

Language, Trauma, and Power Relations in Narratives of Bullying in Online Media

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ABSTRACT

This study explores traumatic experiences experienced during school through personal narratives shared online, focusing on how these experiences are remembered and retold after graduation. The study raises two questions: How are traumatic experiences during school represented through language in interactions with teachers and friends? And how do ideational processes reveal alumni's position as victims or perpetrators, and the power relations that emerge in the narratives? This qualitative study uses narrative inquiry, combined with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to examine the meaning of language, social relations, and the construction of experiences in the narratives. Data were obtained from written narratives by Quora users who recounted their traumatic experiences during school, both with teachers and friends. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning and social interactions in the narratives, including material, mental, behavioral, verbal, relational, and existential processes. The results show that traumatic experiences are exposed through physical actions, feelings, speech, and social judgments. The narratives also reveal the long-term impact of trauma on memories, emotions, and how alumni cope with these memories. This study expands the study of trauma linguistics by presenting personal narratives from online sources, providing insights into how trauma is constructed and interpreted outside of the formal school context.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the media has highlighted various issues that occur in the lives of students in the school environment. Cases of bullying, physical violence, and even acts of violence demonstrate that communication and interaction patterns in schools significantly influence students' behavior and emotional well-being. Even more concerning, these incidents occur not only between students but also involve teachers, who are supposed to be protectors and role models in the educational environment. Several reports indicate teachers choosing to remain silent when bullying occurs, while in other cases, teachers use their positions to baselessly accuse students. These experiences don't just end as fleeting incidents during school, but can linger and become lasting wounds that last until students graduate and enter the next phase of their lives.

In line with these conditions, various studies show that verbal violence and psychological pressure in schools have a significant impact on students' emotional and behavioral well-being. Bullying not only has physical consequences but also impacts an individual's psychological and cognitive-behavioral development (Chu et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2022; Midgett & Doumas, 2019; Putra & Dendup, 2022; Sutter et al., 2023; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). In addition, the way teachers interact and communicate also influences the psychological development of students, both in constructive and destructive forms (Sabrifha & Darmawati, 2022; Wang, 2023). These findings confirm that traumatic experiences in schools cannot be understood solely as an individual issue, but are closely related to social relations, communication practices, and power positions within an educational institution.

Trauma in the context of communication doesn't always manifest as explicit emotional outbursts. Post-traumatic stress disorder can affect how a person uses language, from the verbal level to the discourse level. Research Quillivic et al., (2024) And Yu et al., (2025) Studies have shown that PTSD causes systematic language disturbances, such as increased vocabulary about death, the body, and physical sensations, changes in pronoun patterns, use of passive sentences, and repetition in discourse structures. Ettore et al., (2025) also shows that the accumulation of childhood trauma is associated with changes in the syntactic and semantic structure of speech, characterized by increased duration of speech, word repetition, and small but diverse clusters of meaning. These findings suggest that trauma can be recorded and traced back through the way individuals speak and construct narratives about their life experiences.

These studies confirm that trauma often presents itself through narratives that are not entirely stable, full of repetition, and laden with negative emotions. Wiesepape et al., (2025) states that the quality of a narrative is determined not only by its content but also by its level of coherence. A coherent narrative indicates that individuals are able to organize their experiences in a more structured manner, while incoherent narratives are often associated with disturbances in memory processing, emotions, and the interpretation of traumatic events. In the context of graduating students, narratives become an important space to examine how past bullying experiences remain vivid in memory as painful experiences, even though structurally the narrative can be

told more calmly. Therefore, narratives function not only as stories about the past, but also as a medium for understanding how trauma and power relations from school continue to be interpreted in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring the relationship between language, trauma, and power relations, the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach developed by Halliday provides a relevant framework. Halliday views language as a system of signs that has a social function and is used by humans to construct meaning in their life experiences (Ismadi et al., 2019). Through ideational metafunction, students' traumatic experiences can be traced through six types of processes within clauses: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential. Meanwhile, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to examine how language reflects positions of power, dominance, and role inequality in social interactions. Fairclough asserts that language in the media not only conveys information but also shapes certain understandings and ideologies (Permata Sari et al., 2025). Thus, through SFL the position of the narrative writer can be revealed as an actor, victim, or object in the linguistic structure, while through CDA it can be traced how the dominance and inequality of social relations are considered normal through language.

Various previous studies have indeed discussed bullying, verbal abuse, and psychological stress in schools and their impact on students' emotional well-being. Other studies have also shown that trauma is reflected in how people speak and construct stories. However, very little research directly links communication practices in schools to students' traumatic experiences and examines how these experiences are retold through personal narratives after they graduate. This limitation presents a gap in this research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, trauma, and power relations in long-term educational experiences.

