimensions, ones that either reinforce dominance or challenge it. This reality is vividly manifested in the documentary film *Pesta Babi* (2024), directed by Dandhy Laksono and Cypri Dale, an investigative work that documents how a network of

interests comprising the state, military, multinational corporations, and religious elites operates in South Papua through the medium of language, policy, and symbolic violence.

Indigenous Papuan communities, including the Marind-Anim, Yei, Awyu, and Muyu peoples, face the conversion of approximately 2.5 million hectares of forest for the National Strategic Project (*Proyek Strategis Nasional/PSN*) on food and energy. This project is publicly framed through clean, technical, and progress-oriented language: "national food barn," "energy transition," and "food and energy security." Yet beneath these institutional euphemisms, thousands of hectares of indigenous forest have been cleared without consultation, and the military has been deployed to safeguard corporate interests.

It is precisely this dynamic that renders *Pesta Babi* an exceptionally rich text for critical linguistic inquiry. The documentary is not merely a social document; it constitutes an arena of linguistic contestation between two worlds occupying vastly different positions within the power structure. On one side, state officials, corporate spokespersons, and partisan bishops employ language that is structured, formal, and laden with legitimacy. On the other, indigenous communities speak with unguarded candour, articulating suffering and resistance. Their words are frequently disregarded or fail to reach policymakers.

Linguistic studies on Papua have historically concentrated on the documentation of regional languages or sociolinguistic investigations of language contact. Studies of development discourse in Papua employing a Critical Pragmatics framework to analyse language asymmetry in the context of contemporary colonialism remain considerably limited. Several Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies in Indonesia have examined media and power relations (Suharni et al., 2022; Bahardur et al., 2024); however, none has explicitly integrated the pragmatic dimension—that is, how utterances function as social actions that reproduce or contest power hierarchies in the context of agrarian conflict and the dispossession of indigenous land.

This study responds to the aforementioned gap by posing three research questions: (1) What pragmatic strategies are employed by dominant actors to legitimise the dispossession of indigenous land? (2) How is language asymmetry manifested in interactions between power agents and indigenous communities? (3) How do indigenous communities develop counter-discourse as a practice of pragmatic resistance?

Critical Pragmatics as an analytical paradigm has developed through the work of Mey (2001), who argues that pragmatics cannot disregard the social dimensions and conditions of power that shape language use. Fairclough (2015) extends this framework by demonstrating that discourse reproduces ideology through textual practices that appear naturalistic. In the context of documentary analysis, this approach acquires renewed relevance, as documentary film is not merely a mirror

of reality but a narrative construction that frames diverse voices within a particular hierarchy of representation (Nichols, 2017). This study contributes to broadening the application of Critical Pragmatics in the analysis of audiovisual texts, while simultaneously providing empirical evidence of how language operates within the context of agrarian conflict and indigenous land rights in Indonesia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Critical Pragmatics**

Critical Pragmatics is a paradigm that transcends conventional pragmatic inquiry by situating language use within the broader context of power relations, ideology, and social conditions (Mey, 2001). Whereas traditional pragmatics focuses on how meaning is conveyed through context and speaker intention, Critical Pragmatics interrogates who holds the right to speak, under what conditions a given utterance can be realised, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged by particular speech acts.

Mey (2001) introduces the concept of the *pragmeme* a unit of pragmatic analysis that encompasses not only the speech act itself, but also the social conditions that enable or constrain it. From this perspective, when a state official declares that "this project is for national food security," the analysis does not terminate at its propositional meaning; rather, it extends to the social conditions that render such a claim legitimate, as well as the effects produced upon those who lack access to public discourse.

### **Speech Acts and Language Asymmetry**

Speech act theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), distinguishes between the locutionary act (propositional content), the illocutionary act (the function of the utterance), and the perlocutionary act (the effect of the utterance upon the recipient). In the context of power relations, asymmetry arises when dominant agents possess greater performative capacity—that is, when their utterances can legitimately alter the material conditions of the world. The statement “this land belongs to the Indonesian Army” inscribed on an information board constitutes a performative speech act that unilaterally alters the legal status of indigenous land without the consent of the relevant community.

Bourdieu (1991) extends this notion through the concept of authorized language, arguing that a speech act is effective only when its speaker holds recognised social authority. In the context of Papua, such authority derives from the institutional positions of the state, military, and corporations, which have been historically naturalised as legitimate entities.

