

# **Talking and Teaching from E-stories: Analysis of Conversations in Three-Generation Families in Brunei Darussalam**

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## **Abstract**

This is a small case study of family interactions in Brunei Darussalam, looking into conversations that occurred during family gatherings in informal settings while viewing electronic stories on TV monitors. The conversations are analysed as ordered sequences of speech acts which appear in more global units of communication. The use of language is a social form of linguistic behaviour where speakers perform their illocutionary acts within conversations. The methodology used in this study involves showing electronic or multimedia stories on computer and TV monitors to young children, sitting together with their parents and grandparents. The utterances of the speakers were classified according to speech act theory proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). The utterances were classified as Assertions, Reactions, Expressive Evaluations, Questions, Requests/Directives, Commitments and Declarations, and the ones that show teaching tendencies are discussed.

## **Introduction**

In Brunei Darussalam, families are closely knit and often visit each other during weekends. The normal focal point would be the house of the elders or the grandparents where the children and grandchildren meet, talk and play together. They may also have lunch or dinner together while enjoying each other's company. Conversation among family members young and old, normally occurs around certain activities like watching TV, including such programmes as a football match, a story or TV drama series. In such situations, language is used to exchange information, views and feelings. It may also be used to learn and to teach, especially teaching young children. Children also learn from adults and from other children how to communicate properly, how to speak, how to listen and how to respond. Adults may take the opportunity arising from such conversations as teaching moments to imbibe values in younger members. Conversation, even in idle chat, whether involving two or more people, has its own rules, forms, and function. In family conversations, all members tend to speak and act naturally according to their inner needs and desires.

## **The Study**

This is a small case-study of family talk-in-interactions in Brunei Darussalam. It is part of a larger research project on language shift and choices among Bruneians in three-generational families. The aim of the current study is to investigate conversations that occurred during family gatherings in informal social settings, in the homes while the participants were viewing stories shown on TV monitors. Conversation has recently become the focus of interest for speech act theory (Moeschler, 2001) as its analysis offers useful contributions to the study of speech act performance by micro-analyzing the sequential organization of natural data of participants in social action (Gonzales-Lloret, 2010). Like many activities, conversation is a complex social endeavor, with embedded and superimposed activities requiring a variety of intellectual skills (Ochs, 1988).

In this study the conversations are considered to be ordered sequences of speech acts which occur in larger units of communication. Studies of speech acts originated with the work

of philosophers such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1975) in viewing the use of the language in communication. Austin viewed speech as a whole and analysed it not only in terms of meaning and referents but also in terms of its functions and effects, as the speaker and the listener are very much affected by the context of the speech act. The locutionary act represents the basic meaning of the utterances, while the illocutionary force is an act that is performed in saying something. The performance of an act can be analysed in terms of assertives, directives, expressives and declarations, and a perlocutionary act is something that is performed by means of saying something, reflecting the effect of the speaker on the listener. These are shaped by the context and the culture of the speaker and listener.

## Data

Collection of the data involved showing electronic or multimedia stories on computer and TV monitors to young children, sitting together with their parents and grandparents. The electronic stories (developed by Kamsiah Abdullah, 2007) were utilised as a point of interest, as it was assumed that children love to watch stories with pictures and sound effects. The conversations that arose out of these situations were video-taped and later transcribed for analysis. The data collection was done over several afternoons in the homes of the grandparents of the families involved. Altogether three families, all in Bandar Seri Begawan, took part in the study. The participants in every family consisted of at least two grandchildren and a parent (normally a mother), but other relatives and neighbours also contributed. In all, seven sessions of the electronic stories were recorded. The titles of the electronic stories were: *Anbut Si Labah-labah* (Anbut the Spider), *Beruk Yang Malas* (The Lazy Ape) and *Gajah Yang Nakal* (The Naughty Elephant).

The focus was primarily on talk arising from adults and children viewing a story together. In most interactions the talk started after the viewing of the electronic stories. The conversations occurred naturally and ran smoothly with turn-taking taking place mostly between one adult and one child at a time. Sometimes simultaneous talk occurred, but it quickly reverted to two-person sequences. The atmosphere was comfortable and harmonious.

## Description of the Families

### *Family A*

Family A is a middle-class Bruneian Malay family. The head of the family is a retiree, living with his wife, one child and three grandchildren. During weekends his other children (two daughters who live in separate houses) bring their children to their grandparents' home.

The recordings of the conversation took place in one such afternoon. The participants in the interaction, consisting of the grandfather, two mothers and five grandchildren, were seated comfortably in the sitting room. Two research assistants and the researcher were also present, but were not involved in the conversation. Conversations were mostly in Brunei Malay.