Based on the above background, this study aims to examine how traumatic experiences resulting from bullying at school are retold by speakers after they graduate from school through personal narratives in online media. This study examines how ideational processes reflect experiences as perpetrators, victims, or objects in the traumatic events they experienced, as well as how power relations operate within these narratives. By combining the narrative inquiry approach, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study is expected to enrich the study of trauma linguistics in the educational context, while also providing a basis for strengthening school communication practices that are more sensitive to the long-term psychological impact on students.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative methods with a narrative inquiry approach to examine how traumatic experiences resulting from bullying in high school are constructed, interpreted, and re-presented through the speakers' personal narratives after they graduate. Qualitative methods play a crucial role in

understanding the meaning behind human behavior, interactions, and experiences in everyday life (Widyastono, 2007). Through this method, trauma narratives can be understood contextually according to the social and emotional experiences of the narrator.

Narrative research, or narrative inquiry, involves the analysis of a variety of narrative materials, both from media such as novels, films, or speeches, and stories produced directly by participants, such as life stories, self-portraits, or daily journals (Squire et al., 2014). Narrative research aims to understand the deeper meaning of participants' life experiences through narratives collected using in-depth interviews, observations, and personal documentation such as journals, letters, or diaries (Mutiah & Murhayati, 2025). Thus, narrative research focuses on stories as a means of recording and interpreting events, which are arranged sequentially based on a specific chronological order. In this study, a narrative approach is used to trace traumatic experiences experienced during school through personal stories rewritten after the speakers graduated, so that the traumatic events can be understood in depth based on the chronological order and meaning constructed by the subjects.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from stories of bullying experiences published openly by speakers on the online platform Quora. Researchers searched for narrative posts on the theme of trauma and bullying in school environments and then randomly selected two data sets: one narrative related to trauma caused by teachers and one narrative related to trauma caused by friends or seniors. After the data were determined, researchers documented the narrative text by taking screenshots. Secondary data, derived from relevant books, journals, and scientific articles, was used to provide theoretical context and strengthen the analysis of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, supported by the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches, to explore the meaning of language, power relations, and social constructions that emerge in the narrative. Thematic analysis is a popular method that allows researchers to discover, examine, and present data through specific themes or patterns, which are then interpreted and summarized into conclusions (Najmah et al., 2023). This approach allows researchers to not only describe traumatic experiences, but also interpret how trauma, identity, and social interactions are represented through their writing.

The research subjects were selected through random data collection from online narratives, with the criteria being that they included experiences of trauma in the school environment and were able to describe the relationships between the speakers and their teachers and peers. Data collection was conducted through written narrative documentation published in digital spaces.

With this method, research can understand how traumatic experiences during school remain imprinted after the speakers graduate and how language is used to reconstruct experiences, self-positions, and power relations in their memories.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of a trauma narrative analysis obtained from two stories uploaded to Quora. The analysis focuses on how the authors recounted traumatic experiences after school, both in relation to interactions with teachers (Data 1: the hijab narrative) and peers (Data 2: the bullying narrative).

The analysis emphasizes that trauma is not only reflected through the events experienced, but also through the way these experiences are interpreted and structured within personal narratives. The analyzed narratives demonstrate how physical actions, emotional reactions, social interactions, and verbal utterances shape traumatic experiences that remain imprinted on the authors, even though the events occurred in the past. Further analysis is divided based on the types of ideational processes in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), namely material, mental, behavioral, verbal, relational, and existential, to examine how trauma is constructed and communicated through language.

Ideational Meaning in the Representation of Trauma

The ideational process in SFL represents how experiences and events are experienced, perceived, and interpreted by narrative writers. The data analyzed were two different narratives recounting traumatic experiences with teachers and fellow students at school, taken from the website [Quora](#). Based on the data shown below, the processes contained in the ideational metafunction are divided into several categories:



Data 1. Trauma narratives towards teachers



Data 2. Trauma narratives towards friends

1) Material Process

A material process is a process that involves action or activity, where the verb indicates an action or the occurrence of an event.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	When I was in the first grade of junior high school, when the uniforms and headscarves were distributed, I got a headscarf that was big, so it was too big, but I still managed to fix it by using a safety pin or a safety pin.	Material	writer	veil	during the distribution of uniforms and headscarves, class 1 of junior high school
2	because I was wearing a headscarf that was too big and when I answered questions my mouth automatically moved and my headscarf slipped down until it almost covered my eyes.	Material	writer	veil	When answering teacher's questions

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	..., since I first introduced myself in front of the class, in front of the new students, they	Material	Classmate	writer	when introducing yourself in front of the class

	have been teasing me, imitating my speaking style which is perhaps a little different from other normal boys.				
2	At first I gave it to them, but it turned out they asked for more by forcing their way into my shirt and trouser pockets.	Material	writer	Shirt and pants pockets	When asking for money

In Data 1 (hijab narrative), the author takes creative action to adjust the hijab that is too big, for example "tricking by using a safety pin or pin" and "trying to pull back the hijab when it slips down." This action indicates that there is a problem at the beginning, then shows the author's efforts to adjust the hijab so that it is comfortable to wear before being teased by the teacher.

