

# Classifying Speech Act of Gossip Using Verbal Response Modes in Selected Instagram Posts

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**Abstract**—This study aims to examine the speech act of gossip on selected Instagram posts and categorize the existing utterances based on the speech act classification by Searle (1969). The selected Instagram posts were selected by following a Verbal Response Modes (VRM) approach. A descriptive method was chosen to conduct the research. The data were analyzed by using the taxonomy provided by Stiles (1992). The analysis shows that the utterances and responses on Instagram posts were mostly classified into three categories; *assertive* (statements, suggestions, etc.), *directive* (inviting, requesting, etc.), and *declarative* (declare, announce). Most of the utterances on the post were aimed at stating an actual event and the utterances used by the followers to respond to the statements were inviting other different responses. It is recommended that further research on the speech act using VRM in a broader social or educational context be applicable.

**Keywords:** *gossip, Instagram post, speech act, Verbal Response Modes (VRM)*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gossip is a natural topic that is very easy to interact with when heard of for the first time. It is sometimes thought to be a common reflection of ordinary daily life and considered to be an important part of communication and social behavior that everyone can easily experience to contribute and be familiar with, and for sure it can be intuitively understood (Al-Hindawi & Mirza, 2015).

In recent years, social media platforms have been very influential to almost every aspect of life to offer 'one-click access' to various news accounts including gossip accounts which then specifically occupy its popularity in the platform, one of those popular accounts is on the *Instagram* platform (Juditha, 2018). The account has grown to become a major gossip account in Indonesia which provides various news especially celebrities' daily gossips. People log in to *Instagram* just to read any updated news from any gossip accounts and even to entertain themselves by giving any random responses in the column of comment (Wicaksono & Irwansyah, 2017). More interestingly, the responses in the comment column on each post turn into a conversation thread that usually becomes an indirect intervention for celebrities who are being the topic of the posts. Various utterances which

appear in the comment generally show various intention towards the posts. Most of the utterances usually lead to the pros and cons comments and the intentions lie in the comments that can trigger the celebrity to react. These 'triggering' utterances usually come from the choice of words that followers of the account used to show their reaction towards the situation.

This study aims to examine the utterances that appear on a gossip account's post as the speech act of gossip and classify the utterances into the speech act classification by Searle (1969). It is also an attempt to know the classification of the utterances as one of the communication strategies to carefully react to gossip in daily life that can shape someone's perception.

## *The Speech Act Theory*

The uses of language not only can but even normally do have the character of actions was a fact largely unrealized by those engaged in the study of language before the present century, at least in the sense that there was lacking any attempt to come to terms systematically with the action-theoretic peculiarities of language use. Where the action-character of linguistic phenomena was acknowledged, it was normally regarded as a peripheral matter, relating to derivative or nonstandard aspects of language which could afford to be ignored (Smith, 1990.)

The speech act theory introduced by British philosopher John L. Austin has been an influential philosophical view since the second half of the last century (Yu, 2002). The theory attempts to explain how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers infer the intended meaning from what is said. Thus, a speech act is best described as "in saying something, we do something", such as when a minister says "I now pronounce you husband and wife" which creates a new *social reality*. The speech act is about performing an action through language, such as describing something in "It is raining", asking a question in "Is it raining?", making a request in "Could you pass the salt?", giving an order in "Drop your weapon or I'll shoot you!", or making a promise in greeting, thanking, apologizing, refusing, insulting, and complaining.

Austin distinguishes three types of linguistic acts. The first type is the *locutionary act* or the act of saying something. This is the most basic act of utterance. It is a declarative sentence. It simply says something about the world. Thus, when someone utters *it's hot in here*, he/she simply states something about the

world. It contains merely propositional content or literal meaning of *it's hot in here*.

However, many sentences mean something other than their literal meaning. Some sentences involve the social function of what is said. This is called *illocutionary act*, or what one *does* in saying something. It asserts more than simply stating something about the world. It includes a performative assertion. In this sense, utterance *it's hot in here* can be inferred as (a) an indirect request for someone to open the window, (b) an indirect refusal to close the window because someone is cold, or (c) a complaint implying that someone should know better than to keep the windows closed when expressed emphatically. To this degree, the appropriate response of the hearer will be mainly determined by how the hearer infers the real intention of the speaker.

