

A Speech Act Analysis of the Prime Minister's Speech Pertaining to the Movement Control Order (MCO) to Address the Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

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Abstract

Crisis management is a competency that needs to be possessed by all leaders of today to address the challenges and volatility of the world today. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most crucial examples of such volatility which has impacted the world today. Malaysia is one of the countries that was initially badly affected by the pandemic, and matters were made worse with the political turmoil in the country when there was a change in the prime minister as the COVID-19 cases rose in the country. This study analyses the direct and indirect speech acts in the text of the Malaysian prime minister's speech on the first day the Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented country-wide to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus using the speech act theory by Searle (1969). From the direct speech act, the five classes of the illocutionary act (declaratives, representatives, expressives, directives, and commissives) were further identified and examined. The study found that expressives and directives were used the most in the direct speech acts, while the indirect speech acts carried the purpose to direct or persuade the audience. This study carries significance to the field of speech analysis and crisis management, as it depicts a strategy in which a country leader addresses its citizens during a time of political and worldwide crisis.

Keywords: *speech acts, leadership speech, COVID-19, pandemic, movement control order*

1.0 Background

The recent outbreak, COVID-19, which originated from a wet market from Wuhan, China, in December 2019 has severely affected the lives of people across the world in all sorts of levels. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), as of September 2020, there are 25,842,652 confirmed cases with 858,629 confirmed deaths worldwide. This has sparked fear among citizens globally, especially since almost all countries have been called for isolation or quarantine.

As cases began to rise internationally beginning January 2020, Malaysia was thrown into political turmoil when the then prime minister, Tun Dr. Mahatir Mohamad, resigned abruptly on the 24th of February 2020. Without clear direction of how to control the spread of the pandemic, tensions arose, until the palace named former home affairs minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (hereafter called TSMY), as the eighth prime minister of Malaysia on the 29th February 2020 (Achariam, 2020).

Barely two weeks upon entering the office, the COVID-19 local cases rose drastically from nine cases on the 13th March, to 41 cases on 14th March, followed by 190 cases on 15th March (Statista Research Department, 2020). To contain the virus from sporadically spreading, appropriate measures were then taken by the new government. In particular, the Movement Control Order (MCO) was announced by TSMY on the 16th March 2020 to begin on 18th March 2020 (Tang, 2020), which ultimately lasted until 9th June 2020 (Povera & Chan, 2020). The MCO was then replaced by the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), with the latter is being extended until December 31 this year in an effort to control the spread of the virus (Babubal, Arumugam & Solhi, 2020).

This paper is written to analyse one of the earliest speeches delivered by TSMY in the first few days of the implementation of the MCO. The main purpose is to identify which of the speech act strategies were adopted by TSMY when delivering his speech, especially considering the magnitude of the pandemic and the unique way TSMY was appointed as the leader of the country. Specifically, the paper examines the speech that was delivered on the 18th March 2020, which was the first day the MCO was implemented following the announcement on the 16th March 2020.

2.0 Literature Review

Pragmatics, or the study of meaning, is a field of study that examines the words (whether spoken or written) of a communicator as it is interpreted by the listener or reader (Yule, 1996). Pragmatics distinguishes between what words or phrases mean by themselves, with what those words and phrases actually mean. Thus, the study of pragmatics cannot be separated from studying the context and background of which the words or phrases are used. One of the main areas of study in the field of study is speech acts.

Speech acts concern the actions that are performed via utterances. Examples of speech acts include apologising, complaining, complimenting, requesting, promising, and many more. According to Austin (1962), speech acts are utterances that lead to getting things done. In other words, the utterances relate to different purposes, such as to convey emotion or to perform an act.

The most common way to analyse speech events is to examine the three related acts, which are the locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act as defined by Austin (1962). Put simply, the locutionary act concerns the basic act of utterance or producing a

meaningful linguistic expression. This means that a speaker forms a phrase that can be understood, linguistically speaking, by a listener of the same language. However, one does not merely produce utterances unless it is often done with some type of purpose in mind, and it is this purpose that is called the illocutionary act. The force upon which an utterance is made is depending on its communicative purpose is known as the illocutionary force. Finally, the effect that is intended from the utterance is called the perlocutionary act. For any utterance made, the assumed recognition of the effect intended towards the listener is called the perlocutionary effect. Of all three speech acts, the illocutionary force is the most commonly studied in literature (Yule, 1996).

