

The Use of Speech Act as Communication Strategy of Children with Autism

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Abstract—Autism is considered as the cause of linguistics impairment. It was believed to be responsible for a pragmatic deficit for the person with autism. This study aims to describe how children with autism use speech act as the strategy of their communication in the classroom. The data was taken from one special needs school (SLBN) in Surakarta. The study involved five students at the elementary level and two students at a junior high level. The data were taken from the recording of the classroom activity to get the lingual set used for further analysis. The data were then transcribed and analyzed using a matching technique. Means-end analysis from the speakers' point of view was employed to find out what speech act strategy the speakers used, in this case, children with autism, to reach their goal in the utterance. The results surprisingly showed that most of the children with autism were using a directive speech act. The other type of speech acts employed by the children was assertive. In directive utterance uttered by the children with autism, it was predominantly used to ask or request. However, this strategy is helpful for them to ask for reassurance from the speaking partner, teacher, to get clear comprehension.

Keywords: *autism, pragmatic, speech acts*

I. INTRODUCTION

As a medium for communication, language is very important and closely related to human evolution and development. Not only when they are adults, must the language have been used since humans were born. Although there are limitations in speech produced by humans when they are still an infant, the language skills possessed by humans will also continue to develop in tandem with the growth of the body.

One of the functions of the language is for expressing intentions. Intention itself can be studied with the branch of linguistics called Pragmatics. There are several aspects of intentions that interest many researchers and students. The most talked-about topic in pragmatics is speech acts. This theory was first put forward by Austin in the book entitled "How to do things with words" which is based on his lecture in Oxford in 1952 to 1954 and distinguished the kinds of speech acts into 3 i.e. locutionary acts, perlocutionary acts, and illocutionary acts (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007). Austin added that when someone says something, he is also doing a certain act (Austin, 1962). Austin gave a different picture of the utterance that is constative and performative where the constative utterance is a speech that only reports or describes

events or conditions in the world, while performative utterance is speech that is not describing and is part of taking action (Cummings, 1999).

Furthermore, speech acts are very vital in the interaction between speakers and hearers. Even, Searle (1969) stated that in essence, all speeches contain the meaning of action. So, every speech is spoken in an interaction that has the meaning of action. The study of speech acts has become one of the essential topics in pragmatics. Searle, later, classified speech acts into five types which are 1) Assertive, 2) Directive, 3) Commissive, 4) Expressive and 5) Declaration (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007; Searle, 1969).

However, several conditions also have a profound effect on the language acquisition process. The first condition is the condition of the environment around the place where the humans live. In this case, nature, environment, social conditions and others belong to the category of things that affect language acquisition. The second group is a condition that is related to human or child health disorder itself. The disorder can be a mild or severe and chronic as well as temporary or permanent disorder.

One of the well-known disorders is Autism, a developmental disorder in humans. However, until now, there is no clear linguistic definition of what autism is. Nevertheless, Peeters (2012) provides an understanding that autism is a developmental disorder, impaired understanding or pervasive disorder, and not a form of mental illness. Through this understanding, we can conclude that autism is not a mental illness. Sastry and Aguirre (2014) explain that most individuals with autism have also difficulty in using language effectively, especially in social interactions. It is also believed that several autistic children spoke in unusual tones and rhythms (Grossman, Bemis, & Skwerer, 2010; Paul, Bianchi, Augustyn, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008; Shriberg, Paul, Black, & Van Santen, 2011; Shriberg, Paul, McSweeney, Klin, Cohen, & Volkmar, 2001). The use of language that is too formal is also a form that is considered unusual because generally, people will only speak in formal language occasionally. Thus, it can be inferred that autism is also considered the cause of linguistics impairment.

Practically, autism spectrum disorder cases began from either birth or outset and influence the creating mind that leaves them incapable to frame typical social interactions and

create ordinary correspondence (Baron-Cohen, 2008; Baron-Cohen & Bolton, 1993; Frith, 2008; Hill & Frith, 2003). Children with autism tend to be at a lower level in the social interaction (Jones & Schwartz, 2009; Larkin, Hobson, Hobson, & Tolmie, 2017). Thus, children with autism are questionable whether speech acts can be found in their speaking.

This study focuses on speech acts carried out by autistic children in Surakarta. Since it was believed to be responsible for pragmatic deficit for the sufferer. This study aims to describe how children with autism use speech act as the strategy of their communication in the classroom.

II. METHOD

This study focuses on speech acts that spoken by children with autism. This study utilized descriptive qualitative research using purposive sampling since it can be applied in achieving the objectives of the study (Santosa, 2017). The main purpose of qualitative research is to describe social phenomena that occur naturally (Dornyei, 2007). In conducting this research, the location was in SLBN Surakarta which is a school for special needs students. Concerning the focus of the research on speech acts, data and sources of data from this study are the utterances spoken by the students to the teachers. The data source is language in the form of a speech delivered only by the children with autism that has the verbal ability. This results in excluding the non-verbal autistic children. Sudaryanto (2015) stated that data can be understood as a special lingual phenomenon that contains and is directly related to the problem in question. Thus, the data in this study are utterances delivered by autistic students in SLBN Surakarta.

