

Constative Speech Acts Analysis of Female Student Leaders in a Malaysian Secondary School

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Received: 8 June 2022

Article history:

Accepted: 4 July 2022

Published: 30 August 2022

Abstract

Speech act is a branch of pragmatics in which spoken words or utterances play an important role beyond the function of language in communication. In leadership, speech acts enable leaders to initiate a desirable action or behaviour among their followers, and at the same time, convey information more effectively. As such, constative speech acts are commonly used by leaders to describe or depict facts or states of affairs which are either true or false. As to investigate how the different constative speech acts could be used in this context, a qualitative study was conducted with an objective to analyze the constative speech acts of female student leaders in a Malaysian secondary school based on Theory of Speech Acts by Bach & Harnish (1979). Purposive sampling was used to select the research participants and data was gathered from them through a focus group discussion with the researcher. Findings showed that the research participants used various constative speech acts including predictive, assertive, ascriptive, responsive and suggestive in describing the behaviour and characteristics of a good leader. As a conclusion, constative speech acts of the research participants suggest that they could be analytical, firm and sensitive school leaders.

Keywords: *Speech act, constatives, female school leader, qualitative, pragmatics*

1. Introduction

Researchers have been looking for an answer to question whether men and women lead in the same way for many years (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 2010). Nevertheless, they generally agree with the viewpoint that there are two distinct leadership styles; masculine and feminine which could have resulted from human traits attributed to men and/or women. It is believed that female leaders are better transformational leaders than men and thus demonstrate higher charisma, problem solving and motivational skills, creativity and other skills that may reflect their leadership efficiency (Eagly, 2007). Consequently, it had been said by Radu, Deaconu & Frasinianu (2017) that teams lead by a female leader are often more efficient as compared to teams with male leadership. This could be due to the innate quality of women, whom when given an opportunity to assume the role of a leader, would really take it as a challenge and do the best to achieve their leadership goals. They tend to demonstrate changes in their behaviours and exhibit some unique features which may have not been part of their character previously.

Female leaders are generally insightful and precise in making decisions. However, they are more emotionally driven, less aggressive than men, give credit to others for their own success, tend to build relationships, involve personally and are readily available when people need them (Radu et al., 2017). However, being less authoritative, it might become difficult for them to show disapproval directly through their actions or behaviours, when it is the case. In this context, female leaders may opt to perform the intended action by using various speech acts. Speech act is a branch of pragmatics whereby there are forces behind words. As such, when a speaker says something there is certain aim beyond utterances. In other words, speech acts refer to actions performed by utterances whereby people convey physical actions through words and phrases. This may include actions such as declaring, requesting, apologizing, promising, and complimenting. According to Hanna & Richards (2019), speech acts serve as communication agents in human interaction, whereby the utterances that a speaker produces may contain deeper sense than the actual meaning of the words or phrases themselves (Hidayat, 2016). Through this, leaders may direct, motivate and convince their followers more effectively. Therefore, speech acts are widely used by leaders to express their emotions and convey information in order to accomplish their leadership goals (Kechot, 2015). Speech acts are also important for leaders to exert influence on their followers. They use language in the form of speech acts to share ideologies typically through their speeches (Yan & Wang, 2020). Overall, it is worth noting that the different form of leadership styles by men and women are in relation to their different speech acts, as stated above. It is also important to analyse the different ways of speech acts usage by male and female leaders as it does not only influence their leadership skills, but also other various aspects. In regard to that, this paper aims to analyse the constative speech acts of female student leaders in a Malaysian secondary school.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act

Speech acts often take place in verbal communication. It is a study of how a speaker and the listeners use language to communicate (Yule, 1996). According to Austin (1962), utterances are not just a part of verbal expressions but have the force to accomplish something. Similarly, Birner (2013) have also defined speech act as ‘doing something through utterances. Thus, speech acts enable actions to be performed by just saying some words or phrases. This also means that speech acts carry both a message and an action within it. Speech acts theories are generally focused on relationship between language and action (Austin, 2009). As such, speech acts denote that when people speak, they are aiming to perform an action by producing a series of words or phrases. In other words, speakers either do something or make others do something through their utterances (Marquez, 2000). This is because with speech acts, various actions can be performed, such as directing, informing, requesting and convincing through the words or language they use. Speech acts are divided into three; locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. Locutionary speech acts refer to utterances

with equivalent meaning in its traditional sense (Austin, 1962) and give same meaning to speaker and listener. It is the actual act of an utterance. Locutionary acts refers to linguistic meaning or grammatical form of an utterance, thus it is also called as the act of saying something. On the other hand, illocutionary act is performed using communicative force of an utterance (Yule, 1996). It is the act of doing something by saying something, for instance apologizing by uttering ‘I regret my decision’ or congratulate someone by saying ‘your work is good’. Perlocutionary act refers to making utterances which can cause certain effect(s) on the listener’s thought and action (Austin, 1962). A perlocutionary act is often specific to a particular situation and intended at persuading listeners to do something. Thus, perlocutionary acts always have an agenda directed at others.

