



SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF FEMALE STUDENT LEADERS IN A MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

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Abstract:

The speech act is a study of pragmatics whereby utterances serve an essential function beyond verbal communication. It is an act of performing some activity through spoken words. In leadership, speech acts play a crucial role in the interaction between leaders and their followers. It not only conveys information but also initiates a desirable action or behaviour among the followers. Thus, leaders must be capable of utilizing different speech acts effectively to influence their followers to act or behave in a specific way and accomplish their leadership goals. This study has been undertaken in response to previous researchers who have found significant differences in speech acts of male and female leaders, with an objective to analyze the speech acts of female student leaders in a Malaysian secondary school according to Theory of Speech Acts by Bach & Harnish (1979). We collected data through in-depth interviews with three research participants who had been selected via purposive sampling. These participants were female students aged 17 years old with at least four years of leadership experience. After an in-depth qualitative analysis of interview data, we have demonstrated that speech acts of the research participants varied among constative, directive, commissive. Constatives, informative, assertive, and predictive acts. Among them, informative, assertive, and predictive speech acts dominated their utterances. In conclusion, the participants' speech acts indicated that, in general, they wished to be persuasive in their leadership roles and responsibilities.

Keywords: speech acts, female student leaders, in-depth interviews, secondary school

1. Introduction

"...Women hold up more than half the sky and represent much of the world's unrealized potential..." ([Ki Moon, 2011](#))

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Leadership is an extensively researched area in human sciences, yet it is poorly understood. Furthermore, the leadership potential of females is often overlooked compared to males. This disparity has contributed towards an unbalanced representation of women in leadership globally, and it is indeed a significant socioeconomic issue. According to [Glass & Cook \(2016\)](#), women are less likely to occupy top leadership roles than men in political and corporate sectors. Considering that women represent approximately 40% of the global working population, it is expected that there would be a comparable gender ratio in leadership roles. Nevertheless, women currently represent about 34% of executive positions and even less in the top roles ([World Economic Forum, 2018](#)). In general, leaders are often evaluated through their speech acts, which are usually based on their followers' personal and subjective interpretations of the situation (Hoogeboom & Wilderom, 2015). It is because the choice of words by leaders is observable to followers, which can directly affect their behavior and decisions. Interestingly, differences have been discovered in the speech acts of male and female leaders. However, whether language could really be a reason for gender disparity in leadership roles is still being widely debated. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the use of words by male and female leaders could provide insights into the variations between male and female leadership, which may also explain the under-representation of female leaders.

From the pragmatics' perspective, we can express the connotation of our ideologies and concepts using communication. Hence, the communication style is based on phrases that represent a more profound sense than the literal meaning of the words. Consequently, the speech acts of leaders are constantly investigated, which represent actions performed through utterances (Austin, 1962). These acts may include declaring, promising, complimenting, apologizing, and requesting. Thus, speech acts are believed to play different roles in leadership, for instance, conveying the leader's emotion or performing some activities. The interaction and social connections shared by leaders with their followers can highly influence their leadership styles and strategies in overcoming leadership challenges. According to Hanna & Richards (2019), speech acts also serve as communication agents in human interaction. In this context, leaders must ensure that they can take charge, direct, encourage, inspire and convince others through their speech acts. Communication and utterance help leaders convey information effectively, and the inability to achieve this may jeopardize their goals (Kechot, 2015).

Nevertheless, male and female leaders differ significantly in communicating with their followers. Male leaders generally have a more power-oriented and authoritative communication style. On the other hand, female leaders are more emotionally driven than their male counterparts. According to Radu *et al.*, female leaders are often less impulsive and aggressive and tend to involve personally with their followers (Radu *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is evident that there is an apparent disparity among male and female leadership styles, particularly in the manner in which they communicate with their followers, mainly using speech acts. This is because when leaders speak, there could be many aims beyond the words' meaning. Therefore, this research study has been undertaken to investigate the speech acts of female student leaders in a Malaysian

secondary school. The primary focus of the study is to identify various speech acts to interact effectively with peers and achieve their leadership goals. Moreover, this research study aims to analyze the speech acts of female student leaders according to the Theory of Speech Acts by Bach & Harnish (1979).