Recording and referring were used as techniques to gather the data. The study observed the utterances that happened in the classroom recorded using a camera and eliminating non-verbal communications. Additionally in the observing process, the researcher also recorded each of the communication between the students and the teachers to be re-listened which later can step in data analysis. Meanwhile, in the data analysis stage, this study uses the mean-ends and contextual pragmatic approach. The mean-ends are that researchers only focus on the speech delivered by speakers (Leech, 1993). In this case, the speaker is a student with autism with verbal communication containing speech acts.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On Searle’s classification of Speech Acts, there are 5 categories which are Assertive, Directive, Commissive, Expressive, and Declaration. The children with autism used those types of speech acts for their communication strategy. This strategy is used for them to reach the goal of communication as they intended. The children consist of 5 students at the elementary level and 2 students at a junior high level. Since the research only focuses on verbal communication, the researcher excluded the ones that have no verbal communication ability. However, it still included the one-word utterance produced by the children as long as it has spoken by the verbal autistic children since they have the verbal ability. Table I below is the presented data of the speech of the children with autism.

TABLE I. DISTRIBUTION OF THE SPEECH ACTS USED BY CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Types of Speech Acts	Total	Percent. (%)
Assertive	7	35
Directive	11	55
Commissive	1	5
Expressive	1	5
TOTAL	20	100

Based on the data presented in Table I, there are 20 speech acts occurred in the interaction between the children with autism and teachers in the classroom. These 20 speech acts were spoken by 7 students with 4 students more active as they have better verbal skills regardless of their level of the study. While the other 3 were only using 1 speech acts each due to their inability to express what they want to convey. Most of the time, they kept quiet in the classroom and simply repeating what the teacher said or asked them to say without any initiation to communicate what they have in mind. Table I also showed that Directive and Assertive are the speech acts used the most by the children with autism. Meanwhile, the Declaration was not used by children with autism. Declaration was excluded due to Leech (1993) explanation stated that Declarations should be performed in a specific event that cannot be found here in the classroom. The explanation about the data is shown below.

A. Assertive Speech Acts

Assertive speech act is the utterance that commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007). Below is the assertive speech act performed by children with autism.

Speech context:

The teacher was writing something on the board while the students were expected to pay attention. Later, the marker the teacher used to write was out of ink and one of the students shouted.

Speech form:

Spidolnya habis bu!

(The marker is out of ink, ma’am)

The data above is considered as assertive speech acts since the function of it is to report or inform the teacher as hearer that the marker she used was out of ink. It can also be seen by the lingual marking which is the use of declarative sentences. This shows that children with autism are fully aware of what they see around them. This is one of the strategies of communication they use to involve them in the big world by explaining, informing, or reporting what they see to the other people.

Although children with autism tend to have poor sensory processing (Mattard-Labrecque, Ben Amor, & Couture, 2013), the finding shows that children with autism can report what

they see to the teacher. It is proven that sensory processing was working quite well in children with autism. However, the utterance was produced by the high-functioning autistic child diagnosed based on DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

B. Directive Speech Acts

Directive speech acts are used to express the desire of the speakers to be done by the hearer or addressee (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007).

Speech context:

The teacher was asking the students to draw a line. One of the students then asked where the ruler is.

Speech form:

Penggarisnya mana, bu?

(Where is the ruler, ma'am?)

Since the ruler is important for the students to draw a line, the student asked the teacher to help to find him a ruler. In this data, it can be seen that the student was using the interrogative sentence to ask where his ruler is. However, this is not just a mere question that needs to be answered. It is a strategy of the student in reaching his goal which is getting his ruler helped by the teacher. As presented in Table 1, directive speech acts is the most-frequent speech acts used by the children. It has commonly been assumed that children with autism usually need other people to help them to reach their goals in communication. Thus, the use of directive speech acts is beneficial for their strategy of communication.

The indirect speech act showed in the data above is uncommon in children with autism utterance. It is because children with autism are believed to speak with rigid language (Frith, 2008; Loveland, Landry, Hughes, Hall, & McEvoy, 1988; Rubin & Lennon, 2004). However, the utterance produced by the children with autism is considered directive speech act since the children with autism attempt to ask for something they need.

C. Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive speech acts are speech acts that commit the speaker to future actions (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007).

Speech context:

The utterance was spoken when the teacher asked the students to read a book out loud. However, the student resisted what the teacher asked her to do.

Speech form:

Ga mau belajar!

(I) don't want to study!

Data above has proven that children with autism also can perform Commissive Speech Acts. What the student tried to convey was refusing what the teacher suggested. It also strengthens with the lingual marking which is a negative

declarative sentence. This kind of speech acts can be included in the commissive since its function is to commit. Despite only being used by one student, this indicates that children with autism use commissive speech acts as their communication strategy to commit, promise, or even refuse.