### **Language Legitimation Strategies**

Van Leeuwen (2008) identifies four legitimation strategies in discourse: (1) authorization, which borrows authority from institutions or traditions; (2) moral evaluation, which draws upon socially accepted value systems; (3) rationalization, which employs logic and goal-based argumentation; and (4) mythopoesis, which utilises causal or moral narratives to justify action. These four strategies operate in conjunction in analysing how development projects in Papua are legitimised: through state authority, the morality of national development, economic rationality, and narratives of progress.

### **Institutional Euphemism and Symbolic Violence**

Bourdieu (1991) conceptualises symbolic violence as a form of domination that operates through cognitive categories which appear natural and uncoerced. Language constitutes the primary medium of this symbolic violence. Fairclough (2015) demonstrates how euphemism, nominalisation, and passive constructions are deployed to obscure agents of power and naturalise unequal relations. Phrases such as "land optimisation," "food zone," and "energy transition" function to conceal the actual process of land dispossession, while simultaneously positioning indigenous communities as though they must "adapt" to the narrative of modernisation.

### **Counter-Discourse and Pragmatic Resistance**

De Certeau (1984) distinguishes between strategy as a practice of power operating from an established position, and tactics as practices of resistance operating from a marginal position by exploiting gaps within the dominant system. Bakhtin (1981) conceptualises heteroglossia as the presence of multiple voices engaged in mutual negotiation within every discursive text. Indigenous Papuan communities develop counter-discourse that draws not only upon linguistic symbols, but also upon material-cultural symbols, such as the red cross and the crucifix which are resemantised as instruments of resistance.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a Critical Pragmatics-based critical discourse analysis design. The adoption of a qualitative approach is grounded in the need to capture the nuances of pragmatic meaning that cannot be quantified statistically, but must instead be interpreted within the social, historical, and cultural contexts that underlie them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data source for this study is the oral transcript of the documentary film *Pesta Babi* (2024) in the Indonesian language. The data comprise utterances from multiple parties: indigenous Papuan communities (Yasinta Moiwend, Vincen Kwipalo, Franky Woro, Wilem Kimko, Natalis Buer), Indonesian government and military officials, corporate representatives, church leaders, and the documentary narrator.

## Instruments and Procedures

The research instrument comprised the researcher as the primary instrument. Data were collected through an attentive listening and note-taking method. The procedural steps involved viewing the documentary film in its entirety and transcribing the utterances of each speaker featured in the film.

## Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in four stages: (1) pragmeme identification, determining units of utterance that are pragmatically meaningful within the context of power relations; (2) speech act analysis, categorising utterances according to their illocutionary function and perlocutionary effects within asymmetric power relations; (3) legitimation strategy analysis, applying van Leeuwen's (2008) framework to identify strategies of legitimation and delegitimation; and (4) counter-discourse analysis, identifying patterns of pragmatic resistance in the utterances of indigenous communities. Research validity was established through theoretical triangulation, employing three theoretical perspectives (Critical Pragmatics, speech act theory, and discourse legitimation analysis) to analyse the same data, and through data source triangulation, comparing findings derived from the utterances of multiple parties occupying different positions within the power hierarchy.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the oral transcript of the documentary film *Pesta Babi* yields four patterns of power relations and language asymmetry. Each of these patterns is presented in a dedicated analytical table, accompanied by an explanatory narrative that illustrates how each finding operates within the text.

### 1. Language Legitimation Strategies Employed by Power Agents

Table 1 presents five legitimation strategies identified in the utterances of power agents (the state, military, and corporations) in the documentary film *Pesta Babi*. Each strategy demonstrates how particular linguistic choices are deployed to justify actions that are detrimental to indigenous communities, while simultaneously concealing the dimensions of violence that accompany them.