One of the most prominent fields of study relating to speech acts, and in particular in the illocutionary force of speech, is the study of political speeches. This is due to the unique scenario upon which political speeches are delivered. Political speeches, for instance, are often delivered with a particular illocutionary force in mind on the part of the political leader. Adding to that is the nature of certain political speeches in times of confusion or difficulty, which creates a unique speech event (the context or circumstances that surround an utterance) upon which interesting findings could be derived from the way speeches are delivered.

2.1 Political Speeches

According to Schäffner (1997), one of the most problematic areas in linking the study between politics and linguistics is to first determine and define what is termed as “political”. With the advent of printed and electronic media in the 20th and subsequently the 21st centuries, there has been an increase in discourse that may be characterised as political in nature. In addition to that, there have been increased conversations surrounding the world of politics in daily life, leading to much higher involvement in politics among regular citizens compared to what has been practiced in the past.

In determining whether a speech is “political” in nature, several classifications have been made (Schäffner, 1997). First, political texts may be historically or culturally determined. Secondly, political texts may be delivered to fulfill different functions of political activities. Thirdly, political texts may contain topics that are related directly to politics. And finally, political texts are most often prepared to be delivered to the wider public.

Linguistically, one of the easiest ways to determine whether a text is political is to be able to linguistically prove within the text itself that there are political elements or topics that

are addressed (Schäffner, 1997). There are two methods to do this. The first method is to start at the micro level, whereby specific structures within the text are examined to determine the purpose and functions that it intends to fulfill. Alternatively, the text could be examined at the macro level, which looks at the function and purpose of the entire text, then to examine which linguistic structures have been chosen to fulfill this function.

2.2 Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory introduced by Searle (1969) was derived from the original theory from Austin (1962) which looked at the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts. In the theory provided by Searle (1969), the illocutionary act (the purpose of locutionary speech) is categorised into five classes:

- i. Declaratives - speech acts that change the world via their words/utterances.
- ii. Representatives - speech acts that state what the speaker believes to be the case or not.
- iii. Expressives - speech acts that state what the speaker feels.
- iv. Directives - speech acts that speakers use to get someone to do something.
- v. Commissives - speech acts that the speaker uses to commit himself/herself to a future action.

Based on this breakdown of five classes, the way to classify the different types of speech acts may seem straightforward, however, Searle (1969) also made the distinction between two other types of speech acts, which are direct and indirect speech acts.

The classification between direct and indirect speech acts is related to the structure of the speech or utterance. According to Yule (1996), a speech act is direct when there is a direct relationship between the structure and a function of an utterance. In contrast, when there is an indirect relationship between the structure and function, it is called an indirect speech act. For example, a declarative sentence that is used to make a statement is a direct speech act, whereas a declarative sentence that is used to make a request is an indirect speech act. In general, indirect speech acts are associated with a higher level of politeness compared to direct speech acts. In the study of political speeches in particular, indirect speech acts may thus be an interesting area to be studied.

3.0 Research Objective and Research Question

In light of the discussion above, this paper thus has only one objective, which to investigate which speech acts were utilised in the COVID-19-related speech given by TMSY.

In order to achieve this objective, the following question was formulated:

- 1) Which of the speech acts were utilised in the COVID-19-related speech given by TMSY?

4.0 Methodology

This research sits within the basic interpretive qualitative design using document analysis of one speech text to obtain the findings. The text used was a special address delivered by TSMY on the 18th of March 2020, which was retrieved from the Prime Minister's Office of the Malaysia Official Website. The address was delivered on the first day of the implementation of the MCO, when Malaysia was ranked as one of the worst countries affected by the pandemic. It addressed how serious the virus is, that it was the start of the 14-day MCO which had caused all schools, universities and a number of offices or companies, business premises and factories to be temporarily closed.

The speech text consisted of six pages and contained 98 sentences. To analyse the types of speech acts used, the speech act theory, as described in the Literature Review section was employed. First, the speech text was analysed to identify the direct and indirect speech acts following Searle (1969). Then, both types were analysed further to determine which of the five classes (declarative, representative, expressive, directive, and commissive) were utilised. For the indirect speech acts, the structure and function of the sentences were also examined. From the 98 sentences in the text, 30 sentences were extracted for further analysis.