### *Family B*

Family B is also a middle-class Malay family who live in Kampong Tanah Jambu. This is a nuclear family where the grandparents live in a different house nearby.

During the recording session, two mothers who are close neighbours with two children each, as well as a sister of the home owner were present. The child participants are aged from 2 years to 10 years. There is also an uncle who sat through the whole session and provided some input, and a baby who is not yet able to speak.

### **Family C**

Family C resides in Kampong Lambak. Here it is the grandmother and grandfather who were interested in watching the e-stories with their two grandchildren, a boy aged 7 and girl aged 10. The children's parents are divorced, so most of the time the children spend their weekends at their grandparents' home.

During our interview we obtained most verbal responses from the girl, who was more positive, than the boy, who was shy and rather disinterested. In fact, he left to play in another room half-way through one of the sessions.

### **Method of Analysis**

The conversational exchanges, the minimal units of analysis from the transcripts of the interactions, were first coded and identified. The classification of the utterances of the speakers from their natural language input, then followed. It is assumed, in this study, that there is one speech act per utterance and each utterance represents the internal meaning or intention of the speaker. The speaker's intention in dialogues, also known as the illocutionary force, is the speaker's intent in a true 'speech act' such as informing, ordering, warning, questioning or asserting. In this study the utterances are classified according to speech act theory, as outlined by Taylor and Taylor (1990). The minimal unit of interactive dialogues and responses between participants was categorized under the following labels. (Examples will be given below.)

- A. Assertion
- B. Reaction
- C. Expressive Evaluation
- D. Request and Directive
- E. Question
- F. Commitment
- G. Declaration

At the second level of analysis, the dialogues and questions in the conversations were also classified under the teaching points or type of teaching intended by the speakers.

### **Summary of the Conversations**

The number of participants per family, number of utterances and the number of words spoken are shown in Table 1.

<b>Family</b>	<b>Number of Sessions</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Number of Utterances</b>	<b>No of words Spoken</b>
A	3	8	358	2760
B	2	7	147	984
C	2	5	180	1,442
Total	7	20	685	5185

**Table 1.** Summary of the Sessions

Generally it was observed that the conversations were dominated by the adults rather than the children. Turn taking did take place, but more often, like in a classroom, after the initial speaker, it was the adult who nominated the next speaker (the children) to continue with the conversation (Schiffrin, 2005). This study shows that the role of the adults as mother, grandmother and aunty was duly accepted by the children, as in Malay society the elders are

respected and are expected to lead, to be authoritative, to initiate and to have the last say during conversations.

## Examples of the Speech Acts

Examples of the various speech acts from our data are presented in this section.

### A. Assertions

An Assertion is one of the central kinds of speech act, typically carried out by the utterance of a declarative sentence. It can be defined as a speech act in which a proposition is presented as true or claimed to be true. In this study, we classify comments and explanations as Assertions.

In [1], the mother from Family A states that it is the theme tune to the story.

[1] *Ada lagunya tu , labah-labah atu.* (There's its tune, the spider.)

Utterance [2] is a comment made by one of the mothers to all the children.

[2] *Ya, badannya basar. Dia selalu ambil anak .. anak .. anak damit.* (Yes, its body is big. It always carries its baby.)

Towards the end, adults use Assertions to indicate when a session is over. Extract [3] is by one of the mothers, while Extract [4] is by an uncle.

[3] *Sudah. Habis.* (The end. Finish.)

[4] *Adede. Awu, baluriah eh.* (Yes, now it happens.)

Children can also assert an opinion. Some examples of Assertions by children are in Extracts [5], [6] and [7].

[5] *Lawa lagi yang atu.* (That one is prettier.)

[6] *Cali jua matanya tu.* (Its eye is ridiculous.)

[7] *Bukan jahat, nakal.* (It's not bad, but naughty.)

In all we found 50 utterances which can be classified under Assertion: 21 by Family A, 3 by Family B, and 26 by Family C.

### B. Reactions

A verbal or non-verbal reaction can follow an assertion. A successful assertion can receive a cooperative reaction. Children mostly agree with whatever is asserted to them by adults. In our data, most of the children give positive reactions or answers to questions posed by the adults. Such examples can be found in the following extracts. In Extract [8], all the children respond together.

[8] Children: *Nak.* (We want.)

In Extract [9], the child responds to his mother's question, and in Extract [10], the same child responds to his aunt's question.

[9] Mother: *Berapa ekor ikan tu, kamu nampak?* (How many fish do you see?)  
Child: *Tiga.* (Three.)