*Table 1. Language Legitimation Strategies Employed by Power Agents*

| No | Strategy Category       | Example Utterance                                | Pragmatic Function | Ideological Effect                     |
|----|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1  | Institutional Euphemism | “National Strategic Project for Food and Energy” | Rationalization    | Concealing land dispossession behind a |

| No | Strategy Category         | Example Utterance                                                                                         | Pragmatic Function        | Ideological Effect                                                                      |
|----|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                           |                                                                                                           |                           | national development narrative                                                          |
| 2  | Military Authorization    | "Threats to the state are no longer confined to military warfare, but extend to food and energy security" | Authorization             | Legitimising the militarisation of civilian development on grounds of national security |
| 3  | Nominalisation of Failure | "This project previously encountered technical obstacles"                                                 | Passivisation + euphemism | Concealing agent accountability for recurring project failures                          |
| 4  | Development Morality      | "He has rendered extraordinary service in advancing economic growth"                                      | Moral evaluation          | Legitimising conglomerates implicated in land dispossession as economic heroes          |
| 5  | Progress Narrative        | Humanisation of corporate figures through descriptions of hobbies and personal life                       | Mythopoesis               | Normalising exploitative actors as ordinary citizens of merit                           |

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that the strategy of institutional euphemism is the most dominant. The phrase “National Strategic Project” functions pragmatically as a legitimization presupposition, positioning the project as something that is nationally indispensable, such that anyone who opposes it appears to be anti-development. Furthermore, military authorization reveals a significant framing shift: agrarian matters are constructed as issues of national security, which directly justifies the presence of armed forces in indigenous land conflicts.

## 2. Patterns of Speech Act Asymmetry in Interaction

Table 2 documents five key interactions in the film that reflect a fundamental imbalance in performative power between power agents and indigenous communities. This asymmetry is not merely a difference in speaking style; it constitutes a reflection of inequitable access to the legal system and state-recognised public discourse.

*Table 2. Patterns of Speech Act Asymmetry in Power Agent–Indigenous Community Interactions*

| No | Interaction Context                                          | Power Agent Utterance                                     | Indigenous Community Utterance                                                        | Type of Asymmetry                                                                              |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Installation of Indonesian Army signboard on indigenous land | Action without recorded dialogue                          | "This is our land, our forest. This land belongs to the Kwipalo clan."                | Unilateral performative speech act vs. protest without legal implication                       |
| 2  | Intimidation to sign concession documents                    | State apparatus compels signing of concession documents   | "Signing any paper is very dangerous; they can use it for deception."                 | Coercive directive speech act vs. assertive-resistive utterance without legal force            |
| 3  | Disregard of Indigenous Customary Markers                    | Company continues operations after markers are installed  | "The company disregarded this customary warning marker."                              | Customary declarative speech act whose performativity is not recognised by formal institutions |
| 4  | Development without Consultation                             | Project decided in Jakarta without a consultation process | "We knew nothing. We were surprised when the ship arrived very early in the morning." | Absence of consultative speech acts; monologic policy vs. community's affective response       |
| 5  | Dialogue with a Military Commander                           | "Father, do not speak like that."                         | "If we are not respected, I will seek asylum in Papua New Guinea."                    | Personal power relation that manages and neutralises the expression of citizen dissatisfaction |

Table 2 reveals that speech act imbalance is not merely a matter of who speaks more forcefully, but of whose words carry legal and material consequences. When the state apparatus erected a signboard reading "Land Belonging to the Indonesian Army," that act immediately altered the legal status on the ground. Conversely, when Victor Kwipalo declared "this is our land," the statement though equally valid historically did not automatically produce legal protection. This is the crux of the performative asymmetry analysed in this study.

### 3. Patterns of Lexical Marginalisation of Indigenous Voices

Table 3 identifies five mechanisms of lexical marginalisation employed both explicitly and implicitly to weaken or erase the claims and presence of indigenous communities from the public narrative on Papua's development.

*Table 3. Patterns of Lexical Marginalisation of Indigenous Community Voices*

| No | Mode of Marginalisation         | Manifestation in Transcript                                                           | Discursive Strategy                            | Ideological Implication                                                           |
|----|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Linguistic <i>Terra Nullius</i> | "Papua is an empty land" (documentary narrative framing)                              | Nominalisation of land without human agents    | Erasing the presence of indigenous communities from land rights narratives        |
| 2  | Delegitimisation of Citizenship | "Wilem Kimko does not possess an identity card or formal citizenship from any state"  | Negative identification based on formal status | Delegitimising customary rights through the absence of nation-state identity      |
| 3  | Naturalisation of Displacement  | "The cassowary bird lost its habitat" (without mentioning affected human communities) | Ecological metaphor without human agents       | Obscuring human suffering within an ostensibly neutral ecological narrative       |
| 4  | Reduction of Resistance         | The Red Cross Movement is framed as a confrontation between the                       | Intra-group conflict framing                   | Fracturing indigenous community solidarity and distracting from the core issue of |



| No | Mode of Marginalisation     | Manifestation in Transcript                                                    | Discursive Strategy                              | Ideological Implication                                                                                  |
|----|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                             | community and the local bishop                                                 |                                                  | land dispossession                                                                                       |
| 5  | Depoliticisation of Demands | Community objections are responded to solely with technical-economic arguments | Redirection of discourse to the technical domain | Obscuring the political and rights dimensions of demands that are fundamentally constitutional in nature |

