

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, the author provides a general overview. This chapter covers the background of the research, the research question, the objectives of the research, the significance of the research, and the definitions of key terms.

1.1 Research Background

Language is the most reliable and powerful communication tool for people in society. Humans use language in their daily lives. Language plays an important role in all aspects of human life. If the use of language can at least be understood based on the speaker's intent and purpose, then that language has achieved its goal of communicating a message during a conversation. Language has become the primary communication tool for humankind, whether through gestures or spoken language (Rahardjo, 2007).

The function of language is vital, comparable to the air we breathe every moment. Imagine a world without language; communication would be hindered, knowledge would be difficult to pass on, and cooperation would be nearly impossible. Language enables humans to share ideas, experiences, and knowledge, which are the foundation of cultural and technological development. Language is present in every aspect of life, from daily interactions to artistic expression and scientific knowledge. Through language, humans not only exchange information but also build social relationships that strengthen bonds within groups and communities. Language interaction allows individuals to express emotions, build trust, and negotiate meaning in social life. In the process, the relationships formed through language become the foundation for cooperation, innovation, and collective progress, which ultimately drive the development of civilization.

According to John McWhorter, he stated that “Language is an inherently dynamic, rather than static, living entity.” (2011, p. 16). All modern languages are evolving, dynamic, and living entities. To understand how languages develop and change, we need to trace their historical roots. The history of language not only reflects the evolution of words and grammar, but also records the social, political, and cultural dynamics that shape human civilization.

History shows that language did not begin in the complex form we know today, but rather developed gradually through a long evolutionary process. Initially, humans used a combination of body movements, facial expressions, and simple vocalizations to convey basic needs, such as warnings of danger or emotional expressions. Over time, spoken language began to emerge alongside the development of cognitive abilities and anatomical changes in humans, such as the formation of more flexible vocal tracts. This resulted in a variety of sounds that later became the foundation of spoken language. This process did not occur suddenly, but through transitional phases, where more primitive forms of communication gradually evolved into complex symbolic systems (Stokoe, 1978). Thus, with the development of language as a more structured communication system, its role is no longer merely as a tool for social interaction, but also as a medium that can be used to build social and political structures. In many civilizations, language proficiency has become a marker of status, a tool for legitimizing power, and even a means of controlling society.

From the history above, it can be seen that language has also evolved into a tool that not only functions as a practical means of communication, but also as a power, hegemony, identity control, manipulation, and exploitation. In various contexts, language has played a crucial role as an instrument for building, maintaining, and strengthening power. Language enables dominant groups to establish narratives that carry the meaning of truth and influence societal perceptions. Deconstructing power through the lens of language involves understanding how language not only functions as a tool for communication but also as an instrument of power in various contexts (Talbot et al., 2003).

Language is not merely a passive tool of communication, but also plays an active role in maintaining, reproducing, and supporting power within society. Manifestations of power in language can be found in various aspects of life, from political discourse and linguistic policies to everyday communication practices. Language is used to establish authority, control narratives, and shape collective understandings of social reality. From the use of certain terms in the media to language rules, such as those in educational institutions, linguistic power is reflected in how a group dominates discourse and determines widely accepted meanings.

An example of the power of language through political discourse and education. During the colonial era, colonial languages, such as Dutch, which once colonized Indonesia, were used. The use of Dutch became a tool to reinforce a discriminatory

education system that resulted in special treatment for certain groups who mastered the colonial language. Language has tremendous power in shaping social structures and hierarchies within society. The education system established by the Dutch East Indies government not only created social classes but also reinforced differences based on ethnicity and status. The power of language in the context of colonial education in Indonesia is clearly evident. The use of Dutch as the language of instruction in elite schools such as the *Eerste Klasse School* reinforced the dominance of colonial culture. Only Europeans and the indigenous elite were granted access to high-quality education, while ordinary indigenous people were forced to use Malay, which was considered inferior (Afandi et al., 2020).

From the above example, it can be seen that language is not merely a tool for communication, but also a symbol of status and power that shapes social identity. Through the use of discriminatory language, the colonial government succeeded in creating and maintaining a feudal social structure that separated the elite from the commoners. Therefore, understanding the power of language is crucial in analysing the social and political impact of educational policies during the colonial era.

Based on the above explanation, language as an instrument of power can be defined as the primary medium for forming, maintaining, and reproducing social structures that support the domination of one group over another. The use of colonial language, for example, demonstrates how language can be used to create social hierarchies and limit access to education and social opportunities for certain groups. Thus, language plays an active role in shaping societal structures, regulating the distribution of knowledge, and determining who holds control over meaning and the discourse that is widely accepted. From this perspective, whether it is an individual or a group that controls language, they are the ones who hold power.