2.1 Theory of Speech Act

This study is based on Theory of Speech Act by Bach & Harnish (1979). Their approach towards speech act is intention-inference-based and suggest that the ‘interactional talk’ between speaker and listener involves an inferential process. In this context, Bach & Harnish (1979) proposed the speech act schemata. According to this proposed schema, listener’s understanding towards a speaker’s words does not only dependent on what the speaker says, but also on the contextual knowledge they share. Indeed, Bach & Harnish have emphasized the importance of recognising intention of the speaker in their much earlier studies. Hence, a listener must be able to understand both the literal meaning and non-literal meaning of the language used in order to infer what a speaker really meant, especially when the speaker uses different speech acts to convey his/her message. There are four taxonomies of speech acts outlined by Bach & Harnish (1979) in their book “Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts”; namely Constative, Directive, Commissive and Acknowledgment, with more elaborate categorization as compared to other theories. The subcategories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Theory of Speech Act by Bach & Harnish (1979)

Constatives	Directives	Commissive	Acknowledgement
Assertives	Requestives	Promisses	Apologise
Predictives	Questions	Offers	Condole
Retrodictives	Requirements		Congratulate
Descriptives	Prohibitives		Greet
Ascriptives	Permissive		Thank
Informatives	Advisories		Bid
Comfirmatives			Accept

Concessives			Reject
Retractivess			
Assentives			
Disputatives			
Responsives			
Suggestives			
Suppositives			

The comparatively more elaborate categorization of speech acts by Bach & Harnish (1979) enable researchers to examine the utterances of people more effectively. However, in this study, findings from the focus group discussion shall be presented with focus on use of constatives rather than the other taxonomies.

2.1 Constative Speech Acts

Overall, speech act theories postulate that utterances reflect various actions. In regard to this, Finnegan (2008) stated that speech acts represent actions performed through language. Austin (1962) on the other hand, acknowledged the social and interpersonal dimensions of language behaviour. According to Austin, utterances can either be used for ‘saying’ or for ‘doing things’ in different social contexts. Following this distinction, utterances may either state (constatives) or perform (performatives) actions. Comparing between constatives and performatives, Austin suggested that constatives are statements which are meant to describe some processes, events, or states of affairs, and constative usually have the property of being true or false (Yule 2002). Similarly, Mace (2009) reported that constative utterances denote statements which can describe or portray facts which may be either true or false. Earlier, Cummings (2005) also stated that constatives are ‘fact-stating’ utterances which depict something as true or false. This may include statements, reports, descriptions, predictions and assertions. According to Bach & Harnish (1979), constatives generally express speakers’ belief, with an intention that listeners would form similar belief after listening to it. The constatives according to Bach & Harnish (1979) include assertive, confirmative, predictive, suggestive and responsive, among others.

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach and was conducted at a secondary school in one of the northern states in Malaysia. Research participants were selected by using a purposive sampling method to obtain the most appropriate participants for the research. Besides, it also helps to identify participants with common characteristics required by the research. In this study, the selection of participants was based on the following crite-

ria: (i) Form 5 female students; (ii) a school prefect; and (iii) has at least four years of leadership experience. With these criteria, 7 students were selected to participate in a focus-group discussion, and they were referred by pseudonyms as a matter of ethical consideration. Table 1 represents the demographic profile of participants. Focus group discussion was conducted to collect data for the study. It is a commonly used data collection method in qualitative research, which aims to produce rich data. Focus group discussion helps to uncover participants' perceptions and values towards a topic (Ochieng et al., 2018), in which the researcher adopts the role of a 'moderator' who facilitates the discussion among participants (Hohenthal et al., 2015). Prior to data collection, written approval was obtained from the school administration. Participants were required to sign a written consent form to verify their voluntary participation in the study and to acknowledge their rights to withdraw from the study at any point. The data collection process was scheduled after school hours as it was expected to take some time. Participants were briefed by the researcher before they took part in the focus group discussion. The researcher chose to conduct the focus group discussion in participants' classroom to create a familiar environment so that they would be comfortable to express their thoughts and opinions. The researcher used eleven open-ended questions throughout the focus group discussion to elicit rich information from participants. The entire focus group discussion process took approximately 45 minutes and was recorded in the form of audio recording. Towards the end of the data collection process, research participants received a token of appreciation for their participation in the study, while the outcome of the focus group discussion was transcribed and translated from Malay to English for data analysis. Data transcribed from the discussion was subjected to descriptive analysis using speech act theory by Bach & Harnish (1979).