2. Literature review

2.1. Speech act

From a broader perspective, the speech act is a study of how the speakers and listeners utilize language to communicate. Nevertheless, Bach (1979) stated that the linguistic part of the language alone is not the only concern. According to Austin (1962), utterances are not verbal expressions per se but have the force to accomplish some tasks. Every utterance can carry both a message and an action within it. Therefore, the utterance of any words carries a lot of significance due to these actions. Speech acts are generally actions performed through utterances (Birner, 2013). Hence, speech acts theories describe communication from a non-linguistic perspective, focusing on the relationship between language and actions (Austin, 2009). A speech act is indeed a language function in which when someone speaks, they do not only produce a series of words or sentences but also intend to perform an action. In other words, a speech act can be followed by some actions by a leader's followers (Marquez, 2000). During a speech act, the activities performed by a speaker can include informing, apologizing, asking for assistance – through direct or indirect words. In this context, speakers may not only convey information to listeners but also initiate some physical actions using speech acts. Hence, it can be concluded that appropriate use of speech acts in a language is essential in establishing social relationships. However, as we have observed from the above discussion, speech acts can transcend beyond the linguistic dimension of communication; therefore, every stakeholder must attain the capability to interact with others appropriately.

2.2. Gender differences in speech acts

The history of leadership reveals that men and women have always been two unique sets of people (Goethals & Crystal, 2017). Even in a daily conversation, men and women may face various problems and conflicts due to gender differences. Most of the past studies have claimed that gender differences are inborn; however, some researchers have started associating this disparity to socioeconomic and cultural influences in the upbringing of children (Park, S., & Liang, J., 2021; Moran, B. B., 1992; Piaw, C. Y., & Ting, L. L., 2014). In simple words, boys and girls speak in a different manner because they are raised to speak in different ways. There is a strong connection between communication and leadership. It is because leadership style is very much dependent on the interaction between a leader and their followers. It is indeed acceptable to many that gender differences exist in how male and female leaders communicate with their followers. Men and women are believed to differ significantly in their communication styles as women tend to value emotional connections more. In contrast, men are often power-oriented and more controlling while interacting with others. Consequently, female leaders may develop stronger associations

with their followers due to emotional attachment. Therefore, they can influence their followers better through speech acts, as compared to male leaders (Merchant, 2012). According to Shanmugam *et al.*, diversity can be observed in the language use of men and women. Generally, men are more directive and authoritative, while women are more expressive, supportive, and democratic (Shanmugam et al., 2007; Athanasopoulou, A. et al., 2018). Due to this, speeches of male leaders are often individualistic and competitive, as compared to speeches of female leaders who are empathetic and cooperative towards others (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Athanasopoulou, A. et al., 2018). Regardless of these gender differences in language and communication styles, a good leader should always be able to accomplish their leadership goals, especially in convincing and initiating some physical actions among the followers through effective use of various speech acts.

2.3. Theoretical framework

The approach of Bach and Harnish (1979) towards speech act is intention-inference-based. They claimed that 'interactional talk' between people involves an inferential process. It is believed that an illocutionary action is performed through mutual contextual beliefs between the speaker and listener. Hence, Bach & Harnish (1979) proposed the term "Speech Act Schemata," which refers to an inevitable part of the inferential process in a communicative event. According to this proposed schema, the listener's understanding of a speaker's utterance is not merely dependent on what the speaker says but also on the contextual knowledge shared by both the speaker and listener. Hence, to infer what a speaker says, the listener must understand the literal and the non-literal connotations of the language used. This is the point where a speaker uses different speech acts to convey their message. This is also perhaps why the Speech Act Theory by Bach and Harnish (1979) has a more detailed categorization than other theories. 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. The subcategories are presented 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			

Theory by Bach & Harnish (1979) was chosen as the underlying framework for this study because comparatively, it has more detailed categorization, which can be helpful to examine the utterances of the research participants more effectively.

2.4. Previous studies

Language has been established as a powerful tool in getting to the thoughts and ideologies of leaders. As such, the language use of political leaders, especially in their speeches, is often studied using speech act theories. Among these studies, Safwat (2015), who performed speech acts analysis on selected speech discourse by John Kerry and George Bush during their presidential campaigns. Similarly, Krishnan *et al.* (2021) performed a comparative study of speech acts between Malaysia and Singapore Prime Ministers on the first COVID-19 Movement Control Order announcements. Moreover, Ramanathan *et al.* (2020) evaluated the speech acts in the political discourse of Najib and Modi. Ahmad Kamil & Shamshul Bahrn (2020) performed a speech act analysis of the Prime Minister's speech pertaining to the Movement Control Order to address the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

On the other hand, many recent studies have assessed the gender disparity of speech acts among male and female leaderships. For instance, Che Ismail (2018) reported on politeness strategies and gender differences in the speech act of rejection. Furthermore, Sharqawi & Anthony (2020) elaborated on the impact of gender on the speech act of suggestion. Similarly, Chamani (2014) worked on gender differences in the use of apology speech acts, and Rivai (2015) compared the speech act of male and female university students. However, most of these studies have focused on both genders to evaluate speech acts, and none of them have assessed the language use of female leadership in particular. In this qualitative study, we evaluate the use of language in female leadership in a Malaysian school.