Power is a force, implementation, or coercion against a group or individual, which aims to legitimize power for those who want to control it. Power can operate in various forms. Language is not only a tool for communication, but also a tool for defining social reality and controlling human thought. The relationship between humans and language is very close and inseparable. Language is one of the main pillars that enables humans to build complex civilizations. Humans create language, and language shapes humans (Devianty, 2017). It can also be examined that the power over language in greater depth through post-

structuralist theory, better known as the theory of power relations and knowledge or discourse by Michel Foucault.

With Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge discourse, which emphasizes that power is not only about control by rulers; power is not something that is possessed. Power is not an object. Power lies in a relationship. This means that power is the system itself. According to Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1990, p. 93), "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere". So power is spread everywhere because it is a system. And what makes power exist is how we associate it with the discourse we believe in, which then shapes the way we think and behave. The discourse we believe in, which is continuously produced, becomes a kind of knowledge production. Or, in other words, Foucault believed that power is not just a simple top-down system, but a complex network of connections within society. Knowledge is not neutral or purely objective; knowledge is influenced by power and, in turn, reinforces power.

According to Foucault, power and language are closely related "Doctrine effects a dual subjection, that of speaking subjects to discourse, and that of discourse to the group, ... Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. ... it follows the well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict" (1972, p. 226-227). So in every society, discourse production is always controlled, selected, regulated, and distributed according to certain procedures. Linguistic power is present in the form of a social hierarchy embedded in the language itself. It can be observed this in everyday life, where power in the context of language manifests in various forms and nuances, exercised by everyone through conversations with friends, lessons at school, reading newspapers, or engaging in social media. Most importantly, power in language is everywhere and often nearly invisible. From written and spoken texts, such as newspaper articles, books, and presidential speeches, to informal Instagram posts, language expresses the beliefs of an individual or a group and can alter or reinforce the perspectives and opinions of everyone involved in the interaction. Making language more powerful can become an issue of social position, depending on where we stand as participants in a communication event. There are many stable communication processes in society that we take for granted but that clearly express and maintain power relationships related to the social factors listed above.

However, power is not only manifested in the structural aspects of language. Power depends on communication that originates from different cultures, histories, social contexts, and a sense of belonging to a group or community. Power relations are not only created in personal exchanges but also occur at the systemic and institutional levels. Especially language that creates information, such as history lessons in school, a politician's speech, or even a thread on Twitter (now renamed X), can have varying degrees of influence on us. This means we may treat the most experienced teacher at our school as the most trustworthy source of information, or a politician speaking on the largest news platform as the most factual source of information. This trust and the power derived from it extend beyond the individuals involved in the interaction to the institutions and ideas represented by these speakers. Looking behind the scenes at all these powerful forms of communication, how they are constructed, and how we sometimes easily accept their dynamics, can give us all the strength to question problematic communication structures and ultimately weaken them.

An example of language as a power in the context of literature can be seen in the form of a novel. One novel that can be analysed to show that language can be a power is R. F. Kuang's novel titled *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022). This novel was first published in 2022. *Babel* is one of the literary works that is currently booming and often discussed among fiction readers, especially on Reddit and book party communities in Indonesia. With the genre of historical fiction, this novel combines elements of fiction and historical settings. This novel has elements of dark academia, magic, and Imperialism that are different from the historical fiction genre in general. In its plot, besides magic, it is also filled with power manipulation, the dark history of translation, and various events, particularly how the British Empire colonized by marginalizing the language and culture of its colonies, leading to epistemic violence.

The novel *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* by R. F. Kuang is a complex and courageous work that exposes power, Imperialism, and moral conflicts behind history. Through dense narration and a winding storyline, this novel challenge readers to remain intellectually and emotionally engaged. The characters in *Babel* are not portrayed simply as protagonists or antagonists, but as individuals grappling with the harsh realities of a world filled with injustice and manipulation. Kuang presents an alternative world rich with metaphors of power and

exploitation through language and knowledge, creating a strong resonance with the current state of the world. This novel not only provokes thought about how power works, but also touches on deep emotions by depicting the high price of revolution and change. However, the author's boldness in tackling heavy themes like racism and violence also presents its own challenges, both emotionally and narratively, especially due to the explicit depictions and the use of techniques like footnotes that can disrupt the flow. Despite this, *Babel* stands as a work of fiction that provokes social awareness and depicts the complexity of humanity and a history marked by wounds and sacrifices.

