

An Analysis of Condolences Speech Act by Indonesian Adolescents

Diah Nurlianingsih, Ernie D. Ayu Imperiani

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Bandung, Indonesia

ernie_imperiani@upi.edu

Abstract—This study aims to identify strategies in condolence expressions and explain the effect of power and distance on the choice of condolences strategies used by 20 Indonesian adolescents at the age of 11 to 19 years old. The study was employed by using a qualitative descriptive method. In the form of discourse completion task (DCT), the data were analyzed using Elwood's (2004) classification of condolences strategies and Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. Based on 20 condolence expressions for each given situation, the findings reveal first, seeking absolution from God and expression of sympathy appears as the dominant strategy used by the respondents with 27.3% and 26.9% occurrences respectively, followed by future-oriented remarks (18.1%), an offer of assistance (12.3%), expression of concern (7.5%), related question (6.6%), and acknowledgment of the death (1.3%). Moreover, the finding also shows that variation in strategies of condolence expression appears to be motivated by the factors of the relationship. In more distant relationships, the respondents use lower risk strategies, while those who involve in a closer relationship would choose strategies of higher risk. The findings of the study indicate that the collectivistic norms and religious background of respondents can strongly affect their strategies choices in expressing condolences.

Keywords: *condolences strategy, face-threatening act, politeness, power and distance, speech act*

I. INTRODUCTION

Death is something that all human experience, but talking about death is a difficult matter due to its sensitive nature. Most people believe that it is difficult to find the right words to comfort bereaved, and many hearers feel people are not sensitive enough to understand their situations (Williams, 2006). Uttering a meaningful sentiment, such as condolence, is something personal depending on the relationships between the individual and the bereaved. (Moghaddam, 2012).

According to the classification of speech act, condolence falls into expressive category (Searle, 1975, as cited in Moghaddam, 2012). The main purposes of condolences expression are to share sympathy and encouragement with those who have experienced the death of a loved one (Yahya, 2010).

Giving an appropriate condolence phrase at the right time can be a challenging task. It is because the language used in highly emotional situations may differ from casual conversation. Pishghadam, Ghanizadeh, and Moghadam (2013) also mentioned condolence routines become more complicated

due to several factors such as relations among individuals and cultural traits.

Through the politeness theory, Williams (2006) argues that expressing condolences is one case of Face Threatening Act. It is because people sometimes fall into a dilemma on what they have to do to make the bereaved feel better while facing unfortunate situations. Condolers have a responsibility to use appropriate condolences expressions in order to serve one or more face needs of the bereaved. The complexity of the relationship factors makes offering condolences an interesting speech act in terms of how the strategies chosen reflect the face needs of both the hearer and speaker as it directly has a certain impact for their relationship.

Condolence routines also differ from one speech community to another. These differences come from varied beliefs about death, about how people cope with the death of another, and about the perceived role and responsibility of a condoler. Many studies offer a cross-cultural analysis in the act of condoling from many different countries in the world (Gladkova, 2010; Meiners, 2013; Wakefield & Itakura, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the act of politeness and condolences routine in the Indonesian context. The study also tries to see whether Indonesian people tend to maintain social harmony as stated by Kadarisman (2009) since the culture of Indonesian society is collectivistic. In a collectivistic culture, where the mutual-face concern is essential, avoidance of conflict may prevail for the situation to be defused. Moreover, offering condolences involve a high risk of face-threatening act for both condoler and bereaved.

Another important issue to address is to answer whether Indonesian people consider power and distance in politeness act. As expressing condolences is an emotional and sensitive matter, the risk is fairly high, and speakers will generally choose less risky strategies than they would for other types of FTAs. The power (P) and distance (D) aspects of the relationship between the speakers will be used to explain the variation in FTA strategies used (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

II. METHOD

Descriptive qualitative was used in this study to analyze the problem surrounding condolence and face threatening act. Monsen and Horn (2008) state that descriptive qualitative provides an effective method to gain information that is useful for formulating hypotheses and final assessment. It describes the subject or the object of the research based on the fact or reality. The qualitative descriptive method is suitable for the research

because this method does not require the researchers to move far from or into their data, in which the data will be collected through the discourse completion task (DCT).

DCT used in this study consists of six situations (see Table I) requiring a participant to express their condolence based on two social variables which are power (P) and distance (D). DCT was distributed to 20 adolescents. The majority of the respondents fell in the category of 11-19 age groups.