The most profound form of marginalisation is found in the mechanism of linguistic *terra nullius*. The framing of “Papua as an empty land” is not merely a factual error; it is a discursive inheritance of colonialism that continues to be operationalised in modern agrarian policy. When corporate concession boundaries are drawn “as though Papua were an empty land,” this narrative pragmatically erases indigenous community rights from prevailing legal and moral considerations.

#### 4. Indigenous Community Counter-Discourse as Pragmatic Resistance

Table 4 summarises five pragmatic resistance strategies developed by indigenous Papuan communities in this film. These strategies demonstrate that indigenous communities are not passive actors; they actively and creatively deploy available linguistic and symbolic resources to construct counter-narratives that carry moral force and cultural legitimacy.

*Table 4. Indigenous Community Counter-Discourse as Pragmatic Resistance*

| No | Resistance Strategy             | Example Utterance                                                                    | Type of Speech Act                            | Pragmatic Function of Resistance                                                                 |
|----|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Ontological Land Claim          | "Sago is our ancestor... this is the land created by God and given to our forebears" | Customary declarative + theological assertive | Establishing rights legitimacy grounded in a cultural-spiritual ontology distinct from state law |
| 2  | Public Declaration of Rejection | "We reject it! We reject it!" / "State, do                                           | Commissive + expressive                       | Performatively enacting collective resistance in the public                                      |

| No | Resistance Strategy           | Example Utterance                                                                                       | Type of Speech Act                    | Pragmatic Function of Resistance                                                                         |
|----|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                               | not deceive us any further!"                                                                            |                                       | sphere and strengthening community solidarity                                                            |
| 3  | Resemantisation of Symbols    | The red cross is carved with customary war attributes as a prohibition on entry into the territory      | Material-symbolic speech act          | Reclaiming the authority to interpret symbols from ecclesiastical and state institutions                 |
| 4  | Colonial Comparison Narrative | "This resembles what the British and Dutch colonisers did when they divided Papua with a straight line" | Historical-comparative assertive      | Positioning the situation within the context of global colonialism to establish international legitimacy |
| 5  | Moral Naming and Shaming      | "What the government has done is a crime. The state has become a murderer, like Pontius Pilate."        | Evaluative assertive + moral metaphor | Framing state actions within a universal moral schema comprehensible across cultures                     |

Among the patterns presented in Table 4, the most prominent resistance strategies are the resemantisation of symbols and the ontological land claim. These two strategies demonstrate that indigenous communities do not merely “react” to domination; rather, they construct alternative discursive arenas operating according to a logic distinct from that of the state’s formal legal system. When Franky Woro describes the red cross as “a prohibition marker that integrates culture and religion,” he is enacting a customary declarative speech act that, while unrecognised in positive law, carries performative force within the community and is attracting growing attention in the international public sphere.

The first finding of this study confirms that power agents in *Pesta Babi* consistently employ institutional euphemism to reframe land dispossession as a legitimate development agenda. Phrases such as “National Strategic Project,” “national food barn,” “energy transition,” and “land optimisation” are concrete examples of what Fairclough (2015) terms ideological squaring — the process by which language restructures harmful realities so that they appear natural, even beneficial. This finding is consistent with Bahardur et al. (2024), who, in a study of opinion pieces in the *Kompas* daily, demonstrate that discursive subjects actively construct reality through lexical choices that appear neutral yet carry ideological weight. Pragmatically, the framing of “empty land” in *Pesta Babi* operates as a presupposition that encodes the assumption that Papua is uninhabited an operationalisation of the *terra nullius* doctrine that has historically served as a tool of colonial legitimation (Nichols, 2017). The expansion of the military domain into the sphere of food security is further an instance of van Leeuwen’s (2008) rationalization: a linguistic redefinition of “threat” that directly justifies the presence of armed forces in agrarian conflict.