The novel tells the story of Robin Swift, an orphan from Canton who is taken to England by Professor Richard Lovell and trained in multiple languages to prepare him for study at Babel, Oxford's prestigious Royal Institute of Translation. At Babel, translation is not merely an academic pursuit but the foundation of British imperial dominance. Through the magical system of silver-working—powered by the subtle gaps and untranslatable meanings between languages—Britain strengthens its economic and political control over other nations. In Babel, language is portrayed as a central instrument of power. Mastery of languages enables the British Empire to exploit linguistic differences for technological advancement and imperial expansion. Students like Robin, selected for their multilingual abilities, are positioned within a system where language becomes both a resource and a mechanism of domination. Translation is not neutral; it determines which meanings survive, which identities are preserved, and which cultures are subordinated. The novel further illustrates how discourse is institutionally controlled. Babel regulates who has access to linguistic knowledge and how that knowledge is used, reinforcing imperial authority. Language thus functions as a means of producing and legitimizing power, shaping colonial hierarchies while masking exploitation under the guise of scholarship and progress. As Robin gradually becomes aware of this dynamic, he confronts the realization that language can also be reclaimed. The narrative ultimately presents language not only as a tool of oppression but also as a potential site of resistance. Through this tension, Babel foregrounds the power of language as both the engine of imperial control and the foundation for revolutionary change.

In Babel, language is not only a means of communication, but also a tool of imperialistic domination and control. Translators in Babel, including Robin Swift, do not merely translate words between languages, but are part of a system that regulates and manipulates meaning for the benefit of British Imperial power. This concept is in line with Michel

Foucault's theory, “it appears as an asset - finite, limited, desirable, useful - that has its own rules of appearance, but also its own conditions of appropriation and operation; an asset that consequently, from the moment of its existence ... poses the question of power;” (1972, p. 120), who sees discourse as a field of power: not only reflecting the world, but also creating and regulating social reality. Foucault states that discourse is an asset that naturally becomes the object of struggle in political struggles, “an asset that is, by nature, the object of a struggle, a political struggle.” (1972, p. 120), This is illustrated in the novel when Babel uses the language of the colonized people to strengthen British imperial infrastructure and dominance through “silver-working.” The education system in Babel itself is a concrete manifestation of what Foucault refers to as a mechanism of social control over the production of discourse, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures” (1972, p. 216), where only a handful of people are given access to speak and articulate meanings that are considered legitimate. Robin, who was groomed from childhood as a tool of Babel, is caught in a conflict between loyalty to the system that gives him access to power and awareness of the oppression that the system inflicts on his own people. Within Foucault's framework, Robin's position illustrates a subject regulated by discourse while simultaneously striving to reclaim control over it—a form of resistance against institutional domination that has dictated who is permitted to speak, translate, and control meaning.

The author conducted a literature review to find previous studies related to this research. These previous studies were taken from scientific journals and theses that could contribute to this research, and this research is related to them. The first previous study discussed the relationship between translation, academia, and colonialism. Thesis by Kari Stein *Uncovering a “Mysterious” History: How R.F. Kuang Exposes the Interconnectedness of Translation, Academia, and Colonialism* (2023). This thesis critiques the role of translation within historical and contemporary frameworks of power, emphasizing its implications for understanding colonial history and academic practice.

The author of the second study previously observed *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators’ Revolution* (2022) as an engagement with colonial trauma. Journal of Marie-Luise Kohlke. *The Weaponisation of the Language of Oppression: Review of R. F. Kuang, Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution* (2022). Swansea University, Wales, United Kingdom. Kohlke's review emphasizes that *Babel* does not offer a simple

resolution to colonial trauma, but rather encourages anger and rebellion against systemic and epistemic oppression. Overall, this journal presents *Babel* as an important work that grapples with complex themes relevant to historical and modern discussions of race, identity, and power dynamics, as well as the manipulation of language and translation as tools of oppression. Not only because of its depiction of Imperial violence and resistance, but also because of its courage in rejecting compromise or false narratives of reconciliation.

The author of the latest study previously positioned novels as a tool of counter-hegemony. Journal by Dafina Royer-Chacha. *Counter-Hegemony in Historical Fiction: A Babel; Or The Necessity Of Violence Case Study* (Royer-Chacha, 2023). In this journal, the novel *Babel* not only serves as an engaging narrative, but also as a critical tool for understanding and confronting historical injustice. Kuang's work exemplifies how literature can inspire readers to engage with history and challenge hegemonic ideologies by amplifying marginalized voices and questioning dominant narratives. Ultimately, this journal argues for the importance of historical fiction as a medium for education and activism, particularly in contexts where history has been manipulated or forgotten.