[10] Aunt: *Pernah kamu nampak pi..e..pisang? Pernah kamu nampak daun yang berlubang?* (Have you seen the ba- er banana? Have you seen the leaf with holes in it?)  
Child: *Pernah.* (I have.)

Even when they lack the words to answer questions from the adults, children still show some reaction, at least to confirm that they have heard what was said to them. Extract [11] shows that when a verbal response is not appropriate, a child uses non-verbal means.

- [11] Mother: *Cerita apa tu lai?* (What is the story?)  
 Child: [shrugs to indicate she does not know]

This tendency to respond by these children happens even among the very young ones like the child in [12] and [13] who is 2 years and 5 months old.

- [12] Mother: *Monkeynya makan?* (What is the monkey eating?)  
 Child: *Pisang.* (A banana.)  
 [13] Mother: *Nah liat apa tu?* (Look, what's that?)  
 Child: *Katak.* (A frog.) [pointing at the screen]

Not surprisingly, when someone suggests singing, all the children sing. They seem to enjoy this activity a lot. The song Extract [14] is sung in unison.

- [14] *Labah-labah hitam naik pokok jati, hujan turun, dia bersembunyi, hujan teduh, matahari bersinar, labah-labah hitam perlahan keluar.* (The black spider climbs a tree. When it rains, it hides, to shelter from the rain. Then the sun shines, and the black spider slowly emerges.)

Children also like to follow what other children do. In Extract [15], they all answer together.

- [15] Mother: *Malaskah ia atau rajin sudah ia?* (Is it lazy or hard working?)  
 Children: *Rajin.* (Hard working.)

In total, 160 utterances were classified as Reactions: 126 from Family A, 21 from Family B, and 13 from Family C.

### **C. Expressive Evaluations**

In family conversations, members of a close-knit family often use words that show their feelings towards another member. For example, in terms of endearment, expressions to show love, closeness, devotion or even amity. We encountered many such expressions in our data, for example words like *lai*, a term of endearment often used by parents and grandparents to children. All the mothers used such forms of endearment to their children, but we found no such cases from the children to their elders. Terms like *abang* (older brother) and *kakak* or *kaka* (older sister) were used to refer to the older children, but the older children did not use *adik* or *dik* (younger brother/sister) to their younger siblings. In these cases, names were used, sometimes short family names such as *Zati* for *Izzati*.

In addition, emotional statements were also used to express sympathy – for example, sympathy towards animals such as the monkey in Extract [16].

- [16] Mother: *Kasian, monkeynya kana.* (It's a pity, the monkey was found out.)  
 Child: *Kasian a.* (It's a pity.)  
 All Children: *Kasian.* (It's a pity.)

One 7-year-old male child from Family A was particularly forthcoming in expressing his views, desires and needs, being rather straight-forward in his remarks and not hiding his feelings. He was not afraid or shy to say something or comment on something even if it might displease his elders. Extract [17] is in response to a question about whether he found anything particularly interesting in the story about a monkey who prefers to sleep instead of work.

- [17] *Aku inda tahu ... yang ane, yang ane .. pasal ia sama aku suka tidur.* (I don't know, this one, that one ... because he is like me, enjoying sleep.)

Extracts [18] and [19] are two further rather direct utterances by the same child, expressing his feelings.

- [18] *Ngalih.* (I am tired.)

- [19] *Boring jua!* (It's boring!)

The participants tended to laugh a lot, but laughing was not classified as an Expressive Evaluation in this study. In contrast, words like *lai* (a term of endearment), *abang* (older brother) are included as Expressive Evaluations, as they express love and closeness.

Altogether 68 utterances were classified under Expressive Evaluation: 8 from Family A, 27 from Family B, and 33 from Family C. In the latter, there are many tokens of *lai*, probably because the children who participated were quite young.

#### **D. Requests and Directives**

In some situations, a person may have a request to make or certain things that he or she needs either directly or indirectly. Some directives are just a simple request for someone to do something or to act on something. In our analysis Requests and Directives are differentiated from Questions. Requests and Directives are not comprehension questions based on the e-stories shown, as they do not require a verbal answer. A few examples of request can be seen in the utterances by adults, an auntie from Family A in Extracts [20] and [21] and an uncle from Family B in Extract [22].

- [20] *Sini lai duduk ...* (Come here, dear, sit.)

- [21] *Dapan lagi agatah duduk.* (In front, maybe, sit.)

- [22] *Sudah. [name of girl] sini lai.* (It's finished. Come here, dear.)

Examples of Requests by children in Extracts [23] and [24].

- [23] *Kajab.* (Excuse me a while.)