In Data 2 (bullying), the material process emerged from the actions of both the author and his classmates. For example, classmates engaged in physical acts of "mocking and imitating the author's speaking style" when he introduced himself, while the author engaged in other physical actions, such as giving money initially out of necessity. All of these actions emphasize real physical interaction as the core of the experience of social trauma. From this, it is clear that the author was a victim of bullying, having tried to defend himself, but was still bullied by his classmates and seniors.

2) Mental Process

Mental processes represent a person's thoughts, feelings, or subjective awareness.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	I will never forget this incident	Mental	writer	incident of being teased by a teacher	Traumatic experience during junior high school
2	I'm traumatized until now	Mental	writer	trauma	After the experience in class

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	I chose to keep this all from my family	Mental	writer	Saving events	Traumatic memories
2	The insults or words I received were very piercing and I remember them to this day.	Mental	writer	Insult	experience

The data above shows that the author's experience of trauma does not only arise through physical actions, but also through mental processes, namely the process of thinking, feeling, and remembering painful experiences.

In Data 1 (the hijab narrative), the author expresses memories and feelings of trauma through phrases such as "I will never forget this incident" and "I am traumatized until now." These two phrases demonstrate how negative experiences in the classroom leave strong emotional and cognitive scars.

In Data 2 (bullying narrative), the mental process is seen from the author's choice to keep the experience to himself without telling his family ("I chose to keep this all from my family") and from the memory of the insults that continue to leave a mark ("The insults or words I received, which were very piercing and I remember them to this day"). This emphasizes the long-term psychological impact of trauma, where memories and feelings of sadness or hurt remain imprinted and live on in the author to this day.

3) Behavioral Process

This process involves physical actions related to biological behavior or bodily reactions, such as breathing, crying, laughing, sleeping, or behaving in certain ways.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	The whole class laughed heartily, as did the teacher.	Behavioral	Classmates, teacher	writer	When the lesson is in progress

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	, when I finished my reflection activities in the field that night, many people laughed behind me,	Behavioral	Friend	writer	At the Evening Reflection activity
2	And the worst was when I was in 3rd grade of junior high school, you could say that I cried in class almost every day.	Behavioral	Traumatic experience	writer	3rd grade of junior high school

The behavioral process in this data is evident from the behavior that emerged as a reaction to the experience. In Data 1, the behavior that emerged was laughter, as in the sentence "The whole class laughed loudly, and so did the teacher." Laughter here is not just an expression of joy, but indicates a mocking reaction. When the whole class and the teacher laughed, the author was in a position of being humiliated in front of many people. This situation intensified the psychological pressure the author experienced because the ridicule came not only from friends, but also from the figure who should have protected him, namely the teacher.

In Data 2, the behavioral process is evident in the behavior of being laughed at behind my back and crying in class. The sentence "many people laughed behind my back" indicates that the teasing wasn't always done openly, but also in a hidden way that still hurt. Meanwhile, the sentence "almost every day I cried in class" indicates that the impact of this treatment was very heavy for the author. The repeated crying indicates that the pain experienced was not just momentary, but ongoing.

4) Verbal Process

Verbal processes describe actions related to conveying or exchanging information, such as commanding, requesting, explaining, conveying, telling, exclaiming, promising, asking, and similar activities.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	I clearly remember her statement, 'Why wear a hijab like that? It would be better if you were beautiful, your face looks like a lizard, why cover everything up?'	Verbal	Mr. Teacher	writer	While studying

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	they mocked with the phrase "Worm tires, snake tires"	Verbal	Friend	writer	At school
2	I never told all this to my parents.	Verbal	writer	parent	Bullying experience

The verbal process is evident in the words spoken directly to the author. In Data 1, the teacher made derisive remarks about the author's hijab and face during class. These remarks were made in front of classmates, making the situation even more embarrassing for the author. The author remembers these remarks to this day.

In Data 2, verbal processes are also evident in the taunts given by friends, such as being called "worm tires" and "snake tires." These taunts indicate that the author again experienced unpleasant treatment through words. Furthermore, there are also sentences indicating that the author never told his parents about these experiences. This suggests that the author chose to keep these bitter experiences to himself and not verbally convey them to his family.

