

LANGUAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF DOMINATION: A BOURDIEUSIAN ANALYSIS OF POWER RELATIONS IN DANIELLE STEEL'S *MALICE*

Eliza Amalia¹, Tadjuddin Nur², Siti Tuti Alawiyah³
Universitas Nasional, Jakarta, Indonesia^{1,2,3}

elizaamalia.2024@student.unas.ac.id

Received: 13/10/2025

Accepted: 30/10/2025

Publication: 01/12/2025

Abstract

This study investigated how language functioned as an instrument of domination in Danielle Steel's *Malice*. The research applied a qualitative descriptive method to analyze eighteen utterances containing verbal aggression that represented symbolic power. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, *field*, *capital*, and *symbolic power*, the study described how linguistic expressions constructed and legitimized social hierarchy within the domestic sphere. The analysis revealed that domination in the novel was expressed through subtle forms of symbolic violence rather than physical aggression. The findings showed three major patterns: first, moral coercion and emotional manipulation disguised as affection; second, legitimate language used by institutional voices to reinforce authority; and third, the internalization of power that produced silence and obedience. Through these findings, language was proven to operate as a social mechanism that transforms coercion into moral duty. The study concluded that symbolic power endures because it is accepted as care, gratitude, and love, revealing that domination persists most effectively when expressed through everyday language.

Keywords— Bourdieu, domination, language and power, *Malice*, symbolic violence, verbal aggression.

Introduction

Language is not merely a neutral tool for communication; it functions as a social practice deeply embedded in systems of power. (Bourdieu, 1991) emphasizes that every linguistic act occurs within a *field* structured by unequal distributions of *capital*, meaning that speaking is simultaneously an act of positioning and contestation. Those who command greater social, cultural, or symbolic capital can impose meanings that appear legitimate, while others are compelled to accept and reproduce them.

In literary discourse, intricacies of power are often rendered more subtly, offering rich terrain for examining how domination is sustained through everyday language. (Steel, 1996b) provides such terrain in the domestic domain, where verbal abuse and moral coercion are enacted not through overt violence but through speech that carries symbolic weight. Grace Adams, the protagonist, becomes enmeshed in a web of manipulative utterances from her father, whose authority is naturalized via language.

While earlier analyses of *Malice* have emphasized psychological trauma and recovery (Angela M. Carter, 2015; Kumar et al., 2025) they often overlook the linguistic mechanisms that underpin domination. Similarly, discourse-oriented research on gender and violence has largely focused on public or institutional domains (Fairclough, 1995); (Van Dijk, 1993); (Tannen, 1990), with limited application to domestic interactions. Recent studies, however, have begun to foreground how language constructs and perpetuates power relations in more intimate settings. For instance, a critical discourse analysis of social media chats on intimate partner violence in Tanzania reveals how interlocutors (re)produce gendered power relations through linguistic strategies of threat, deflection, and silencing. Moreover, in the realm of textual and visual media, (Kumar et al., 2025) exposes persistent gender bias in textbooks, where male authority is normalized and female agency marginalized through discursive framing.

The importance of updated frameworks is echoed in feminist discourse studies:(Azmy et al., 2024) emphasizes that language is a site where gender norms are negotiated, contested, and reproduced. This underscores the urgency of applying powerful theoretical lenses like Bourdieu's to contemporary texts.

Bourdieu's conceptual toolbox—*habitus, field, capital, symbolic power*—is particularly apt for analyzing how domination operates through language in the microcosm of the household. In such a domestic *field*, the father's utterances often function as *legitimate discourse*, speech acts endowed with moral authority. Through repeated exposure to such discourse, Grace develops a submissive *habitus*, internalizing domination as normative duty. Thus, *Malice* can be read as a linguistic microcosm, wherein symbolic power is exerted silently but relentlessly.

The present study aims to uncover how power relations are represented through illocutionary acts containing verbal aggression in *Malice*. Specifically, it addresses: (1) how linguistic forms construct and legitimize symbolic domination, and (2) how such domination generates psychological and social consequences for the female protagonist. By applying Bourdieu's sociological linguistics, this paper argues that *Malice* demonstrates how language becomes an instrument of domination—a mechanism that turns coercion into care and obedience into virtue.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of sociolinguistics, feminist discourse analysis, and literary criticism. It extends Bourdieu's theory into literary analysis, offering a model for how narrative fiction reveals—and naturalizes—symbolic violence in everyday speech. In doing so, the study positions *Malice* not only as a novel of suffering and survival, but as a linguistic laboratory where power works gently, invisibly, but no less decisively.