The third type of linguistic act is *perlocutionary act*, or what one does by saying something. It deals with the effect of what is said on the hearer. Again, the desired effect or meaning relies much upon how well the hearer captures the speaker's intention. Thus, if the real intention of utterance *it's hot in here* is an indirect request for someone to open the window, and the hearer does open the window, then the perlocutionary act is successful and the illocutionary act has successfully taken place well.

#### *Classification of Speech Act*

Austin in 1962 also classified speech acts into (1) *veridictives*, the giving of evidence, reasons, or are evaluative of truth like acquit, calculate, describe; (2) *exercitives*, having to do with deciding or advocating particular actions like order, direct, nominate, appoint; (3) *commissives*, or committing the speaker to a particular action like a promise, pledge, vow, swear; (4) *expositives*, deals with terms used to elaborate the speakers' view alike affirm, deny, emphasize, illustrate; (5) *behabitives*, providing reactions to the behavior of others like applaud, deplore, felicitate, congratulate.

Searle (1969) criticized Austin's theory for there is a persistent confusion between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. He reclassified the speech acts into:

- a. *Assertive*. Committing the speaker, in varying degrees, by using verbs like suggest, swear, insist, state.
- b. *Directives*. Refers to the attempt of the speaker to get the hearer to do something by using verbs like ask, command, request, invite, advise.
- c. *Commissives*. Committing the speaker to some future course of action using verbs like a promise, guarantee, pledge, threat.
- d. *Expressives*. To express the speaker's psychological state of affairs using verbs like thank, congratulate, apologize, welcome.
- e. *Declarations*. To bring into reality the state of affairs noted in the declarative content using verbs like appoint, declare, christen, name, announce.

In the speech act, Searle (1969) also stated that there are numbers of *felicity conditions* that must be met for a speech act to work. The first is *preparatory condition*. It covers (a) generally accepted procedure for successfully carrying out the

speech act, (b) appropriate circumstances for the use of speech act, and (c) appropriate person who uses the speech act. Hence, in the case of declarative acts, the person performing the act must have the authority to do it and must do it in appropriate circumstances and with appropriate actions. An example of this is when in a wedding ceremony (the right circumstance), a priest (the right person) says "I now pronounce you husband and wife" (the right speech), and afterward, the marriage licensed is signed (the right procedure). The second one is *sincerity condition*. Here, the person performing the act is demanded to have appropriate thought, feeling, belief, or intention. In the example, the priest must intend the marriage words to affect the marriage. The last is *essential condition*. This requires that the involved parties all intend by the ceremony and the utterance of the words *I now pronounce you husband and wife* to create a marriage bond.

#### *The Pragmatic of Gossip*

Gossip is one of the terms that are defined differently based on how one tries to approach or study it. Al-Hindawi, and Mirza (2015) stated that if one tries to approach gossip sociologically, then gossip can be defined as a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation. Yerkovich in 1977 also found that gossiping is a form of sociable interaction, which depends upon the strategic management of information through the creation of others as "moral characters" in talk. Because it is a sociable process, the content of the talk is not as important as the interaction which the talking supports.

Meanwhile, Basyah, Pulungan, and Dirgeyasa (2018) argued that even in gossip, what the gossipers are talking about is the basic understanding of pragmatic communication. They also revealed that the utterances produced by the speaker/gossiper in the gossip or conversation is giving some effect to the hearer, for instance, a belief or an action. Thus, when a speaker or gossiper utters something, he/she is performing an act. The performing of an act in this sense is as the performance of an illocutionary act. The illocutionary act is closely connected to gossiper's intention of stating, describing, blaming or advising someone and sharing the information to the hearer. The illocutionary act of the gossip is communicatively successful only if the gossiper's illocutionary intention is recognized by the hearer, because the gossiper's illocutionary intention consists in the hearer's understanding. The gossip is exchanging personal information (positive or negative) about other people. As Foster in 2004 mentioned that gossip is a personal conversation on social topics. The information exchanged truthful or deceptive, can benefit the sender and the receiver or both.

#### *Verbal Response Modes (VRM)*

Verbal Response Modes (VRM) is defined as a taxonomy principle of speech acts that is used to classify literal and pragmatic meaning within utterances (Lampert, Dale, & Paris, 2006). Each utterance is coded twice: once for its *literal*

meaning, and once for its communicative intention or pragmatic meaning. The same VRM categories are used in each case.