3. Material and Methods

The undertaken study is a qualitative approach towards language use in female leadership. Thus, it focuses on exploring and describing spoken words of research participants following posits of speech act.

3.1. Participants

This study was undertaken at a secondary school located in one of the northern states in Malaysia. Samples to participate in data collection were chosen using the purposive sampling method. The participants were chosen based on their availability and teachers' recommendation of their active participation in school in leadership positions, as presented in Table 2. The purposive sampling technique helped the researcher identify potential participants with some common characteristics. But more importantly, these student leaders were capable of producing rich data for the research. We utilized the following criteria to include participants for the study: (i) female students aged 17-year-old; (ii) school prefect or in any other leadership position; and (iii) has at least four years

of leadership experience. Eventually, we selected three students for an in-depth interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants as a matter of ethical consideration, and their demographic profile is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents' Profile

Name	Age	Gender	Leadership positions held	Experience as a leader (years)
G1	17	F	Prefect	4
G2	17	F	Prefect	7
G3	17	F	Prefect	5

3.2. Data collection and analysis procedure

Data for the undertaken study was gathered using face-to-face interviews. The data collection process was initiated upon getting approval from the school administration. The participants were briefed before they signed a written consent form. This was to acknowledge their voluntary participation in the study and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time, should there be any discrepancies. The face-to-face interview was conducted in participants' classrooms during the school recess period. This was to create a familiar environment for the participants to feel comfortable and convenient during the interview. The interview session took about 20 to 50 minutes for each participant, whereby they shared thoughts, opinions, and concerns about leadership, leadership styles, and the use of language to lead effectively. The researcher used open-ended questions to obtain in-depth information from participants throughout the interview. There were several follow-up questions to probe and better understand the participants' views. The interview session was ended when the researcher felt that there was no more new information being generated through the unprompted questions. Besides, it also helped to avoid getting repeated responses from the participants. The entire interview process lasted approximately 130 minutes of recording, and the outcome was transcribed accordingly. At the end of the data collection process, the researcher provided some tokens of appreciation to the research participants for their participation and commitment to the undertaken study. Data transcribed from the interview was subjected to descriptive analysis based on speech act theory by Bach & Harnish (1979).

4. Results and Discussion

As presented in Table 3, we utilized the data collected through interviews and categorized it according to the type of speech act represented in each case.

Table 3: Speech act analysis of participants' utterance

Participant	Speech	Type of speech	Explanation
G1	I have a lot of experience in leading people.	Constative	The utterance shows that the participant was asserting her capability of being a leader.

	I am the only one in this school, <i>umm</i> ...whose <i>uhh</i> , two positions at the same time which is prefect and also <i>um</i> , <i>Pemimpin Rakan Sebaya</i> .	Constative	The participant was informing the researcher that she holds two leadership positions in school.
	I don't want to be a prefect, not because I hate them or what, it's just I think it's a big responsibility to hold so... ...but <i>cikgu</i> , <i>ustazah Aisyah</i> you know she convinced me that <i>um</i> , if I become a prefect, it will ...you know open a lot of, more ways for me to meet people and yes, I <i>um</i> , I agreed with her so <i>yeah</i> .	Constative	The first part of the utterance shows that the participant was not ready to accept the position as a school prefect as she ed that it would be a huge responsibility on her. However, the retractive speech was observed in the second part of the utterance, whereby the participant finally changed her initial stance on becoming a prefect after being advised by her teacher.
	Until now he is <i>uhh</i> he <i>uhh</i> lived 1400 years ago but everyone is still talking about him, because he is a great leader.	Constative	This part of the utterance is retrodictive, as the participant was trying to predict what happened in the past that people are still admiring the leader she was referring to.
	Being student leaders, we can improve ourselves	Constative	The utterance shows that the participant was trying to use descriptive speech as she tries to describe the benefits of being a student leader.
G2	Yes, I do have experience in leadership and my moment, this year <i>lah</i> I become the head of the dormitory, and I lead all of the Exco there.	Constative	The utterance shows that the participant was highlighting her leadership experience through assertive speech.
	As a prefect, I have to help the teachers to shape our students' discipline. As an example, for morning assembly, I have to turn up early because I have to ask them to go to the assembly. After the assembly went smoothly, I have to check their uniform, to make sure it is orderly	Constative	The participant was trying to inform the roles of school prefect to the researcher through her utterance.
	For juniors, I can be a bit firm, but with my peers, I cannot be rough with them because people cannot accept it.	Constative	The utterance shows that the participant tried to be responsive towards the sensitivity of her peers when she chose to be gentle with them as compared to her juniors while being on duty as a prefect.
	When giving caution, sometimes we can be funny, but I think regarding the school uniform, we	Directive	The utterance shows that the participant used prohibitive speech with her peers as she gave stern warnings to them on school rules.