Literature Review

Language, Power, and Ideology

Language, power, and ideology form an inseparable triad in discourse studies. (Bourdieu, 1991) argues that language is not merely a neutral means of expression but a social practice embedded within relations of power. Every act of speaking occurs in a *field* structured by unequal distributions of *capital*, where individuals possessing greater symbolic authority can define meaning and truth. In this sense, communication becomes a site of social struggle rather than mutual exchange. Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic power* explains how domination is legitimized through everyday linguistic interaction and how speakers unconsciously reproduce existing hierarchies.

This conception of language challenges structuralist linguistics, which isolates language from its social context. Instead, it emphasizes *practice*—how people use language strategically within the limits imposed by the social field. Symbolic power functions through misrecognition, where dominated groups accept inequality as natural or moral (Saxberg, 2015). These ideas (Alnizar, 2025) (Alnizar, 2025)s provide the theoretical core for interpreting how language in Danielle Steel’s *Malice* enacts power and coercion.

Theoretical Framework of Critical Discourse and Symbolic Violence

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers complementary insights into the relationship between language and social structure. (Fairclough, 1995) defines CDA as the study of how language contributes to the production and maintenance of power relations, focusing on textual, discursive, and social practices. (Van Dijk, 1993) extends this by stressing the cognitive dimension—how ideology is mentally internalized by both dominant and dominated groups. Through repetition, discourse shapes shared knowledge and legitimizes inequality.

Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence deepens these approaches by addressing the subtle, invisible nature of domination. Symbolic violence occurs when coercion is disguised as affection, morality, or duty. It is most effective within intimate domains such as family or religion. It is most effective within intimate domains such as family or religion, where legitimate authority is rarely questioned (Boreiko & Kulakevych, 2021). (Tannen, 1990) further demonstrates that gendered conversational styles reinforce these asymmetries, as women’s politeness strategies often conceal unequal power distribution. Together, these scholars provide an interpretive frame for examining how verbal aggression in *Malice* constitutes symbolic domination.

Language, Gender, and Domination in Recent Studies (2019–2024)

Recent scholarship has revitalized the study of linguistic power by integrating feminist, sociological, and multimodal approaches. For instance (Boreiko & Kulakevych, 2021) revisits Bourdieu’s field theory in digital contexts and shows how social media discourse constructs legitimacy through new communicative norms that reproduce social hierarchies online. Meanwhile, (Im et al., 2022) explore how women experience online abuse and perceive harm and justice, demonstrating how gendered language in digital interactions reinforces symbolic subordination. Language as an institutional instrument of exclusion is further illustrated by (Alnizar, 2025), whose study of Indonesian fatwas reveals how authoritative discourse legitimizes ideological boundaries and silences marginalized voices. Collectively, these studies reaffirm that symbolic power transcends institutional boundaries and penetrates private and digital communication, operating not only through explicit coercion but also through linguistic practices that normalize dominance, moral obligation, and silence.

Bourdieu’s Sociological Linguistics in Literary Contexts

Bourdieu’s sociological linguistics provides a bridge between linguistic analysis and cultural interpretation. His core concepts—*habitus*, *field*, *capital*, and *symbolic power*—explain how language both reflects and reproduces social order. Within literature, characters’ utterances can be read as linguistic practices shaped by social structures. The father figure in *Malice* embodies *legitimate discourse*, sustained by patriarchal authority, while the daughter’s silence represents the internalization of domination, or *habitus* of submission (Bourdieu, 1991).

Recent work in critical language pedagogy shows that “linguistic capital” is unevenly valued in the classroom: students who align with dominant, standardized speech norms are perceived as more legitimate, articulate, and rational, while others are positioned as deficient. This dynamic reproduces symbolic power relations in educational spaces (Juarez Serfio Fernando, 2025). (Kumar et al., 2025)

critiques textbook language for reinforcing male rationality as the default, echoing Bourdieu’s thesis that linguistic legitimacy aligns with social privilege. In literary contexts, this framework elucidates how fictional language reproduces ideology while offering readers insight into hidden power structures.

By synthesizing classic and recent scholarship, this study positions Bourdieu’s theory as both a linguistic and interpretive tool. It enables an understanding of *Malice* not only as a psychological narrative of abuse but as a sociolinguistic representation of how language operates as an instrument of domination within patriarchal culture.

Research Method

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method, which aims to describe and interpret the linguistic phenomena found in (Steel, 1996b)). The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to analyze language as social behavior and to explore how meaning is constructed through interactions between characters. Through descriptive analysis, the study interprets the ways verbal expressions and utterances represent symbolic power, moral coercion, and domination within the novel.