4. Results and Discussions

Data gathered through the focus group discussion was categorised according to the type of constative speech act represented, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Constative speech act analysis of participants' utterance

Participant	Conversation (with translation)	Explanation
S1	I: First question, how should a leader behave in performing his daily duties? S1: <i>Menjaga tingkah laku[aaa] contohnya sewaktu[...][aaa]ni la ada kerja en, cikgu suruh buat en, kiranya kita kena tepati masa lah, cikgu bagi arahan, kita kena buat.</i>	S1 stated how she should behave as a prefect and highlighted things she must do (be punctual) and not to do (procrastinate) using assertive speech.

Watch my behaviour[aaa] for example when [...] [aaa] there is work en, teacher asks to do en, so we have to be punctual, when teacher gives instruction, we must follow.

I: *Kamu buat ni untuk menjadi contoh kepada pelajar lain ataupun sebagai apa?*

You do this to become an example for other students or what?

S1: *Ha! Bagi contoh sebagai[aa] kepada pelajar lainla sebab, contohnya kalau kita bawa buku dengan pen, dia nampak macam berkarisma sikit,aa! Nampak macam[...] haa orang nampak ha macam berkaliber[..] ha berdisipin*

Ha! Give example as[aa] to other students because, for example when we carry a book and pen, we will look charismatic a bit,aa! Looks like[...] haa people see ha we have caliber [...] ha disciplined

S1 used **predictive** speech act in this part of the discussion, because she assumes that if she carries a pen and book along, she will appear as someone with charisma, caliber, and discipline, and thus would be an example to other students.

S2

I: *So, ada lagi nak tambah? Kamu rasa selain dari tu apa lagi yang kamu buat? Selain dari contoh yang S1 bagi?*

So, anything else to add on? You think, apart from that, what else you can do? Besides from example that S1 has given?

S2: *Kiranya sentiasa kena menjaga adab dengan cikgu, dengan kawan- kawan, dengan family sebab daripada situlah macam bila orang kita nampak[aa] bila orang tengok kita macam menjaga adab dengan orang, daripada situ orang boleh nampak hormat.*

I guess must always practice good manners with

Utterances of S2 in this part of the discussion was **predictive** as she assumes that when she practices good manners with people around her, other students will see her as a respectful person.

teacher, with friends and family, because it is from there people see [aa] when they see us practice good manners with others, people will see the respect.

I: *Mesra. Mesra dengan?*

Friendly. Friendly with whom?

S2: *Mesra dengan[...] setiap orang. Kalau contoh kalau kita mesra dan[...] dia pun tak la tak la segan sangat dengan kita, dan kita pun kalau nak bagi satu teguran apa semua tu kita bagi santai-santai macam tu ja, dan dia pun mungkin boleh terima dengan benda tu.*

Friendly with[...] everyone. For example if we are friendly and[...] people will not hesitate with us. And if we were to advise them, and they might be able to accept that

Utterances of S2 in this part of the discussion was **predictive** as she assumes that when she is friendly with others, it will be easier for them to listen to her instruction/advice.

S3

I: *Okay, contohnya kamu sebagai seorang pengawas, lepas itu kamu tidak buat homework haritu, kamu kena denda, contoh kena jalan itik dekat luar so semua orang tengok. So kamu rasa semua benda tu akan effect tak persepsi orang terhadap kamu sebagai seorang pengawas?*

Okay, if let say you as a prefect, then did not do homework on a day, you are punished, for example you have to walk like a duck outside so everyone sees that. So, do you feel all that will affect people's perceptions towards you as a prefect?

S3: *Sebab[aaa] las [hehe] kata[aaa] contoh pengawas tu dia tak buat kerja sekolah dan nanti*

In this part of utterance, S3 used **ascriptive** speech act whereby she tried to associate negative behaviour of prefects (such as not completing homework) to negative perceptions by other students.