	can't because they have known it for so long.		
	The chance for, if in the prefect situation, it is the chance for me to help the teachers with that position. It is more likely for the teachers to see me if they want my help	Constative	The participant was using suggestive speech in her utterance as she feels that her position as a prefect will make teachers approach her for help.
	Surely with the teachers, I will speak with manners.	Commissive	The utterance shows that the participant is committing herself or, in a way, promising to speak with manners when communicating with her teachers.
	We have to make sure that they understand what we are saying. One more thing, we have to speak from the heart. We cannot prepare our talk beforehand. It should be sincere from the heart.	Directive	The participant used advisory speech to tell the researcher how to talk to people.
G3	I can differentiate leadership between primary and secondary school.	Constative	The utterance used the assertive speech as the participant was trying to prove that she knows the difference in primary and secondary school level leadership levels.
	So, I think if I don't polish myself now people are not going to see me. So, from these skills later in the future will be easy for me to survive and balance my curriculum.	Constative	The participant was using predictive speech in her utterance. She felt that if she does not prepare herself with the leadership skills from now, it will be difficult to survive in the future.
	Sometimes I use invitation with my friends. So, I'll be like "let's go to the assembly".	Commissive	The utterance shows that the participant uses commissive speech to convince her friend to attend the assembly as she offers to go together with them.
	In terms characteristic and way of dress he/she is not that important. But having good language is essential because people will always look at the leader.	Constative	The ascriptive speech was observed in this part of the participant's utterance, as she associated leadership with the use of good language.
	Maybe because I had experience in a mixed primary school and held the position of Head Prefect, I don't think that it would affect my chance to be a leader, as long as me always improve ourselves and nothing is impossible.	Constative	The utterance of the participant shows the use of suppositive speech. The participant thinks that her chances of being a leader in her current school will still be the same even if she does not have any prior experience of being a prefect.

From these results, it can be concluded that G1, G2, and G3 mainly used constative speech acts in their utterances. Additionally, they also used directive, and commissive speech acts but to a lower extent. Regarding the constative speech acts, the participants tend to use assertive speech to highlight their leadership capabilities. This was observed in all three of the participants. They also used an informative speech in explaining their leadership roles and responsibilities to the researcher. The constative speech was utilized extensively by G1 during the interview. Her responses to the interview questions indicated that she frequently utilized assertive, retractive, predictive, retrodictive, and descriptive speech acts in her speech. On the other hand, G2 exhibited to utilize a mix of the constative, directive, and commissive speech acts in her leadership. She used informative, responsive, and suggestive utterances for the constative speech acts; prohibitive and advisory utterances for directive speech acts. Moreover, she employed promises and offers under commissive speech acts. Interview data from G3 was found to be similar to G1 in terms of the speech acts used in their utterances. It was indicated that G3 was also a heavy operator of constative speech acts, whereby her utterances were primarily influenced by assertive, predictive, ascriptive, and suppositive words and phrases. Additionally, G3 was found using a commissive speech act in her leadership. Overall, constative speech acts that dominated the participants' utterances were similar to the ones found in speeches of world leaders. Indonesian President, Jokowi was observed using various types of constatives during his speeches, including announcing, informing, and predicting. (Hafifah, 2020). Similarly, Altikriti (2016) reported that constative speech acts were prominent in President Obama's speeches, whereby he utilized more assertive sentences as compared to the other speech acts. These studies indicated the cruciality of speech acts in leadership, especially the role of constative acts as persuasive speech acts (Krishnan et al., 2021). Consequently, the findings of this study may suggest that the participants were persuasive and compelling in their communication and leadership roles. Moreover, the outcome of this study also may indicate that the use of speech acts by female leaders may not considerably differ from their male counterparts in terms of their functionality.

4. Conclusion

Speech acts are inevitable in leadership, regardless of gender differences. Speech acts are crucial in communication between leaders and their followers. They help leaders effectively convey information to followers and persuade them to perform a desired action or behavior. In this study, speech acts of the participants were found to vary between constative, directive, and commissive, with constative acts dominating their utterances. Henceforth, it can be concluded from this study that female student leaders are generally persuasive in their communication and leadership roles and responsibilities. The undertaken research limits itself to examining female student leaders' speech acts in one of the secondary schools. Hence, the researcher recommends comparing the outcome of this study against speech acts of male student leaders to better understand the notion of gender disparity in speech acts and leadership styles.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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