

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background to study

Communication is a life long learning process which begins at birth. As children grow up they too learn to manage their communication skills by observing what others do around them. Children's communication processes involve the use of words and actions together and often they do this so that they accomplish their needs and intentions. Messages, information, thoughts and opinions can be conveyed precisely through effective communication skills. However, what is acceptable to one society may not be acceptable in another. Nonetheless, whatever those effective communication skills may be, it cannot be denied that they enable young children to learn about what is acceptable and unacceptable about behavior in society. It is through these skills that children also learn about social relationships as well as how well they are fitting themselves into the social groups which they are surrounded by.

It cannot be denied that language is a tool of communication and socialization because without language many human interactions cannot be fulfilled. Therefore, it can be said that language, whether spoken or written enables human beings to interact and in that regard, helps them to have a sense of belonging. Social interactions with others allow children to acquire social skills which are acceptable in society and in that regard help them. The social interactions among family members not only instill and develop those skills, they also provide the child with the necessary and basic social skills step by step. When further fine-tuned as they develop in stages, these skills not only make the child a better person whom the society respects but also enable the child to understand the social behavioral pattern of the society (Baron, Byne and Branscombe, 2006). In order to adapt

to these behavioral pattern, the children learn by watching and observing what adults around them do. Then through this imitation process, they absorb and apply what they see. According to Skinner (1958), by imitating adult's speech and behavior, children are themselves prepared for their future roles as adults. However, we must bear in mind that imitation is not the only method by which the process of socialization occurs. Behavioural and speech patterns can also be influenced by media and peers with whom interaction occurs. Vygotsky (1986) described learning as being embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment" (p. 287).

In looking at conversations or speech, it can be seen that spoken interactions conversations are carried out for the purpose of communication. However, conversations do not always function smoothly as interlocutors do many things in between such conversations. In addition, disfluencies (various breaks, irregularities, or utterances that are often not consistent with any specific grammatical construction and occur within the flow of otherwise fluent speech) may also set in to interrupt such conversations. No conversation except if it is prepared and practiced is ever smooth and coherent because natural conversations are often filled with such as interruptions, incompleteness, miscommunications, overlaps as well as physical noises which blur out any spoken conversations. Disfluencies occur for a number of reasons but in natural conversations, interlocutors employ various strategies for the purpose of making themselves heard or to be noticed.

Young toddlers also interrupt but parents do not always reprimand them nor try to correct them because of their immaturity. Like Piaget (1955) says, this is a part of the growing up stage where young children need to express themselves in order to be understood.

Whilst doing this, these miniature adults are seen as being self centered or what Vygostky (1982) calls egocentric. However, as they grow older, children become more aware of what happens in their social interaction with others. Gradual observation of what others do help them internalize these (Krashen, 1980) and this includes language abilities. Social skills are acquired through interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1982) so the more they interact the more they learn and some researchers term this as sociolinguistic competence where language rules are applied appropriately in social situations and events. By nature, children say what they think and so they tend to be more honest and direct in their interaction with others, irrespective of who their interlocutors are. Nonetheless, their upbringing and cultural background may also play an important role in how they communicate (Clyne, 1994). In the Malaysian environment, hierarchy (Hofstede, 1984) is of paramount importance and people living in this country still practice some of the traditional values passed down by their ancestors and these include respect for elders, respect for authority and avoiding conflict (see Ezhar Tamam et al. 1977). Malaysians, as Asians come from a high context culture and so family relationships are very important. Besides avoiding confrontations, Malaysians are also indirect in their communication styles (Asma Abdullah and Pedersen, 2003). This is considered polite for being upfront can offend the listeners and most Malaysian children are brought up to show respect by being indirect. Nonetheless, people do change so it is possible that the younger generation of Malaysians may have evolved to become different from the older generation. Lailawati (2005) mentions that Malaysian Malays have also shifted their values, moving from being a more collectivistic culture to individualistic. Her study suggests that Malays of the younger age group tend to be more vocal and less culturally inclined. Kuang (2007) also suggests that Malaysian Chinese children have become provocative. Her study reveals spoken data of children who were rude to their parents. Kuang, David and Zuraidah (2006) also show some evidence of

how young Malaysian children talk. Their studies indicate that young children between 4-6 years used more directives instead of making request when they needed something from their parents or caregivers. In this sense, it is possible that younger generation of Malaysians may experience a tussle of power particularly within the home domain.