The second finding reveals that language asymmetry in *Pesta Babi* is most sharply evident in the disparity of performative power the capacity of utterances to legitimately alter the state of the world. When the military apparatus erected a signboard reading “Land Belonging to the Indonesian Army” on the customary land of the Kwipalo clan, the act constituted a declarative speech act that, by virtue of the speaker’s institutional authority, effectively altered the legal status of the land without community consent. Victor Kwipalo responded: “This is our land, our forest.” Yet his utterance, though equally valid historically, does not carry equivalent performative force within Indonesia’s formal legal system.

Bourdieu (1991) explains this phenomenon through the concept of authorized language: language is not merely an instrument of communication but also an instrument of power, in which one speaks not only to be understood, but to be believed, obeyed, and respected. Indigenous communities possess rich linguistic resources and historical legitimacy over their land; yet within the formal legal arena of the nation-state, this legitimacy is not recognised as an authority capable of issuing legitimate performative speech acts. This finding reinforces Suharni et al.’s (2022) argument that an actor’s position in discourse whether represented as agent or victim, named or unnamed is profoundly shaped by that actor’s position of power within the social hierarchy.

The third pattern demonstrates that marginalisation in *Pesta Babi* does not invariably proceed through frontal assault; rather, it operates through silencing, reduction, and depoliticisation. The delegitimisation of Wilem Kimko’s citizenship characterised as “not possessing an identity card or formal citizenship from any state” pragmatically positions him outside the boundaries of entitlement accorded to the modern citizen. This framing operationalises what Agamben (1998) terms bare life: existence situated outside legal protection, notwithstanding the fact that the Muyu community had inhabited that land long before the Indonesian state was

established. Pragmatically, this mechanism operates through a legitimation presupposition: the right to land is assumed to require state recognition, such that communities lacking “official documents” automatically forfeit claims that can be acknowledged within formal discourse. This pattern parallels the findings of Simbolon et al. (2025) on how local knowledge systems are frequently marginalised by formal educational institutions. Both reflect a broader pattern in which non-mainstream authority is delegitimised by dominant institutions.

The fourth finding demonstrates that indigenous communities in *Pesta Babi* develop a counter-discourse that extends far beyond mere reactivity. The resemantisation of the red cross is the most compelling example. The cross a symbol associated with Christianity and ecclesiastical authority is reclaimed and redefined as an instrument of customary resistance. Franky Woro explains: “On those crosses we carved the attributes of war... to show that we forbid anyone from entering our territory.” This constitutes a declarative speech act carrying powerful cultural performativity within the community. The comparison strategy invoking “Pontius Pilate” is a brilliant instance of what Bakhtin (1981) terms carnivalesque inversion the use of a dominant narrative to subvert the prevailing moral hierarchy. De Certeau (1984) describes tactics of resistance as operations that “move within the enemy’s *terrain*.” Indigenous communities deploy the language of international human rights, the historical narrative of global colonialism, and spiritual-moral authority all drawn from the dominant “repertoire” yet in pursuit of ends that are antithetical to dominant interests. This pattern complements the perspective of prior CDA studies, which have tended to analyse strategies of domination far more extensively than strategies of resistance.

## CONCLUSION

This study has deconstructed power relations and language asymmetry in the documentary film *Pesta Babi* through the lens of Critical Pragmatics. Four principal patterns were identified: first, power agents employ institutional euphemism, military authorization, and progress narratives as legitimation strategies that conceal indigenous land dispossession; second, speech act asymmetry is manifested in the inequality of performative power the utterances of state and corporate actors carry formal legal force that indigenous community utterances do not; third, lexical marginalisation operates through mechanisms of linguistic *terra nullius*, delegitimation of citizenship, and depoliticisation of demands; and fourth, indigenous communities develop sophisticated counter-discourse through the resemantisation of symbols, tradition-grounded ontological claims, historical-colonial comparison, and moral naming-and-shaming. Language in the documentary film *Pesta Babi* is not merely a mirror of conflict; it is the arena in which conflict is enacted, contested, and at times won by the less powerful party through its linguistic and cultural ingenuity. Theoretically, this study affirms the relevance of Critical Pragmatics for analysing the discourse of agrarian conflict and contemporary colonialism, particularly when combined with theories of performativity and multimodal analysis. Future research should expand the data

corpus by analysing government policy responses to this film, as well as examining how the discourse of indigenous Papuan communities circulates and is transformed within digital media and international human rights forums.

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