

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This first chapter is an overview of what is to be expected in this study on the ‘fulfillment and non-fulfillment of Gricean maxims in conversations among Malaysian women friends’. It reveals what this researcher hopes to achieve at the end of the research. This chapter includes the background, the significance and purpose of the study, scope and limitations as well as the research objectives and research questions designed to aid in accomplishing the goals of this study.

### **1.2 Background of the Study**

This case study of seven conversations will attempt to investigate informal (casual) discourse among Malaysian women friends within a Gricean framework. The past two decades or so have seen an explosion of interest in the analysis of informal discourse in the field of sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and pragmatics. Works on conversations, language and gender as is Grice’s theory of the Cooperative Principle and its conversational maxims have been examined by different authors and from varying points of view. Lakoff (1975) and Coates (1996, 2007) looked at women and the language they use whilst Rundquist (1992) and Brumark looked into indirectness and non-observance using the Gricean theory. However, it can be discerned that most studies have focused on mixed discourse (Tannen, 1984; Rundquist, 1992; Crawford, 1995; Hay, 2000; Brumark, 2006). This is to say that these studies were centered on the conversations between males and females or parents with their children. Thus, research and findings pertaining to single-sex (male to male/ female to female) discourse have been somewhat lacking.

Single-sex discourse, especially the talk of women friends have always been surrounded by many myths. The most popular label given to women talk is ‘gossip’.

Gossip is viewed by many in a rather negative light and has been described as “idle-chatter”, “malicious discussion of others lives” or “scandalous information about friends or acquaintances” (Guendouzi, 2001: 32). In fact, Lakoff (1975) in her book ‘Language and Woman’s Place’ revealed some of her impressions on ‘women’s language’. These features included “expression of uncertainty, avoidance of strong expressions of feeling and subject matter deemed ‘trivial to the real world’” (Hay, 1995: 15). Women’s conversational patterns have also been described as “chaotic”, “it goes all over the place” and “there’s no particular structure” (Coates, 1996: 56 & 117). Yet, according to Coates (1996: 117) in the midst of the chaos there is a “melding” where the voices of the women blend to “construct a shared text” and is collaborative. Guendouzi (2001: 6) in her article states that one of the responses to the questionnaire in her study ‘*why do you feel people gossip?*’ is “to find out that you are part of a group”. These views are a reflection of the fact that solidarity is an important factor in the talk of women friends even in gossiping or idle talk.

### **1.3 The Purpose of the Study**

Coates’ observation of the phenomenon of ‘melding’ in women friends’ conversational discourse is echoic of Grice’s theory of a Cooperative Principle present in the conversations. The Cooperative Principle (hereafter referred to as CP) stipulates that interlocutors abide by certain ‘norms’ or conversational maxims (quantity, quality, relevance and manner) when conversing. De Klerk (1997) taking on Tannen’s view as cited in Guendouzi (2001: 47) suggests that:

“the ability to participate appropriately in discussion of any sort depends on the mutual understanding and cooperation regarding ‘norms’...”

Wardhaugh (2006: 293) drawing on Grice’s CP asserts that:

“Conversation makes use of the cooperative principle; speakers and listeners are guided by considerations of quantity, quality and so on, and the process of implicature which allows them to figure out relationships between the said and the unsaid.”

Hence, this study is fashioned as such to investigate Grice’s cooperative principle in the conversations of Malaysian women friends from two aspects of the conversational maxims:

1. Fulfillment (adherence) : Whereby the maxims (quantity, quality, relevance and manner) are abided in conversations.
2. Non-fulfillment (non-adherence) : The maxims are not observed by the interlocutors usually deliberately (either through flouts or violations)

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The literature on the difference in gender speech style is vast and previous studies have proven that there are distinctive features in the conversational styles of men and women. Certainly many books have been written about the differences found in gender speak.

One of the more prominent discoveries of the differences is that men’s conversational styles are fueled by ‘competitiveness’ whereas women’s are by ‘cooperativeness’. Cheshire and Trudgill (1998: 3) as cited in Coates (2004) said of these differences:

“Women – in most western societies at least – prefer a *collaborative speech style*, supporting other speakers and using language in a way that emphasizes their solidarity with the other person. Men, on the other hand, use a number of conversational strategies that can be described as a *competitive style*, stressing their own individuality and emphasizing the hierarchical relationship that they enter into with other people.”

The focus of sex differences Coates (1988: 95) believes, has been aimed to “quantify differences in women’s and men’s use of certain linguistic forms” resulting in the generalization of the “way women talk” which was derived from the behavior of women in mixed groups.