*jugak pelajar-pelajar yang dia akan buat juga le-
pastu, dia tak buat dia akan bagi alasan ha
“pengawas tu pun tak buat jugak” kiranya bila
orang akan pandang rendah dekat pengawas tu.*

Because [aaa]if [hehe]if we[aaa] example a prefect
did not do homework later there will be students
doing similar thing, if they do not do it they will
give reason ha “prefect also did not do her work” so
people will look down at the prefect.

S4

*I: So kamu rasa result tu penting la? Kenapa kamu
rasa result itu penting sebagai seorang pengawas?*

So, do you think results are important? Why do you
feel results are important as a prefect?

*S4: Sebab dia boleh bagi[aaa]contoh ataupun in-
spirasi macam saya cakap tadi en, macam kita buat
kerja, macam orang tengok macam perfect la,
pengawas lepastu[“pandai”], nanti orang akan
lagi percaya*

Because it can give[aaa] example or inspiration like
I said earlier, en, like how we do work, people will
see us as perfect person, being a prefect and intelli-
gent], later they will trust in us more

I: Okay. Next, macam mana kamu handle konflik?

Okay. Next, how do you handle conflicts?

*S4 : Kalau[..] saya ada dua[..] pihak yang
bergaduh[hmm] saya akan pi ke satu pihak pi
dengar apa penjelasan dia, dan[..] pergi lagi satu
pihak dengar penjelasan dia. Pastu boleh tau kat
mana yang jadi isunya*

If [..] I have two[..] people fighting [hmm] I will go

In this part of utterance, S4 used
ascriptive speech act whereby
she tried to associate good aca-
demic results of a prefect with
trust towards her leadership.

In this part of the discussion, S4
described how would she man-
age conflicts as a prefect. The
utterances of S4 implied the use
of **responsive** speech act in con-
flict management.

to one of them and listen to his explanation, and[...]
go to another person to listen to his explanation.
Then can know what is the issue

I: *Berkeyakinan, confident lah?*

Confident right?

S4: *Kena jaga imej dia, sesetengah orang dia kalau
tengok[...][aaa] seorang ketua tu pun macam[...]
lengloi[...][...] tak berapa nak ni[...]*

Must take care of the image[...][aaa] when a leader
looks [...] timid [...] not so good [...]

In this part of the utterance, S4 used **assertive** language to highlight the importance of self-image and confidence to a prefect.

S5

I: *Okay. Last question, kamu rasa seorang ketua ni
mereka disukai ramai tak?*

Okay. Last question. Do you feel people like leaders?

S5: *Okay, dia[...][...] ikut kepada situasi. Kiranya
macam ada certain[...][aaa] macam ada seorang
pengawas kalau dia berperwatakan baik, dia jaga
tingkah laku, dia ikut peraturan cena[...][...] akan[...]
disukai oleh orang lah.*

Okay, it[...][...] depends on situation. If there is certain[...][aaa] like a prefect if she has good character, good behaviour, she follows rules [...] she will [...] be liked by others

I: Okay good! next, what desirable characteristics should leaders have?

S5: *Saya rasa[aaa] sebagai pemimpin ni kita kena
selalu[aaa] selalu tolong[...][...] macam contoh tolong
kawan-kawan ka tolong cikgu macam dalam*

In this part of the discussion, S5 used **predictive** speech as she assumes that if she will be liked as a leader if she has good manners and behaviour.

S5 used **suggestive** speech in this part of the utterance as she proposes behaviour of a good leader.

*konteks sekolah ni, kalau kita tengok macam cikgu
 bawak barang banyak-banyak apa en, kita pi la to-
 long*

I think[aaa] as leader we should [aaa] always help
 [...] for example help our friends or help teachers,
 like in the context of school, if we see teacher car-
 rying a lot of things en, we should go and help

S6	<p>I: <i>Okay. Lagi?</i> Okay, what else?</p> <p>S6: <i>Pada pendapat saya[haha][aa] seorang ketua ataupun pemimpin ni dia kena memahami orang disekililingnya, contoh macam pengawas akan ada banyak masalah dekat sekolah, jadi dia patutnya kena memahami pelajar-pelajar yang buat masalah tu, sebab selalunya kena dengan zaman sekarang ni[aaa][..] remaja suka memberontak jadi kita kena memahami[aa] rentak peredaran zaman untuk kita menyelesaikan masalah yang berlaku</i></p>	<p>S6 used suggestive speech in this part of the utterance as she proposes ways to solve problems in school.</p>
S7	<p>I: <i>Maksudnya kamu guna authority. Okay, lagi?</i> You mean you use authority. Okay, anything else?</p> <p>S7: <i>Kiranya[...]<i>sebelum nak selesaikan masalah tu kiranya kita kena faham la situasi sesorang tu, ka- dang-kadang kita dengar sebelah pihak ja</i></i></p>	<p>S7 highlighted the need to un- derstand people's situation when they are involved in a conflict. This implied the use of respon- sive speech acts in solving prob- lem among people.</p>