Since the speech was mostly delivered in Bahasa Malaysia, an English translation for each relevant utterance was done. It is also worth mentioning that this study analyses the written form of the speech and does not take into account the tone of voice that TSMY used personally when delivering the speech.

5.0 Findings

From the analysis of the speech, it was found that TSMY mainly used the expressive and directive speech acts the most, followed by assertive and declarative. Interestingly, no

commissive speech act was found; rather, there was only one sentence which seemed to be a commissive but was actually declarative in nature with an indirect purpose to be taken as a commissive (refer to section 5.2).

The findings are split into two sections. The first examines the direct speech acts, while the second section examines the indirect speech acts, followed by a discussion of the findings.

5.1 Direct Speech Act

The following table highlights the use of the direct speech acts in TSMY’s speech.

Speech Act / Class	Original Text	English Translation	Explanation
Declarative	<i>Virus ini berjangkit dari manusia ke manusia menerusi sentuhan.</i>	This virus is transmitted through person-to-person contact.	It could be suggested that this utterance is made to inform the public on how the virus-transmission process happens. It also directly tells the public that if they do not follow the quarantine order, the possibility of them to get infected is high. The evidence could be observed in the following statement made by TMSY:
Assertive	<i>Langkah-langkah tegas perlu terus diambil untuk membendung wabak ini daripada terus merebak.</i>	Drastic steps should be taken to control this virus from spreading	This utterance uses the word “tegas” [drastic] to highlight the types of preventative measures that are to be taken as an effort to contain the virus from spreading, following the increase number of cases in Malaysia.
	<i>Sebagai Perdana Menteri, saya ada tanggungjawab besar untuk menangani krisis yang sedang melanda negara kita. Tetapi saya tidak mungkin dapat melaksanakan tugas ini bersendirian.</i>	As a prime minister, I have a big responsibility to carry to handle this crisis that is happening in our country. However, I will not be able to perform this task alone	The above utterances are directly suggesting that TSMY has a big responsibility to carry to contain the virus and to consequently reduce the number of cases which keeps increasing day by day. To make it happen, he needs everyone’s cooperation as it is not a one-man job. It should be noted that the direct speech act for this statement focuses more on the first sentence. The second sentence is elaborated further under the indirect speech act in section 5.2.
Expressive	<i>Tolonglah</i>	Please <i>-lah</i>	TMSY directly expresses what he feels to support his prior utterance (Saya ingin merayu kepada saudara-saudari [I would like to beg [you] ladies and gentlemen]) and the next utterance (Stay put where you are). It also further highlights how serious this virus is. The suffix <i>-lah</i> is used to add emphasis to the imposition.

	<i>Saya minta tolong untuk tempoh dua minggu ini sahaja.</i>	I would like to ask for your cooperation for these two weeks only.	Here it could be seen that TMSY uses the phrase “ <i>minta tolong</i> ” to express how important this first quarantine phase is to Malaysia and that he needs everyone’s cooperation.
	<i>Saya ingin merayu kepada saudara-saudari. Tolonglah.</i>	I am begging you (ladies and gentlemen). Please -lah.	In these utterances, TMSY uses the words “merayu” and “tolong -lah” repeatedly to further emphasise on the importance of staying put. The use of the word “merayu” (“beg”) is a highly expressive term TMSY used considering his position as the leader of the country. The “-lah” was also used multiple times to emphasise a point, as is common in the Malay language when trying to persuade a person or add emphasis to the word used.
	<i>Jadi, tolonglah. Saya merayu sekali lagi.</i>	Therefore, please -lah. I am begging you again.	
	<i>Tangguhkanlah.</i>	Postpone -lah.	
	<i>Duduklah diam-diam.</i>	Stay put where you are.	
	<i>Saudara-saudari tidak perlu bersesak-sesak dalam LRT, MRT atau bas untuk ke tempat kerja.</i>	[Ladies and gentlemen] You do not need to crowd the LRT, MRT or buses to go to work.	
Directive	<i>Anak-anak tidak perlu pergi ke sekolah, tidak perlu mengikuti aktiviti sukan dan lain-lain yang boleh mendedahkan mereka kepada jangkitan virus COVID-19.</i>	Children do not have to go to school, attend any sport or physical activities or do anything that could expose them to COVID-19.	
	<i>Kalau anda merancang untuk pulang ke kampung, batalkanlah dahulu niat itu.</i>	If you are planning to go back to your hometown, cancel -lah your plan.	
	<i>Tetapi untuk mengelakkan risiko jangkitan, saudara-saudari tidak dibenarkan makan di kedai. Pesan makanan, bungkus dan bawa balik ke rumah. Atau lebih baik gunakan perkhidmatan penghantaran makanan ke rumah</i>	However, to minimise the risk of getting infected, you are not allowed to eat at any restaurants. Order take-away food and bring them home. Better yet, use a home food delivery service.	