The difference between this study and previous studies is that it focuses on language as an instrument of power. Language is a medium of hegemony, identity control, manipulation, and exploitation. This allows them to manipulate global resources and exploit existing human resources. By controlling the meaning and interpretation of words, the British Empire strengthened its dominance over diverse cultures and languages in R. F. Kuang's novel *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022). This study uses Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge relations. While previous studies have examined themes such as translation, colonialism, and historical fiction, the function of language itself as an important element has been under-explored. The author of the first study looks at the relationship between translation, academia, and colonialism. Kari Stein's thesis emphasizes the role of translation within modern and historical power structures, stressing the importance of understanding academic practices and colonial history. The second study examines the novel *Babel* as an attempt to address the trauma caused by colonialism. According to Kohlke's review, the institution of *Babel* fosters anger and rebellion against epistemic and systemic oppression. Overall, the journal presents the novel *Babel* as an important work, addressing complex themes relevant to historical and contemporary debates about the dynamics of race, identity, and power, as well as the manipulation of language and translation as tools for

self-restraint. Not only because of its depiction of colonial resistance and violence, but also because of its bold refusal to accept false reconciliation narratives or agreements. The author of the latest study uses her work as a tool of counter-hegemony. Dafina Royer-Chacha's journal shows that the novel *Babel* is not only an interesting narrative, but also a critical tool that helps us understand and confront historical injustice. Dafina states in her writing that Kuang shows how literature can encourage readers to participate in history and challenge hegemonic ideologies by focusing on marginalized voices and challenging existing narratives. Ultimately, this journal discusses the importance of historical fiction as a tool for education and activism, especially in situations where history has been misused or forgotten. This research is unique because it does not merely address themes such as translation, colonialism, and historical fiction. Instead, it will concentrate on language as a power, how language is used, and how the *Babel* institution exerts influence through the British Empire's translators. Michel Foucault's post-structuralist theory of the power-knowledge relationship will be employed in this research.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The focus of the problem in this research is the novel *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators' Revolution* which will discuss how language legitimizes power in novels *Babel: Or The Necessity Of Violence: An Arcane History Of The Oxford Translators' Revolution*, then the author creates research questions:

1. What is language as a power in the narrative or dialogue of a novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022)?
2. How does language impact a nation and its culture as a representation of power in novels *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022)?

1.3 Research Purpose

As explained in the research questions above, the main objectives of this study are the main objectives of this research are:

1. To find out what is language as a power in the narrative or dialogue of a novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022).

2. To find out the impact of language on a nation and its culture as a representation of power in novels *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022).

1.4 Research Significance

This research is expected to make a new contribution to the field of literature and have theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of literary studies that intersect with discourse analysis, particularly in examining how language functions as an instrument of power in fiction. With a specific focus on novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022). This study is also expected to provide further information and knowledge about the power of language contained in each narrative and dialogue in the novel *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022). This analysis also provides insight into post-structuralist views on language and power, particularly in line with Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power relations.

Practically speaking, this study offers critical reflections for readers, academics, educators, especially English Literature students. on the role of language in shaping social structures, ideologies, and resistance. By revealing how language is portrayed as a tool of control and a weapon of revolution in novels, this study can deepen readers' critical awareness of language manipulation in both fictional and real-world contexts. This study can also serve as a reference for further research in the fields of literature, linguistics, or cultural studies that explore the intersection of language, politics, and identity. English Literature students. In addition, this research is also expected to be a way for the author to increase knowledge, especially about paradox, character identity, and deconstruction.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

1. **Discourse:** Discourse is a system that regulates how we speak, think, and act. Discourse produces knowledge and truth, and is always bound to power relations that define and control individuals and society.
2. **Discontinuity:** Discontinuity refers to the idea that history does not always proceed in a linear and continuous manner, but is marked by breaks, differences, and fundamental changes in ways of thinking, knowledge, and social practices. In this context,

discontinuity refers to the gap between language and its hegemony, namely Silver-working and translators.

3. **Power:** Power is a force, implementation, or coercion against a group or individual, which aims to legitimize power for those who want to control it. Power is not something that is possessed. Power is not an object. Power lies in a relationship. This means that power is the system itself.
4. **Truth:** Truth is a discourse that we believe in, which then shapes the way we think and behave.
5. **Knowledge:** Knowledge is a discourse that we believe in, which is continuously produced, becoming a kind of knowledge production.

