CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

This is a study of the language used in a Malaysian radio chat programme. Specifically, the focus is on conversational implicature, that is, the underlying meaning, intended meaning or implied meaning of utterances. Using the Gricean framework as the tool of analysis, this study analyses the strategies that are employed by participants or speakers in a conversation to convey implied meaning. Observations reveal that utterances carry meanings that are direct and perfectly understood or indirect and yet understandable. Irrespective of the directness and indirectness of the strategies employed to convey meaning, conversations appear to display some degree of cooperative effort on the part of the participants. This cooperative effort means that participants appear to pursue a mutually accepted direction in their conversations. This cooperative effort is the assumption that speakers obey what Grice calls the Cooperative Principle (CP).

People can carry out any communicative act using several different types of utterances. In fact, there are instances when there is a distinction between what participants say and what they actually mean. There are also instances where the conventional meaning of what a speaker says may have an underlying meaning as well. At other times, the intended meaning of a speaker can be relatively free of the conventional meaning, that is, what the speaker intends to communicate need not be related to the conventional meanings at all and is "not conventionally attached to the words being used" (Schffrin, 1986:193).

The scholarly works of Grice, Levinson, Searle and Austin, and others indicate that one way of explaining how this process of communication works involves a system of conversational implicature in which participants lead each other to attribute meaning that is different from the conventional meaning of an utterance. The Gricean framework allows the intended meaning of a speaker to be relatively free from its conventional meaning. It is, therefore, interesting to discover that people can say one thing and have some confidence that the other participant(s) will interpret them as meaning something else.

This study examines conversational implicature in spoken discourse. In other words, it identifies the implied meaning conveyed in utterances and goes on to investigate how the speaker conveys the implied meaning, how the listener interprets it and what strategies both employ in the process.

This study draws its data from tape recordings of a Malaysian Radio Chat programme broadcasting over the air as Hitz with the Morning Crew on FM 92.9 every morning from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. Each morning, the programme features a topic or two for discussion. The topics discussed are common everyday matters. There are also some quizzes and competitions. Callers are invited to call in to present their views. Some conversation also takes place between the two deejays with another one joining them occasionally. The conversational style is informal and appears unscripted. The deejays often tease and cajole the callers and each other and that makes this programme quite hilarious at times. In between these exchanges, the deejays spin music.

Since the data consists of audio recordings of verbal exchanges, the researcher who is the uninvolved listener plays a

major role in the interpretation process. She is a representative of the listening audience at large. Conversational implicature is identified in the conversation of the participants of this programme. The implicature is conveyed by the speakers when they overtly violate Grice's conversational maxims. The listener interprets the underlying meanings of the utterances via inferences. This inference is based on the usual linguistic meaning of what is said; the contextual information; and the assumption that the speaker is obeying what Grice calls the Cooperative Principle.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Conversational implicature is an intriguing feature of conversation. This idea was first put forward by H.P Grice whose concern was to distinguish what a speaker explicitly says from what he implies. Basically, we know that the meaning of an utterance lies with the speaker of that particular utterance. A listener cannot read the mind of the speaker. He can only understand the speaker's meaning from the surface meaning of the utterance or he can draw out the underlying meaning of the same utterance by interpreting it appropriately. The process of interpreting the underlying meaning of an utterance is called inference. The listener in making an inference on the meaning of an utterance, must take into account the surface meaning as well as other external factors such as the context of situation and shared background knowledge. However, an utterance may convey several meanings, for example, when the context is changed or when the participants do not share the same background knowledge. This means there can be more than one interpretation of any particular utterance.

It can be seen that speakers of a language can use the language to convey implied meaning. It is the contention of the researcher that when an implicature is conveyed, one of Grice's conversational maxims is overtly violated. The researcher's premise is that the violation of the maxims involve at the same time the employment of certain strategies to successfully convey specific implicatures. Therefore, it is the interest of the researcher to explore and discover the strategies that were used in conveying particular implied meaning and to investigate how consistently the strategies were used and with what pragmatic effects.

Many studies on conversational implicature have been carried out on people who speak languages other than the English Language. This suggests that the Gricean framework has universal applications. There have been a few studies on the spoken discourse of Malaysian ESL speakers using the Gricean framework. One study which has provided interesting and helpful insights, was carried out by Jamaliah Mohd Ali who did a pragmatic study of verbal interactions (1995) and Asmah Haji Omar who did a study on indirectness as a rule of speaking (1992). This study is different from the ones mentioned as it examines only conversational implicature which is part of the corpus of language for communication. Also, it examines only the overt violations of Grice's conversational maxims and the strategies that were used by the speakers to successfully convey the implicature. Factors such as the usual conventional meaning of words as well as the contextual information have helped the researcher to infer the implied meaning of utterances.

1.3 The research questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the maxims that are overtly violated in the conversations recorded?
2. What are the meanings that are conveyed when the maxims are violated?
3. What are the strategies employed by speakers in conveying implied meanings (conversational implicature)?
4. What are the pragmatic effects of the strategies used to convey implied meanings?

1.4 The significance of the study

Effective communication involves the use of specific strategies to convey both surface and implied meaning. In this study, the focus will be on the strategies employed to convey the implied meaning, that is, the focus will be on conversational implicatures.

Conversational implicature is an important facet of communication. Insufficient attention has been given to the subtler aspects of communication, in particular, to the pragmatic effects. Oral communication, in other words, does not only involve the conventional or surface meaning of words but also the underlying or implied meanings. For this reason, the study of conversational implicature has considerable significance for the language learner and teacher; and for the curriculum planner.

It is insufficient just to learn a language for the sake of acquiring only the bare bricks , that is, the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Attention needs to be paid also to language as a

tool of communication. Presently, in the classroom, the oral skills emphasise the teaching of correct pronunciation, stress and intonation. Very little importance is given to conversational implicature, that is, to help students understand the intended meaning of the speaker which may be different from the conventional meaning.

The language learner too has to concentrate on different levels of meanings in communication. He must be aware that language for communication includes meaning that goes beyond what has been literally said, that the surface meaning and the underlying meanings may be totally different; and that successful communication depends on his ability to recognise both. Therefore, to the language learner, knowing that conversational implicature is a feature that is present in language may make studying the language more interesting and meaningful.

1.5 The limitations of the study

The scope of this study is not extensive enough to make the findings representative of all radio chat programmes. The data for this study was drawn from a small corpus of verbal data recorded on tape. It does not cover ordinary conversations but conversations on air. So, some loss in terms of spontaneity and naturalness is to be expected. The data in this study also convers only informal spoken discourse in English and not formal spoken discourse

This study is based on audio recordings of spoken discourse. The emphasis on the analysis is on the meanings that the speakers wish to convey and not on the pronunciation and prosodic features. Other para-linguistic features such as facial expressions and gestures have also not been taken into account in this study

because the data is based on the audio recordings of the radio programme. The researcher was not present in the studio at the time of broadcast and is therefore not in a position to comment on these aspects. The researcher understands that these non-verbal features may carry communicative meaning which may have significance for the whole interpretation process. The analysis has therefore been based on the verbal data including the non-verbal vocalizations available in the audio recordings.