The verbal response modes (VRM) taxonomy (Stiles, 1993) is a general-purpose classification of speech act. It concerns what people do when they say something rather than the content of what they say. It can be used to describe the relationship of the speaker to others in any sort of discourse. Each utterance (defined as a simple sentence; independent clause; nonrestrictive dependent clause; multiple predicates: or term of acknowledgment, evaluation, or address) in dialogic conversation is coded as reflection (R), acknowledgment (K), interpretation (I), question (Q), confirmation (C), edification (E), advisement (A), or disclosure (D). Under the VRM system, every utterance from a speaker can be considered to concern either the *speaker's* or the *other's* experience. Further, in making an utterance, the speaker may need to make presumptions about the experience. Finally, a speaker may represent the experience either from their point of view, or from a viewpoint that is shared or held in common with the other interlocutor. These three principles — *source of experience*, *presumption about experience* and *frame of reference*— form the basis of the VRM taxonomy as shown in Table I.

TABLE I. THE TAXONOMY OF VERBAL RESPONSE MODES (VRM) BY STILES (1993)

Source of Experience	Presumption about Experience	Frame of Reference	VRM mode	Description
Speaker	Speaker	Speaker	Disclosure (D)	Reveals thoughts, feelings, perceptions or intentions. E.g., <i>I like swimming</i>
		Other	Edification (E)	States objective information. E.g., <i>They hate swimming</i>
	Other	Speaker	Advisement (A)	Attempts to guide behavior; suggestions, commands, permission, prohibition. E.g., <i>Learn to swim!</i>
		Other	Confirmation (C)	Compares speaker's experience with other's; agreement, disagreement, shared experience or belief. E.g., <i>We both like swimming.</i>
Other	Speaker	Speaker	Question (Q)	Requests information or guidance. E.g., <i>Do you like swimming?</i>
		Other	Acknowledgment (K)	Conveys receipt of or receptiveness to

				other's communication; simple acceptance, salutations. E.g., <i>Yes.</i>
	Other	Speaker	Interpretation (I)	Explains or labels the other; judgements or evaluations of the other's experience or behavior. E.g., <i>you're a good student.</i>
		Other	Reflection (R)	Puts other's experience into words; repetitions, restatements, clarifications. E.g., <i>You dislike swimming.</i>

II. METHOD

This study aims to collect data related to classifying the utterances into the speech act of gossip on Instagram. This research was designed as a descriptive study. This kind of study set out to describe and to interpret what the thing is about and what event has influenced and affected a present condition (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). It means that this present study was intended to present a real situation happened at the research site without giving any treatments or interventions to the participants. This study is aimed at investigating how the utterances on gossip account are classified in the speech act classification and how the intentions behind the utterances on the posts affect readers' response?

To achieve the purposes, a closer survey on an Instagram gossip account was conducted as a data collection technique. An account named *Lambe Turah* was chosen to be the subject of the research, and a random sample of post was fully observed covering the utterances on the caption (assumed as locutionary act), responses on the column of comments (assumed as illocutionary act), and also the response from the object in the conversation topic – the celebrity – (assumed as perlocutionary act).

A chosen post was describing an event that happened to a celebrity. *Lambe Turah* as the gossip account published a post containing a picture and a caption below the picture was provided as an explanation on what the picture is about. Below the caption, provided is a column of comment which followers or readers can use to put their responses. The analysis was done to find out which utterances both on the caption and comments were categorized into speech act classification on VRM table. The classification was then used to determine which utterances representing the speech act of gossip in accordance to the speech act classification. This analysis was expected to be able to provide identification of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary act behind the utterances.

**III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In the present study, the VRM was used as the tool to classify the utterances on a chosen post. To specify the process into the taxonomy principle on VRM, the caption and readers' responses on the post were identified as Speaker, and the object of the conversation (the person/celebrity who was gossiped) was identified as Other. The following is table II. providing the result (utterances are provided in Bahasa Indonesia).