Maisarah binti Ahmad Kamil & Fatin Fatinah binti Shamshul Bahrn
A Speech Act Analysis of The Prime Minister’s Speech Pertaining to the Movement Control Order (MCO) to Address the Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

	<i>atau home food delivery service.</i>		
	<i>Prinsipnya mudah sahaja. Dalam tempoh dua minggu ini, duduklah diam-diam di rumah. Stay at home.</i>	It is that easy. Within these two weeks, stay at home.	
	Stay at home and protect yourself and your family.	-	The three utterances above are used to order the public to just stay at home and not do anything that could increase their exposure to the virus. As can be observed above, no mitigation devices are used together with the words “stay” and “protect” to show that he is giving the public an order to stay at home.
	Stay put where you are.	-	
	<i>Duduklah diam-diam di rumah.</i>	Stay at home.	

5.2 Indirect Speech Acts

Interestingly, even though indirect speech acts are generally associated with a higher level of politeness compared to direct speech acts, there were very few indirect utterances in the speech compared to the direct speech acts. It should be noted that interestingly, all the indirect speech acts are declaratives with an underlying purpose beneath the structure of speech.

We want to break the chain of infection. [Declarative, Request]

This statement shows the indirect request made by TSMY for the public to take action in order to break the chain of reaction. The use of “we” signals inclusiveness. TSMY uses the pronoun to refer to himself as the speaker, as well as those who were listening as a means to persuade them that it is also within their best interests for the chain of infection to be broken.

Tujuannya ialah supaya saudara-saudari tidak perlu bergerak ke sana sini. (The purpose is so [you] ladies and gentlemen do not need to move from here to there [one place to another]).
 [Declarative, Command]

This statement, on the surface, suggests that there is no need for the citizens to move anywhere. However, underlying the statement is a command for the citizens to stay put and remain where they are *because* there is no reason for them to move anywhere.

Jika dalam tempoh ini kita belum berjaya sepenuhnya, Kerajaan mungkin terpaksa melanjutkan tempoh Perintah Kawalan. [Declarative, Commissive]

This statement is one of the most unique statements in this speech. On the surface, the utterance may seem to be a statement of fact, but underlying the statement, it could be argued that there was a threat of extending the movement control order if the orders were not followed. In fact, this statement is the only one of its kind in the entire speech.

Kalau saudara-saudari bergerak ke sana-sini, apatah lagi bersesak di tempat awam, kemungkinan untuk bersentuhan adalah tinggi. (If [you] ladies and gentlemen move to and fro, what more if you crowd public places, the chances of close contact is high.) [Declarative, Command]

This statement is an indirect command to stay indoors and not venture out unnecessarily. The underlying threat, of course, is that there will be a high risk of infection if the public decides to venture outdoors. Again, the statement was made indirectly to persuade the public to obey the movement control order.

Saya percaya mereka akan berterima kasih kepada tuan-tuan kerana prihatin tentang kesihatan para tetamu. (I trust they [the invited guests] will be thankful to you for being considerate towards the health of the guests). [Declarative, Request]

This statement is interesting as there exists a double meaning behind the chosen words. On one hand, it is to persuade the public to cancel all public ceremonies and events that have been scheduled. On the other hand, the words carry an indirect meaning that if the listener decides to proceed with the event, it is as if they are not being considerate to the health of the guests. In this statement, TSMY also spoke on behalf of the guests, saying that they “will be thankful” if such events were to be cancelled, even though this may not necessarily be true or representative of the entire population.

Tetapi saya tidak mungkin dapat melaksanakan tugas ini bersendirian. Saya memerlukan sokongan anda semua. (But it is impossible for me to perform this task alone. I need support from all of you). [Declarative, Request]

This was one of the most humbling statements that TSMY made in his speech, as he spoke for himself in the first-person pronoun, stating that he is unable to achieve this success alone. Indirectly, it is a persuasive statement to say, "Support me".