- [24] *Aku mau tidur e ...* (I want to sleep.)

In total, 37 utterances were classified as Requests and Directives: 19 from Family A, 10 from Family B, and 8 from Family C.

#### **E. Questions**

Asking questions is a fundamental part of finding information and also for persuasion. Both adults and children ask questions to find out certain facts or information. In our data on family conversations we find that it is the mothers (not the fathers) who are eager to ask questions, playing the teacher role – with the intention to teach their children, to make sure their children learn something from viewing the e-story. The children who are usually the target of the questions, are duty bound to answer. The following examples show the questioning techniques used by the mothers.

Simple, clear questions that are unambiguous and seek short answer are shown in Extracts [25] and [26].

- [25] *Apa tu lai? Apa tu?* (What is that, dear? What is that?)

- [26] *Suka liat?* (Did you like watching it?)

The questions form the adults often repeat information, to reinforce the effect, as in Extracts [27], [28] and [29].

[27] *Di mana Anbut tinggal? Di mana [name of boy].* (Where does Anbut live? Where?)

[28] *Siapa yang bacakap atu? Siapa yang bacakap [name of girl]?* (Who said that? Who said it?)

[29] *Nak tengok cerita? Nak tengok cerita?* (Do you want to watch a story? Do you want to watch a story?)

Some questions probe for more details, such as Extract [30], while others might be seen as leading questions, such as Extract [31].

[30] *Macam mana ia boleh selamat?* (How did it become safe?)

[31] *Inda. Sebabnya ia takut kana..?* (No. It was because he was frightened, was it?)

Questions are a very common classification, with 370 instances in total. 169 were from Family A, 96 were from Family B, and 105 were from Family C.

### F. Commitments

Only one utterance can be classified under Commitment (or non-commitment) from these three family interactions. It is produced by the grandmother in Family A in Extract [32].

[32] *Kalau inda, nini inda bawa bajalan ni.* (If not, grandma will not take you out.)

### G. Declarations

No utterances that could be classified as Declarations were found in these interactions.

### Summary of Speech Acts

The occurrence of the various speech acts is summarised in Table 2.

Categories	Family A	Family B	Family C	Total
A. Assertions	21	3	26	50
B. Reactions	126	21	13	160
C. Expressives	8	27	33	68
D. Requests and Directives	19	10	8	37
E. Questions	169	96	105	370
F. Commitments	1			1
Total	344	157	185	686

**Table 2.** Frequencies of illocutionary categories

The highest frequency is Questions with 370 utterances (54% of the total). This is followed by Reaction with 160 utterances (23%). Assertions represent 7%, and Expressives are 10% of the total utterances, while Requests and Directives are just 5%.

### Teaching and Learning

The Questions category has the most utterances, so it deserves more detailed discussion. Most of the Questions involved some aspect of teaching, though it should be noted teaching also

involved other kinds of utterances, not just asking questions. Here we will analyse some of the teaching that was found in the data.

It was noticed that open questions where long detailed answers are expected were not posed by any of the adults. This is appropriate, as the purpose of these interactions was not solely for teaching and learning but for entertainment as well.

However, parents wish to teach their children and encourage good behaviour and character in them, so they regularly adopt a range of teaching techniques. The focus of these techniques include the following:

- a. teaching counting
- b. teaching children to think
- c. making sure comprehension is achieved
- d. explaining
- e. demonstrating with actions
- f. motivating
- g. teaching language
- h. translating
- i. character building
- j. building good rapport among family members and friends

Each of these will be illustrated in turn.

### **a. Teaching counting**

In Extract [33], the mother tells her child to continue his counting. In response, the child followed her instructions.

[33] *Habiskan kira.* (Finish your counting.)

### **b. Teaching children to think**

In Extract [34] the children are asked to think about things.

[34] *Ingat?* (What do you think?)

Sometimes the questioning encourages the child to draw logical conclusions from their thinking. In Extract [35], the child observes that extracting the heart out of the body is not possible.

[35] Child: *Sakit e.* (It hurts.) [touching his chest]

Aunt: *Macam mana ia kan ambil jantungnya?* (How can he take out the heart?)

Child: *Mana dapat tu?* (How could he do it?)

Teaching children to think for themselves also means letting them disagree and argue, not afraid to differ in their opinion with others, especially adults. One such incident is Extract [36]. (In fact, in this instance the Aunt subsequently relented and agreed that \$20 is expensive.)

[36] Aunt: *Dua puluh ringgit murah* (\$20 is cheap.)

Child: *Mahal sepatutnya.* (Definitely expensive.)