I guess[...]before we solve the problem we need to
understand people's situation, sometimes we only
listen to one side only

The central focus of constatives is to convey information. In general, constatives share the characteristic of expressing belief and intention. Findings of the study showed that almost all participants used constative speech acts to express their thoughts and ideas on how they should behave as a prefect (leader) at school. The most frequently used speech act was predictive. Although predictive has been categorised as one of the constative speech acts by Bach & Harnish (1979), it is widely argued to be a function of assertive based on categorisation by Searle (1969). Due to this, a large body of research have reported predictive speech act as assertive. Conversely, there is another assumption in the literature that assertive speech referring to future events can be considered as predictive (Fuentes, 2019). Regardless of this contradicting views, Violeta (2019) have stated that predictive speech act is intended to estimate something that will happen in the future or will be a consequence of something. This can be supported with participants (S1, S2 and S5) uttered words and phrases which reflect their assumptions, such as '*nampak macam*' (looks as if), '*kiranya*' (I guess) and ' *mungkin boleh*' (maybe can) in explaining how some actions might contribute towards positive image of themselves as a leader. This may imply the possibilities of participants to demonstrate good manners and behaviours at all times at school in order to be accepted and respected by other students. Predictive speeches used by the participants could also mean that they are analytical in their leadership role.

According to Safira (2017), assertive speech act is used when speaker's utterances refer to something in which they believe to be true and in accordance with fact. In this study, S1 and S4 used assertive language to highlight the importance of having certain characteristics to be a good leader, such as being obedient, punctual, and confident. Assertive utterances are generally representations of statements, descriptions, explanations, classification, and clarifications of reality and have the **world-to-word direction of fit** (Sbisà, 2018). Typically, speakers may use verbs such as state, believe, and conclude to express constatives. According to Alkhirbash (2016), assertive speech act which is used to emphasize facts and to assert claims/beliefs may also contribute to persuasion. This was evident in speeches of Tun Dr Mahathir whereby he was often seen using 'assertives' to highlight his beliefs and express his opinions as true issues in order to convince his audiences. As such, S1 and could be trying to make the interviewer believe that being obedient, punctual and confident is important to be a good leader. Assertive speeches used by the participants could also indicate that they are firm and confident leaders.

Ascriptive speech was also used by participants of this study; S3 associated negative behaviours of leader to negative perception among followers while S4 associated good academic achievement of leaders to

an increase in trust towards their leadership. On overall, both participants used ascriptive language to highlight how they can establish positive image of themselves as leaders by showing good exemplary behaviours. Besides, participants of this study were shown to indicate the use of responsive speech act in conflict management and problem solving. In this context, S4 and S7 implied the needs for leaders to be sensitive and alert towards all parties involved in a conflict to solve it effectively. On the other hand, S5 and S6 used suggestive speech act to propose how a leader should behave and how leaders should solve problems, respectively. In this context, suggestive speech acts are used by participants to recommend the desirable behaviours and action of a leaders. According to Chengcheng & Fernandez (2020) who stated that suggestive speech act stimulates others to perform an action and motivate them to do so. Furthermore, Utari et al., (2020) have reported in their studies that suggestive is one of the polite speech acts which can be used to tell others to do something without offending them.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Speech acts are particularly used by leaders to share information and to persuade followers to perform an action or behaviour. The undertaken study is an extension of speech act research on female school leaders, which has theoretical implication on understanding of constative speeches through analysis of their utterances based on Speech Act Theory by Bach & Harnish (1979). The findings imply that female school leaders use different types of constative speech acts include predictive, assertive, ascriptive, responsive and suggestive. On the other hand, findings of this study have practical implication towards use of constative speech acts by female school leaders. The female school leaders were shown to apply different constative speech acts especially predictive, assertive and ascriptive in explaining how some of their behaviours may help establish themselves as a good leader in school. This could also mean that the participants were analytical, firm yet sensitive in carrying themselves as school leader. Nevertheless, the undertaken study limits itself in examining the constative speech acts of female student leaders in one of the secondary schools. Hence, a comparison against speech acts of male student leaders is highly recommended to achieve a better understanding on gender differences in constative speech acts.

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