

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF COMPLAINTS IN A MALAY SPEECH COMMUNITY

Subfield: Sociolinguistics

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of a speech act that is at odds with its own culture, and thus, is expected to occur only infrequently in that culture. However the social function of that speech act, a complaint, makes it an everyday occurrence. The complaint speech act is assumed to be a difficult utterance in the Malay culture, the dominant culture in Peninsular Malaysia. The Malay culture emphasizes self-restraint in the face of social conflict, hence uttering dissatisfaction or disagreement is less likely to happen. If disclosed, they are considered uncouth behavior, threatening individual listener's face and provides potential disrupt to the perseverance of social harmony among the speakers involved (Jamaliah Mohd Ali 2002, 1995; Asmah Haji Omar 1992; Asma Abdullah 1996; Teo Kok Seong 1996, 1995). However, the research shows that, complaints are common in a social interaction among native speakers of Malay, especially among the middle class Malays.

A complaint is a speech act, a minimal unit of linguistic communication which contains an utterance or set of utterances which identifies a problem or trouble source and seeks remediation, either from the person responsible for the trouble source or a third party who has the power to affect the situation. It assumes shared cultural presuppositions between speaker and listener about what is right and what is wrong. Complaints compare what "is" with what "should" have happened (Schaeffer 1982). Brown and Levinson (1987:67) define it as a speech act that threatens both positive and negative face wants of the hearer. Positive face is every interlocutor's need to be desirable to others and negative face is the interlocutor's need for personal freedom or autonomy.

The data for the study was obtained ethnographically involving 125 recorded observations. The respondents for the study consist of native Malay speakers among the middle class in Bandar Baru Bangi, a town in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The findings of the study conclude that complaints among the Malay

speakers occur in various situations, topics and relationships among the interlocuters, being part of everyday social function. Among the functions are as a corrective statement, a response to greetings, declining invitations, and bargaining. In general, complaint is a speech act that discusses the negative due to certain dissatisfactions, and functions as a solidarity instrument for the speaker and listener.

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