Malaysian Indians, especially those in urban areas too have shifted in language use. Professional Indians (Pillai,2006) seem to be using more English at home than their first language, Tamil. However, certain cultural norms and traditional values like forms of address used in the home domain remain intact. In relation to the context of this study forms of address used at home are reflected in terms such as : ‘appa’(father), ‘amma’ (mother), ‘akka’ (elder sister), ‘anneh’ (elder brother).

1.1 Power in communication

Power in general refers to authority and in families; it is often the parents, caretakers and elder siblings who seem to wield the power over the younger ones. Studies have shown that the interaction between parents and children are linked to a variety of social outcomes including aggression, achievement and moral development and psychologists do not deny that it may be due to the way parents communicate with their children. In addition, with the advent of new technology, more and more children are being cocooned within their homes as they interact more with electronic equipment and human interactions are thus reduced. A decrease in human interactions can affect how young children behave in social situations and this has been highlighted lately in newspapers and media discussions. In the Malaysian context, many young children are also given additional stress or pressure as both parents work to bring in more income. This is seen in the case of maids bringing up children in the homes while parents are busy at work. This phenomenon has inevitably created more challenges for everyone involved as children

are not taught how to behave and talk. In traditional families, children used to be taught or guided by their mothers on how to talk and behave but in today's context, children's speech and behavior are neglected by busy parents. Hence, it is highly possible that young children look towards how their parents talk to others as their model. In looking at how children and parents talk in Malaysian homes, Pillai (2008) mentions that it is inevitable that family discourse will exhibit more direct styles which are consistent with intimacy and solidarity. In addition, Snow (2002) finds that the use of directness is also prevalent in parent– children interactions. Brown and Levinson (1987) talk about directness and indirectness. This will be further discussed in Chapter 2. As mentioned above, directness is seen as rude in the Malaysian context because it is upfront. To some, this is face threatening to the listener. A threat is seen as a resemblance to power because it puts the other party in a vulnerable state. Nonetheless, Hocker & Wilmot (1991) explain that power can be thought of as a dynamic product of shifting relationships.

In general, an individual does not have power; it is given to him or her by the others with whom he/she interacts with. According to Hocker and Wilmot (1985), all powers within any interpersonal relationships are the property of the social relationship that is occurring. It is not a quality of the individual. Power accrues to interactants through the cooperation of another who willingly or unwillingly accommodates them (Lund & Duncan, 1988). It has been accepted that culture and traditional values play an important role in how individuals within the family circle interact among themselves. This is manifested in their speech patterns and this varies according to the cultural norms of a society.

Every society has its rules and etiquette of interaction and so there are rules on appropriate behaviour during speech events. For instance, in the Malaysian context, one should not shout when talking to elders, one does not address an elder person by name and a younger person does not interrupt an older person who is talking with another. Thus, as conversations progress turn taking rules also need to be learnt. However, certain aspects of turn taking rules are enforced by the respective community groups who develop their own norms which are acquired during social interactions. Hymes (1977) claim that rules of interaction can be better understood when a community's socio-cultural practices are investigated. Bordieu (1992) indicates that language is a social resource in the sense that it commands socially accepted forms of language use which allow the speaker to have access to positions of power and also cast influence in different spheres of society. Although the analysis of conversations generally presupposes that speakers have equal social roles (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; McLaughlin, 1984), it is obvious that there is always an imbalance of equality among speakers who come from different social backgrounds and possess different attitudes. These differences can be seen in men-women talk, adult-children talk, employer-employee talk, teacher-student talk, rich-poor talk, educated –less educated talk and so on.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Born as pieces of white paper which are uncontaminated, young children and their behaviours are said to be influenced by those surrounding them. It is said that through the experience children gained from their environment, they acquire their expertise about the world and how it works. It has been claimed by many linguist that children's behaviour patterns including their linguistics pattern are the consequence of what occurs around