6.0 Discussion

Based on the findings, it was found that the TMSY's utilises both direct and indirect speech acts. However, more direct speech acts were found given the dire situation that Malaysia was in when the speech was delivered. This was reflected especially in the amount of expressives and directives that TSMY used in his speech. The use of such strategies is interesting considering the context upon which this speech was delivered, as not only was TSMY newly elected following an abrupt resignation of the then prime minister, he (TSMY) was also tasked with the need to protect the country from a pandemic that until today has shaken the world with its effects.

Although the research done that Sadock (1974) and Green (1975) argue that the proverbial *please* is only to be used with sentences or utterances that carry a request, Geukens (1978) states that this is not always the case. The evidence could be observed in the speech done by TMSY where he uses the word "please" several times in his speech as a form of order. This can be further supported by one of the statements made by him (*Jika dalam tempoh ini kita belum berjaya sepenuhnya, Kerajaan mungkin terpaksa melanjutkan tempoh Perintah Kawalan. (If we don't fully succeed during this phase (quarantine phase), the government will probably need to extend this MCO)*) which means if the public does not comply with the order, they will use their authoritative force to extend MCO. This will subsequently affect the well-being of the public in general as they will not be able to go to work and school, dine-in at restaurants and go back to their hometown.

In addition, the suffix *-lah* is also used numerous as a means to force the public to follow the order given by TMSY and his government. This Bahasa Malaysia suffix is frequently used by the Malaysians to emphasise emotions or add more force to the words or phrases used with it ("What-lah is this All About?", 2011; Citrin, 2013). An interesting point to note is that this use of the *-lah* suffix has been written in the speech text itself. This means that the use was intentional during the delivery of the speech itself.

7.0 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

There are many more forms of analyses that can be done onto this speech, which was not covered in this first paper. Firstly, this paper only examined the speech acts contained in the speech text and did not examine differences (if any) that exist between the written speech text and the spoken speech that was delivered by TSMY. An examination of the spoken speech may reflect other findings, especially in examining the tone of voice used when delivering the speech acts.

Secondly, this paper separates the use of speech acts with politeness. As mentioned before in section 5.1 and 5.2, the use of the *-lah* suffix is highly linked with politeness theory, as is the use of indirect speech acts. Thus, this speech text may also be examined in light of the politeness theory, and comparisons can also be made between this speech and the speech delivered by TSMY in announcing the MCO on the 16th March 2020 to identify the similarities and differences in the strategies used.

Thirdly, future research can examine the written strategies adopted with how the speech was written. For example, TSMY made use of many short sentences and fragments, and some English phrases were also repeated after the Malay ones to emphasise a point. These strategies fall outside the scope of speech acts but can definitely be analysed further to glean more insight into the field of speech writing.

Fourthly, it should be noted that the findings and interpretations of this research was conducted by the researchers, which may include some element of bias and subjectivity to the findings. As a qualitative study, this is common as the researcher acts as the instrument to analyse the data. However, a qualitative study could also ensue from this research. An instrument or an interview can be conducted with members of the public to identify the effectiveness of the strategies used in TSMY's speech, which may also give a higher impact to the applicability of the findings to the field of speech analysis and leadership.

Finally, future research can make comparisons of the speech delivered by TSMY with that of other leaders. COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic has thrown the world into a state of crisis, which highlights the importance of having leaders who can manage the crisis through how they speak to those under them. Hence, this research, along with future research in this era of crisis, can contribute significantly to the topic of leadership, crisis management and linguistics to develop leaders who are able to confront uncertainty and challenges in an uncertain and volatile environment.

8.0 Conclusion

It is interesting to observe and analyse the COVID-19 speech given by TMSY given the fact that he was appointed as the prime minister only a few days before the pandemic hit Malaysia. This study found that expressives and directives were the most common direct speech act classes used in TSMY's early speech to the public when implementing the MCO. Further studies could be done to compare his other COVID-19-related speeches in the context of pragmatics. An analysis based on the combination of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and one of the theories in Sociolinguistics could also be carried out to observe the cultural environments. The findings of this study, and other studies of this nature, bring significance to the field of speech analysis, as well as leadership and crisis management, especially in understanding how leaders can use words to influence their followers and gain trust during a time of crisis.

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