The commissive speech acts also include refusing which is also part of illocutionary acts (Huang, 2007). Commissive speech acts spoken by the child with autism was refusing to show that there was an attempt of the students, the children with autism, to be uncooperative. The children with autism were reportedly having such uncooperative behavior (Stein Lane, Williams, Dawson, Polido, & Cermak, 2014).

D. Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts are the type of speech acts used to show or express the speaker's psychological attitude (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007).

Speech context:

There was one of the students who were absent due to illness at that time. The teacher showed her sorry to hear that news. Surprisingly, It was responded by one student perfectly.

Speech form:

Semoga cepat sembuh.

(Get well soon)

By interpreting the student utterance, it indicated that the student was trying to show his sympathy toward his friend who is sick and cannot attend the class at that time. Such utterance can be categorized as Expressive Speech Acts as its function to express the psychological attitude of the speaker as an evaluation of the condition around them. The children with autism's ability to use it indicate that they can feel emotion.

Expressive speech act is a psychological attitude that is expressed to respond to such a condition that the speaker feels. The response itself should be appropriate with such a condition. It is consistent with the study by (Lam & Yeung, 2012) stating that the children with autism can provide sufficient information or response needed though they speak "oddly". However, there was only one datum found in this study that considered the expressive speech act. Thus, this is supporting the studies that most of the children with autism have difficulties in giving appropriate comments in social interactions (Jones & Schwartz, 2009; Rubin & Lennon, 2004; Sussman & Sklar, 1969).

E. Frequency of Speech Acts by The Children With Autism

Table I presented above showed that directive speech acts dominate the speech acts spoken by children with autism. It can be inferred that actually, children with autism were able to initiate a conversation (Loveland, et.al., 1988) especially when they need something from other people. Therefore, directive speech acts were the most compatible speech act to be employed in such condition. The directive speech acts in children with autism had also been studied by Sumarti and Salamah (2015).

The assertive or representative speech acts become the second speech acts uttered by children with autism in this study. Assertive speech act is accommodating the function such as reporting, stating, boasting, and claiming (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007). The ability of the children with autism in stating and reporting becomes an interesting point in this study. It is due to what was stated by Mattard-Labrecque et al. (2013) saying that children with autism tend to have low sensory processing including visual processing that is required in making a report on what they see.

Children with autism surprisingly also showed the ability in expressing what they feel on the unpleasant news. However, the only 1 datum found in this study was because most of the children with autism have difficulties in giving appropriate responses in the social interaction (Rubin & Lennon, 2004). Besides, the children with autism most of the time cannot give a spontaneous contribution to social interaction (Duffy & Hally, 2011).

The similar also happened in commissive speech act that was only found in one datum. The commissive speech act is the utterance that commits the speaker to future action (Cruse, 2000; Huang, 2007). The only datum found in this study was commissive speech act that functioned as a refusal. The refusal given by the child with autism was part of uncooperative behavior (Stein et al., 2014) that is frequently found in children with autism when they face some change or something unusual (Baron-Cohen, 2008).

The absence of the declaration speech act in this study was due to the function of the declaration speech act itself which is almost impossible to be found in the subject that has language impairment. Declaration speech act is a kind of speech acts that can change the world (Searle, 1975). With the functions such as declaring war, firing employment, name, sentence (in court), and open (e.g. an exhibition) (Cruse, 2000), it relies on the extra-linguistic institution, making it called institutionalized performatives (Huang, 2007). In other words, this speech act can only be performed by the authority.

However, the speech impairment that the children with autism indeed affect their performances in conveying what they intend to say. Limitations they have in receptive skills do have certain effects on their productive skills. Hence, the children with autism have low involvement in social interactions compare to the typically developing children.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study is limited by the number of the children with autism that were involved. Those children were also put in the same class regarding their different diagnosis. The low number of utterances produced by the children with autism also became the limitation of this study. Providing more utterance data will also provide different results of the study in the pragmatic skill of children with autism. Further study on other aspects of pragmatic is also recommended in the future.

The results of the study indicate that the children with autism who are believed to have pragmatic impairments also use speech acts as their communication strategy. Their ability to convey what they intend to say is the proof that autism is not the obstacles for them to communicate and involve in this big

world. Moreover, children with autism can perform several categories of speech acts effectively. However, Directive and Assertive are the most performed speech acts by the children with autism regarding its use. Directive speech acts come naturally not only in the children with autism, but also in human in general since we need other people to help us. The assertive that become the second dominant data in this research also indicates that the children with autism, in a certain condition, can initiate conversation as well as pay attention around them to be reported.

As a personal matter, the identity of the children with autism in this study is undisclosed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank the teachers and headmaster of SLBN Surakarta for giving permission and access to the researchers to observe the students; the children with autism; in the school environment.

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