5) Relational Process

The relational process can be interpreted as a process that emphasizes the existence of relationships or connections between participants in the abstract realm, without involving physical influence or direct action from one participant towards another.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	-	-	-	-	-

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	But the worst and most painful bullying was in junior high school, both verbal bullying and violence or even harassment.	Relational	Friends, seniors	writer	junior high school time
2	Maybe the story will be a bit long and the sentences a bit convoluted	Relational	Story	long, convoluted	The narrative conveyed

The relational process was only found in Data 2 and was used to assess the author's bullying experience. This is evident in the sentence stating that the most severe and painful bullying occurred in junior high school, whether in the form of verbal abuse, violence, or harassment. This sentence demonstrates how this incident is classified as the most painful experience in the author's life.

Furthermore, the relational process also emerges when the author describes the form of her own story as long and somewhat convoluted. This demonstrates the author's attempt to provide a picture of the narrative context she's conveying. Thus, the relational process here reveals the context, nature, and how the author assesses her traumatic experience.

6) Existential Process

The existential process shows the existence of an entity.

Data 1

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	-	-	-	-	-

Data 2

No	Sentence/Phrase	Process Type	Perpetrator	Goal/Target	Context
1	..., and when I cry, no one cares.	Existential	No one un	writer	When the author experienced violence and cried in 3rd grade of junior high school

In this data, the existential process only appears in Data 2 through the sentence "no one cared." This sentence indicates that when the author cried due to the violence, no one was present to care for or help her. This indicates that trauma victims need social support from others.

The Power Relations Evident from the Ideational Process Pattern

Based on the two analyzed data, power relations in schools are clearly visible through the pattern of ideational processes involving teachers and peers. Pierre Bourdieu stated that every form of social interaction always contains elements of power that operate subtly and often go unnoticed by the individuals involved. (Hasanah et al., 2025). In Data 1, the teacher's power is evident in the verbal process of the utterance "Why are you wearing a hijab like that..." delivered in the classroom. This utterance is not merely a comment, but a symbolic act that positions the teacher as the party considered authorized to judge and humiliate students in public spaces. Because this action is generally considered normal or ordinary, the utterance is not recognized as something that contains elements of violence. This is evident in the sentence "The whole class laughed crisply, so did the teacher..." The attitude of the whole class laughing had an impact on the mental process experienced by the author, as in the sentence "I am traumatized until now," which shows that the teacher's verbal power continues to cause psychological wounds in students.

Meanwhile, in Data 2, power relations emerge in the form of domination between students. Material processes such as "they've been teasing, imitating my speech style" and "they asked for more by forcing their way into my shirt and pants pockets" show that peers and seniors appear as active perpetrators, while the author is constantly the target of actions. Here, relations of power, domination, and control are visible between seniors and juniors. Forcing victims to give money to commit acts of harassment shows that seniority provides advantages by giving them a strong position in social interactions and giving them the freedom to determine the norms and values that apply in that environment (Dwi et al., 2025).

Apart from that, Bordeaux also explains about cultural capital which refers to a collection of abilities and skills that a person has, such as knowledge, expertise, ways of communicating, and other aspects, which play an important

role in forming and strengthening their social position.(Addina & Hanif, 2025).From the narrative of Data 2, it can be seen how the author narrates that he has a slightly different way of communicating with his friends (... , imitating my speaking style which may be slightly different from other normal men). This can be interpreted as a weak point in the author's social position which is exploited to strengthen the control carried out by other friends. From a mental perspective, the author is described as the party who chooses to "keep this all from my family" and "remember the insults to this day", which indicates ongoing mental pressure due to his weak social position. This is reinforced by the existential process in the sentence "no one cares", which further emphasizes that no one cares about the bullying problem.

The narrative pattern reveals that power imbalances do not emerge abstractly, but are constructed directly through the characters' physical actions, speech, and inner experiences. The narrative depicts teachers and friends as active participants, while the author is consistently positioned as the recipient of long-term psychological impacts. While the narrative does demonstrate forgiveness from the victims, the wounds remain deeply embedded in memory and may resurface at some point. Thus, the power relations at school in these two sets of data are reflected in the language used by the authors and can be framed within CDA theory. The resulting narratives clearly demonstrate who holds the power and who is the victim.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that power relations in the school environment are clearly visible through the language used in everyday speech. From these trauma narratives, it becomes clear who is in the dominant position and who is the victim. This not only has a momentary impact but also leaves lasting emotional wounds that are difficult to erase throughout life. It is important to emphasize that language not only functions as a means of communication but also contributes to shaping and reinforcing inequalities in social interactions at school. Therefore, schools, particularly teachers, educational staff, and students, are expected to be more sensitive to the use of language in all forms of interaction to create fairer and less demeaning communication.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study reveals that power relations in schools are constructed and reinforced through everyday language, as reflected in trauma narratives that position certain individuals as dominant and others as victims. Language operates not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism of symbolic power that perpetuates inequality and leaves lasting psychological impacts. Therefore, fostering critical awareness of language use among teachers, staff, and students is essential to creating a more equitable and non-oppressive school environment.

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