Therefore, the obvious lack of research in the area of single sex (same sex) interaction and discourse has captured the notice of researchers. This has been particularly observed by Coates (1988: 94) pertaining to women only discourse that; “research has rarely focused on women in single-sex groups” and as a result “we know very little about the characteristics of all female discourse.” This void has also been observed by Aries and Johnson (1999: 216) who found that:

“Within the context of studying women’s friendships, *talk* may have also been neglected because of the more general devaluation of women’s talk. Certainly scholars of both speech communication and sociolinguistics take talk (speech) as central to their studies, but the substance of women’s talk rarely, until recently, appears as a legitimate focus for investigation.”

One of the earliest works focusing on all female discourse is by Deborah Jones (1980) entitled ‘Gossip: notes on women’s oral culture’ whereby in her paper Jones offered a “description of ‘language use in women’s natural groups’ (Coates, 1988: 70).

Therefore, this study is a step towards filling this gap in research concerning all female talk. The nature of this study is exploratory and will delve into new territory where gender studies and Gricean maxims are concerned. This study will incorporate two major aspects of the pragmatic field, that is Grice’s theory of maxim fulfillment and non-fulfillment and diverge from the norm of investigating all mixed discourse (Rundquist, 1992; Brumark, 2006) by observing the talk of women friends in Malaysia.

To this researcher's knowledge, one study has been done on Malaysian women's discourse. Nevertheless, the study mentioned is focused on the "formal features of language most commonly used by a group of Malay women in their interactions" (Hafizah Ahamad, 2004: 5). This study however will be an investigation into the informal talk of Malaysian women friends (regardless of race or ethnicity) and hopes to determine whether 'cooperation' (based on the CP) is present when the conversational maxims are fulfilled or otherwise.

### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

- 1) To investigate the phenomenon of fulfillment and non-fulfillment of Gricean maxims in conversations among Malaysian women friends.
- 2) To identify similar or contrasting patterns of maxim fulfillment or non-fulfillment in the conversations.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

With regard to the objectives set, this study will attempt to address these questions:

- 1) How are the fulfillments of maxims manifested in the conversations?
- 2)
  - a. How do the participants work out indirect utterances?
  - b. In instances of non-fulfillment of maxims, what kind of pragmatic effects emerge?

## **1.7 Scope of the Study**

Seven authentic and natural conversations will be observed and recorded with each ranging from approximately 40 minutes to an hour. This is to ensure that this researcher will have sufficient data to discern similar or dissimilar patterns that emerge from the analysis of the conversations regarding Grice's maxims. The group of women friends whose conversations are recorded are all Malaysians of different ethnicity, either working or studying with ages ranging from their early 20's to late 30's. Although these women friends may be of different ethnicity, this is not to be viewed as a major concern in this investigation.

Each conversation is a multi-party conversation (with 3-5 women) in each conversation. This limitation on the number of interlocutors is deliberately done in order to avoid confusion in the transcription process and to keep inconsistencies to a minimum (i.e. too many irrecoverable utterances, overlaps, mistaken identities of the interlocutors in transcription).

Prior to the recording, the participants are briefed on the purpose of the study. Consent is obtained from all the participants in each group and anonymity is ensured before any recording ensued.

The focus of this research is principally on the verbal and vocalized input pertaining to the fulfillment and non-fulfillment of Grice's conversational maxims. These informal conversations are primarily in English. It is to be expected that the conversations will be riddled with code-mixing and code-switching which is caused by the influence of the different cultures and mother tongue in Malaysia.

## **1.8 Limitations of the Study**

Data collection proved to be somewhat of a challenge as well as a time-consuming process. While groups of women friends were easily identified, however, some were initially reluctant to have their conversations recorded. It was only when these potential groups were given re-assurance that their identity would remain private and anonymous that they allowed their conversations to be recorded. The setting of the time and place for the recording proved difficult as the time clashed with some of the participants but at the end it was manageable.

Pertaining to the recording of the conversations, some groups expressed concern about 'how' and 'what' they were going to talk about (at the beginning) whilst others did not have any problems and adopted the 'bring it on' attitude. The fact that the interlocutors were aware that their conversations were being recorded contributed to self-consciousness and awkwardness in the initial stages. However, since a mini Mp3 player was used as a recording device, this moment of self-consciousness dissipated after the first few minutes, thus enabling natural talk to occur.

It should be noted that the amount of data collected is modest by nature and although some findings and insights may emerge, it is nevertheless insufficient to be used as a yardstick to represent the conversational behaviors of Malaysian women in general.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

It has been established in this chapter that studies into all female discourse is an area virtually untouched especially in Malaysia. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings from this study will further contribute to the literature as well as shed new light and insights in the area of women's conversational discourse and that of Grice's theory of the Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims from a Malaysian point of view and in a Malaysian context.