The object of this research is the novel *Malice*, which contains numerous dialogues reflecting verbal aggression and unequal power relations. The data consist of eighteen selected utterances that illustrate how the father’s speech toward his daughter demonstrates symbolic domination. The researcher identified, selected, and classified these utterances based on their relevance to the focus of the study. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques, while data analysis was conducted by interpreting the meaning of each utterance using Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory of *habitus*, *field*, *capital*, and *symbolic power*.

The analysis focuses on how linguistic expressions function as instruments of symbolic domination, showing that language in the novel operates as an invisible yet powerful tool that legitimizes authority. The results are then presented descriptively to reveal the relationship between linguistic form, social context, and symbolic meaning within the narrative.

Results and Discussion

Tabel 1. Symbolic Violence in Malice

No.	Data Code	Quotation	Interpretation
1	SV-01	“... how she had to help them, how she owed it to them ...”	Moral coercion disguised as duty; obedience framed as gratitude.
2	SV-02	“... told her what a good girl she was ...”	Praise becomes a control device, reinforcing a submissive <i>habitus</i> .
3	SV-03	“... if she expected to stay married ... keep him happy ...”	Linguistic conditioning linking female worth to male satisfaction.
4	SV-04	“So what’s the address?”	Authority expressed through curt directive; assertion of control.
5	SV-05	“Just be grateful I haven’t told them ...”	Threat masked by gratitude; secrecy used as a power mechanism.
6	SV-06	“I didn’t do shit to you except kiss you ...”	Abuse reframed as affection; symbolic violence via denial.
7	SV-07	“All they are is a bunch of pictures ... half the time you were snoring.”	Mockery invalidates the victim’s perspective and silences protest.

(Source: Steel, 1996)

The data in Table 1 indicate that symbolic violence in *Malice* is manifested through moral, emotional, and linguistic coercion. Each utterance reflects how authority operates subtly under the guise of affection or duty. In Data 1, coercion is presented as indebtedness, transforming the daughter’s responsibility into an act of loyalty. The phrase “*what a good girl she was*” (Data 2) shows how praise functions as reinforcement of subordination. Data 3 further reveals the patriarchal notion that a woman’s virtue depends on her service to men, constructing obedience as a prerequisite for social approval.

Short, commanding utterances such as “*So what’s the address?*” (Data 4) highlight linguistic efficiency as an expression of dominance, while “*Just be grateful I haven’t told them*” (Data 5) exposes the manipulation of gratitude as emotional leverage. Denial statements like “*I didn’t do shit to you except kiss you*” (Data 6) exemplify symbolic violence that redefines abuse as affection. Finally, mockery in “*All they are is a bunch of pictures ...*” (Data 7) functions to discredit the victim’s experience, reinforcing control through humiliation. Overall, these examples show that symbolic violence normalizes dominance and silence through everyday language, embodying Bourdieu’s idea that coercion often appears as care

Tabel 2. Legitimate Language and Institutional Power

No.	Data Code	Quotation	Interpretation
8	LL-01	“She was neither insane, nor retarded ... Nor did she seem dangerous.”	Institutional discourse frames credibility via pathology.
9	LL-02	“Her father was Mr. Perfect ... No one wants to believe ...”	Social myth protects patriarchal authority through reputation.
10	LL-03	“You been in trouble for murder ... you’re on probation ...”	Legal narrative labels the victim as a criminal subject.
11	LL-04	“You mean incarcerated for murder?”	Repetition of legal accusation reinforces institutional bias.
12	LL-05	“The two prison guards said ... implied she’d used drugs ...”	Authority’s voice transforms rumor into accepted fact.
13	LL-06	“The prosecution concocted a theory ... seduce her father ...”	Legal discourse reverses victimhood and legitimizes male dominance.

(Source: Steel, 1996)

Table 2 shows that the mechanisms of domination in *Malice* extend beyond family relations into institutional discourse. Sentences such as “*She was neither insane ... nor dangerous*” (Data 8) employ diagnostic terminology that objectifies Grace and frames her sanity as a measurable condition, illustrating how medicalized language legitimizes judgment. In Data 9, the statement “*Her father was Mr. Perfect*” demonstrates how social reputation accumulates symbolic capital, protecting the perpetrator from scrutiny.