**TABLE II. THE RESULT**

Source of Experience	Presumption about Experience	Frame of Reference	VRM mode	Description (utterances appear)
<b>Speaker</b>	Lambe Turah posted a caption about a musician named Manji who recently reported to have insulted the music album cover of Dadali band)	<b>Lambe Turah</b>	Disclosure (D)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soo scared!/Duuh takuut</li> <li>- Peace is beautiful, Bro!/Damai itu indah, Bro!</li> </ul> <p><b>(statement)</b></p>
		<b>Followers' comments</b>	Edification (E)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dadali doesn't like it, really!/Dadali nggak suka digituin tuh!</li> <li>- Support Dadali!/Dukung Dadali!</li> <li>- I don't like a fight/Aku ga suka pertengkaran</li> <li>- I'd rather read netizens' comments/Aku lebih suka baca komen netizen lain</li> </ul> <p><b>(insisting)</b></p>
		<b>Lambe Turah</b>	Advisement (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hope it's soon resolved peacefully/Semoga segera diselesaikan dengan baik dan damai yaa</li> <li>- Go get an apologize!/Cepet minta maaf deh!</li> <li>- Go find him, don't grumble on your posts!/Samperin lah, jangan ngomel di status!</li> </ul> <p><b>(advisement)</b></p>
		<b>followers' comments</b>	Confirmation (C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This too shall pass, as usual/Yang udah-udah juga beres ntar</li> <li>- Everything will be soon normal again/ Semua bakal normal lagi</li> <li>- Friend is friend/Ntar juga temenan lagi</li> </ul>

Other	Musician 1	Anji	Question (Q)	(affirmation)
			Question (Q)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Did I say wrong?/Kalimat saya yang salah dimana?</li> <li>- Dear Bro Dadali, can you just try reading my caption again?/Dear bro Dadali, bisa coba baca lagi caption saya?</li> </ul> <p><b>(asking and inviting)</b></p>
			Acknowledgment (K)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I have explained and apologized/Saya sudah menjelaskan dan meminta maaf</li> <li>- Still waiting a response from Dadali/Tinggal menunggu respon dari Dadali</li> </ul> <p><b>(emphasize the situations)</b></p>
	<b>Musician 2</b>	<b>Dadali</b>	Interpretation (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- You said you didn't judge the band but you did show my album, dude!/Lu bilang ga ngejudge band tapi lu nunjuk album gue</li> <li>- Why on earth did you point out my album cover?/Kenapa cover album gue yang lu tunjuk?</li> </ul> <p><b>(evaluative truth or reasons)</b></p>
			Reflection (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get the hell out that nosy video on your post!/ Hapus video nyinyir lu!</li> <li>- At least you could blur that CD!/Paling ga lu blur kek CD gue!</li> <li>- Fight with me tomorrow!/Berantem lu ama gue besok!</li> </ul> <p><b>(resulted command/order)</b></p>

From the VRM table above, it can be found that the classification process of the speech act was first shaped from the caption posted by the speaker (here is Lambe Turah) on the Disclosure (D). As it threw a triggering caption and then the followers continued to throw other utterances in various forms of edification (by insisting) and confirmation (by affirming), as response to the statement on disclosure. The point of why the conversation continuously shifted to a long conversation thread

among the followers was because the Lambe Turah stated a ‘triggering’ or expressive speech act in the first place. Maíz-Arévalo (2017) pointed out that this kind of expressive speech act was a reflection of emotive speech act. The emotive speech act can be bridging to correspond to a long conversation in the context of throwing continuous responses over a triggering statement. Gautam, Maharjan, Graesser and Rus (2004) also emphasized that an emotive speech act in the first statement is indicative of a trigger to shape an established perception.

However, the main focus of the findings was the pattern appear during the survey that assisted the work of VRM in classifying the utterances into the speech act categories. The utterances that Lambe Turah threw was the pre-requisite for the upcoming existence of the classification (Moldovan, Rus, & Graesser, 2011). Based on the table, sometimes Lambe Turah only stated casual utterances like “*Duuh takuut*” or “*Damai itu indah lho*”, but in fact, the utterance seemed to be purposefully an automated method to lead to the appearance of other responsibilities, this is in line with Malone (1993) revealed about the purposed statement that can change someone’s intention to respond to something.

As an interpretation of what VRM has resulted, the classification found did not stop only at informing something on the post. The VRM also managed to reveal the readers’ intention behind every utterance they have thrown. The classification found was mostly in the form of statement which is the speech act of *assertive* that in this study the statements have managed to lead the readers’ response into their interpretation and perceptions (Qadir & Riloff, 2011).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A closer survey to the sample of posts on the Instagram account has shown that the assistance of Verbal Response Modes (VRM) in classifying the speech act of gossip which resulted in a specific categorization of every utterance. The VRM also provides a further finding in the scope of identifying the intended meaning of every utterance which was assumed to be the bridge to shaping someone’s perception on a topic of a conversation. However, this present study is small-scale research that still needs to be developed. Other researchers should conduct further study on classifying speech act in a broader social and educational context, to provide a solid understanding of how to use and understand speech act as a

communication strategy and a way to carefully prevent oneself from shaping a misperception, especially towards gossip.

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