them. In that respect, it could be deduced that children's verbal interactions such as turn taking patterns, interrupting, overlapping others' talk or remaining silent when being spoken to may vary because of whom they see and what they observed. The nature of children and how they react to others is not due to their inborn characteristics but due to the way their parents or others around them interact and communicate. For children, observation is their silent companion because young children absorb very quickly what they see and then play this out when they mature. The child's communication styles, whether as a timid and submissive individual or as a powerful and aggressive person is derived from observations. Nonetheless, as society is all about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, a young child can be further taught to hone what is good and to discard what is not. While some parents insist that younger children be submissive, other parents may be teaching their children to be more assertive. In addition, as parents spend more time at work, materials and freedom are being substituted. Thus, there are bound to be changes occurring in the speech patterns of young children as these children acquire more experiences with others. In that respect, it is imperative that how young children talk be studied in order to identify to what extent their behavior may be affecting others.

1.3 Aim of the study

This study covers some aspects of the family discourse elicited from a Malaysian Indian family. It aims to explore the spoken data of a Malaysian Indian child who is interacting with several people of different authority levels. Focusing on spoken conversations, this study aims to look at how two communication strategies of overlapping and latching are used by the child to gain control of the floor. It is hypothesized that the child uses these two strategies to display discourse power. In other words, this study aims to show how a seven year old child talks and through what means the control of the conversation is being overtaken by the child through these two strategies.

1.4 Research questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent does power occurs in the verbal interactions of a child with interlocutors of three tiers: higher authority, similar authority and lower authority?
- 2) What strategies are used by the child to demonstrate power?
- 3) Which of these strategies are more frequently used?

1.5 Significance of the study

Many researchers have shown immense interest in child language especially in children's developmental linguistics but very few studies have been conducted on the construction of power in children's verbal interactions with adults, peers and lower authority groups. Further, studies conducted on Malaysian Indian families have been rare and in particular on Malaysian Indian children. As such, this study will act as a springboard for further studies. This study attempts to enlarge the horizon of studies on child language by looking at the spoken data acquired from a child who is from a minority ethnic group in multicultural and multiethnic Malaysia. In particular, this study will look into how the child uses the strategies of overlapping and latching as means to dominate the floor and how through using these two strategies, the child displays power. The definition of power will be outlined and discussed in Chapter 3.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The scope of this empirical study is small as it looks at the spoken samples elicited from a child of a minority ethnic group. In addition, data was accumulated from a short period of time and not over a longitudinal study, therefore, the outcome of this study would not be sufficient to make a generalization that power construction does occur in all children's speech in the home domain. The child selected for this study is of Indian origin whose parents are professionals and can be considered as middle class. The participants involved in this study consist of people in the child's surroundings; parents, caretakers, aunts, subject's friends, a maid and her younger brother. The interlocutors are all from the same ethnic groups. The maid is from India and is not educated. These are the people whom the child interacts with normally. As such, no artificial scenarios for data collection were constructed.

The researcher will only be analyzing two distinct strategies; overlapping and latching as these were the only ones seen in the study. Other strategies such as silence, directives and question forms will not be discussed.

1.7 Summary

As mentioned above, this study explores the daily interactions of an Indian child with three tiers of authority. Spoken data of the child and these people involved in the study will be used as data and they will be analyzed to see how the child gains control of the floor. In this regard, power, which is seen as the child's ability to take over the conversation from the other participants, will be discussed.

The study will emphasize on how the subject attempts to display power through her spoken language with her interlocutors. The speech patterns which contain overlaps and latching will be analyzed to show how the subject displays her power and dominates the floor during her conversations with her interlocutors. The study will also evaluate the effectiveness of and differences in power display in the interactions with the interlocutors of different levels; higher, equal and lower levels.