Institutional and legal language, as seen in Data 10 and Data 11, identifies Grace with criminal behavior through presupposition, thereby shifting her role from victim to offender. The authority of institutional voice continues in Data 12, where “*the guards implied she’d used drugs*” shows how rumor attains legitimacy once articulated by an authoritative speaker. Data 13 completes this process: “*The prosecution concocted a theory ...*” not only fabricates a new narrative but also rewrites moral positions, converting the abuser’s actions into a social misunderstanding. These examples reveal Bourdieu’s concept of *legitimate language*—the form of speech that gains power through institutional recognition rather than truth.

Tabel 3. Symbolic Domination Effects

No.	Data Code	Quotation	Interpretation
14	SE-01	“Thank you, Grace whispered ...”	Gratitude under oppression shows internalized submission.
15	SE-02	“Yes, yes, I do ... Silent tears slid down her cheeks ...”	Forced consent; emotional compliance in the face of control.
16	SE-03	“Everybody loved him ... Everyone hated me ...”	Unequal symbolic capital shapes public perception.
17	SE-04	“I thought I owed him total silence ...”	Silence represents the internalization of domination.
18	SE-05	“The voices inside the church rose ... she couldn’t sing anything ...”	Loss of voice mirrors total symbolic control and muted agency.

(Source: Steel, 1996)

The data presented in Table 3 illustrate the psychological and emotional outcomes of symbolic domination. Grace’s whispering “thank you” (Data 14) reflects the paradox of expressing gratitude within oppression, revealing how moral control transforms suffering into perceived virtue. In Data 15, the repetition “yes, yes, I do” accompanied by tears portrays consent under constraint, confirming that domination has been internalized through affect. Data 16 shows the asymmetry of symbolic capital—public admiration of the father and collective disdain toward Grace—depicting how social recognition becomes an instrument of continued subjugation.

Silence emerges as the final manifestation of symbolic violence. The confession “*I thought I owed him total silence*” (Data 17) represents complete internalization of power, while “*she couldn’t sing anything*” (Data 18) translates that silence into a physical, spiritual inability to speak. These examples confirm that symbolic domination does not merely restrict external expression but reshapes the subject’s inner perception of agency. The linguistic and emotional muteness in *Malice* encapsulates the ultimate success of symbolic power—control so deep that it requires no further enforcement.

Conclusion

The analysis of Danielle Steel’s *Malice* reveals that language operates as an instrument of domination, shaping the relationship between power and submission within the domestic sphere. Through qualitative interpretation, the study identifies that verbal aggression and emotional coercion are not expressed through physical violence but through symbolic power manifested in everyday speech. Each utterance analyzed shows how domination is legitimized through linguistic subtlety, transforming control into expressions of affection, morality, or gratitude.

The eighteen utterances examined demonstrate three major patterns of domination. First, symbolic violence constructs obedience as moral duty, embedding subordination within the character’s *habitus*. Second, legitimate language extends power from the domestic to the institutional field, where reputation and authority function as symbolic capital. Third, the effects of symbolic domination reveal the internalization of power, as silence, compliance, and emotional restraint become the markers of control. These patterns confirm Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical argument that language is never neutral but always positioned within a hierarchy of legitimacy and recognition.

This study concludes that *Malice* portrays domination as a subtle yet pervasive force sustained by language. Through praise, accusation, or silence, linguistic practice legitimizes inequality and shapes consciousness. The novel demonstrates that symbolic power endures precisely because it is

misrecognized as love, care, or duty. Therefore, understanding language as a social act becomes crucial to unveiling how domination persists in both literary narratives and real-life communication. The findings contribute to the broader discussion of language, gender, and symbolic power, emphasizing that the most enduring forms of control are those that speak softly and are most willingly accepted.

References

- Alnizar. (2025). Faetwa as ideological discourse: Language, power, and exclusion in contemporary Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11-23.
- Azmy. (2024). Feminist discourse and linguistic negotiation of gender norms in Southeast Asia. *Gender and Language*, 245-268.
- Boreiko, & Kulakeych. (2021). The reproduction of social hierarchies through digital communication: Revisiting Bourdieu's field theory. *Language and Culture Studies*.
- Bourdieu. (1991). *Language and symbol power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- Im. (2022). Online gender-based violence and linguistic strategies of control: Women's experiences of harm and justice. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1371-1389.
- Saxberg. (2015). Symbolic violence and linguistic habitus in educational discourse. *Language and Education Review*, 321-335.
- Fernando, J. S. (2025). *Transgressing linguistic supremacy: Reimagining public speaking education for racialized students*.
- Steel, D. (1996). *Malice*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Tannen. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Dijk, V. (s.f.). Principle of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 249-283.