### c. Making sure comprehension is achieved

Most questions asked are to elicit correct answers to the story and thereby make sure the children have understood it. Extract [37] illustrates acting out part of the story to ensure the children understand it. All the children responded to this with laughter.

[37] *Kena jual... ea kena jual... tuannya inda baguna ea, pasal ea emalas...nadakan tabuat.. kana suruh naik pokok inda mahu, ambil anu buah kelapa inda mahu, masih muda. Lagipun aku sudah ngalih, aku malas. So tuannya sasak sudah, bawanya tempat orang ramai-ramai, beruk tu happy, ea fikir tuannya bawa jalan. Rupanya tuannya cakap lelong-lelong, siapa mahu beli?*

(He was sold. He was sold. His master did not need him, because he was lazy ... could not work. When asked to climb the tree, he refused; when asked to pick the coconut, he didn't want to, saying it was too young, and he was tired and lazy. So the master had enough of him and took him to a crowded place. The monkey was happy, thinking that his master had taken him for a walk. But actually the master said, cheap sale, who wants to buy?)

### d. Explaining

Sometimes the adults decide it is necessary for them to explain something in detail. In Extract [38], the story involving Anbut the Spider is explained.

[38] *Ah tiba-tiba ada ja... lapas atu ea pun me. merangkak ke atas daun, jadinya daun atau pun menyelamatkan ia. Lapas atu daun tu hanyut, hanyut hanyut ke siring. Lapas atu labah-labah, Anbut pun turun.* (Suddenly there was something ...after that it crawled on top of the leaf, so the leaf saved it. Then the leaf floated, floated towards the bank, and the spider, Anbut, climbed off.)

### e. Demonstrating with actions

On occasions, the adults demonstrate something using actions.

[39] *Cuba tah.* (Try it.) [putting both her hands above her shoulders]

[40] Mother: *Macam mana kalau tani kabak-kabak? Cuba kamu pigang.* (How is it if our hearts are pounding? Try holding yourself.)

Children: *Dup dup.* (sound of heart pounding). [all children touch their chest]

### f. Motivating

Some of the instructions from adults are used to motivate the children in some way.

[41] *[name of boy] sini duduk, lihat cerita dulu. Lihat dulu, supaya [name of boy] tahu.* (Sit here. Watch the picture. After watching it, you will know.)

### g. Teaching language

Some questioning by the adults is to explain the meaning of words. In Extract [42], the mother asks if the child knows the meaning of *busut* (anthill).

[42] Mother: *Tahu busut ani apa?* (Do you know what an anthill is?)  
Child: *Inda.* (No.)

### ***h. Translating***

In Extract [43], the child asks the meaning of the word *jantung* (heart), and the mother replies using the English equivalent and then points to a picture.

- [43] Mother: *Tuannya .. mahu ambil jantungnya.* (His master wants to take out his heart.)  
 Child: *Apa jantung?* (What is *jantung*?)  
 Mother: *Jantung .. heart.*

### ***i. Character building***

Sometimes, the adults aim to instill appropriate behaviour in the children.

- [44] *Jangan malas [name of boy].* (Don't be lazy.)

On occasions, the adults encourage a sense of sympathy in the children.

- [45] Mother: *Kasian a.* (It's a pity.)  
 Children: *Kasian.* (It's a pity.)

Other appropriate behaviour is also encouraged. In Extract [46], the Mother urges the child not to disturb others, in this case by stepping on an ants' nest.

- [46] Mother: *Bolehkah tani buat macam itu?* (Can we behave like that?)  
 Child: *Inda.* (no)

### ***j. Building good rapport among family members and friends***

There are many instances in which the adult and children laugh and talk together, and sometimes they all sing, building rapport between them.

- [47] *Satu dua tiga.* All sing now. (One two three. All sing now.)

## **Conclusion**

The results show that rich and informative data can be obtained from family talk-in-interaction. The utterances in this study show a number of salient features which can be analysed using appropriate categorisation of illocutionary acts that focus on the intent of the speakers. The speech acts by the adults show a tendency to dominate and to teach their children, especially to help them understand the stories shown to them as well as to inculcate appropriate values. Values can be inculcated through stories and at the same time children learn how to express themselves during the course of face-to-face interaction. Interaction is therefore viewed as a means to build knowledge of the language that the children are expected to acquire (Masahiko, 2002). It is not surprising, therefore, to find the use of many types of questioning techniques being adopted by parents in order to motivate, to encourage learning, and to make the viewing of the e-stories a beneficial learning experience for their children. More studies should be conducted in order to gain an in-depth knowledge of the processes involved during talk and learning in a natural family environment.

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