TABLE I. DESCRIPTION OF THE SIX SITUATIONS

Situation	Description
Situation 1: [=P, +D]	Teenager – a close friend (same age) A close friend told you that his/her family member passed away a week ago. You then say:
Situation 2: [=P, -D]	Teenager – an acquaintance (same age) You heard that one of your acquaintance were not coming to the private course class because his/her family member passed away. You then say:
Situation 3: [+P, +D]	Teenager – a family member (older age) Your relative’s child has passed away and on hearing that, you go to their house to condole them. You then say:
Situation 4: [+P, -D]	Teenager – school teacher (older age) You heard that your school teacher’s parent has passed away and you see your teacher the next day in. You then say:
Situation 5: [-P, +D]	Teenager – a close friend (younger age) A close friend, who is younger, tells you that his/her family member passed away. You then say:
Situation 6: [-P, -D]	Teenager – a neighbor (younger age) Your young neighbor’s parent has passed away. You come to their house to condole them. You then say:

As shown in Table I, each situation was formed by considering two social variables which are power (P) and distance (D). This study requires respondents to express their condolences to bereaved who have a different level of power (e.g. +P means the bereaved have a higher power, =P means equal power, and -P means lower power) and different degree of familiarity (e.g. +D means distant relationship and -D means close relationship) between individuals.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed that respondents that most Indonesian adolescents in this study tend to use more than one expression while expressing their condolences to others’ bereavement. Three most common strategies are ‘seeking absolution from God’ ‘expression of sympathy’, and ‘future-oriented remarks’.

A. Condolences strategies

The first research question was formulated in order to discover the frequently used strategies by Indonesian adolescents when responding to an obituary. Indonesian adolescents tend to use condolence expression that consists of a minimum of two strategies but can more vary depending on the degree of familiarity and power of the speakers. Moreover, the

frequency of condolences strategies for each category is shown in Table II.

TABLE II. FREQUENCY OF CONDOLENCE STRATEGIES IN EACH SITUATION

Condolences strategy	Frequency						Subtotal	Percentage
	S. 1	S. 2	S. 3	S. 4	S. 5	S. 6		
Acknowledgment of the death	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	1.3%
Expression of sympathy	8	14	8	10	10	11	61	26.9%
Offer of assistance	9	4	2	4	7	2	28	12.3%
Future-oriented remarks	5	4	3	9	7	3	41	18.1%
Expression of concern	6	4	2	0	3	2	17	7.5%
Seeking absolution from God	14	4	5	10	9	0	62	27.3%
Related questions	3	4	1	3	3	1	15	6.6%
Total							227	100%

Each of the data presents different strategies that will be discussed further below.

1. Acknowledgment of the death

This strategy consists of interjections that show the realization of death. Wierzbicka (as cited in Yahya, 2010) further explains that these interjections are related to common responses from people after hearing an obituary such as disbelief, sadness, and shock. The most common phrases were “*Ya ampun*” and “*Ya Allah*” which are somehow equivalent to the English phrase “Oh, my God”. In this study, acknowledgment of death was seen as the least frequent strategy among others with a percentage of 1.3% (n=3). The least use of this strategy is possibly due to the impulsive habitual of Indonesians who would rather use an expression such as “*Inalillahi.*” when hearing an obituary.

On the contrary, the findings of Wakefield and Itakura’s (2017) study revealed that acknowledgment of death becomes the most common response from a native-English speaker. They chose an expression of sorrow using the word “Sorry” or “Oh no”. Besides, Wakefield and Itakura (2017) also gave different names for this strategy as “interjections of negative emotion.” This naming was based on their data that show the tendency of Japanese people who regularly express their negative emotions after using interjections phrase. Nevertheless, the present study still called this strategy as an acknowledgment of death.

2. Expression of sympathy

Expression of sympathy can be considered the core of condolences speech act because it appeared dominantly in all given situations (Yahya, 2010). In a few cases, this strategy formed the entire expression of condolence although it was more common for the responses to be

formed with the combination of two or more condolences strategies, for instance:

“Turut berduka cita ya atas kepergian orang yang sangat berarti bagi kamu, semoga amal ibadahnya diterima Tuhan.”

“I’m sorry for the loss of your loved one, may God bless all her/his good deeds.”

As a result, expressing sympathy became the second most frequent strategy used by the respondents in approximately 26.9% of the responses (n=61). Other common expressions that belong to this strategy were *“Turut berduka cita atas kepergiannya.”* (I’m sorry for your loss) or *“Aku turut bersedih.”* (I’m sad for your loss). This finding corresponds to Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh (2015)’s study which compared condolences speech act between Persian and English.

3. Offer of assistance

This strategy was the fourth dominant strategies that respondents used in expressing condolences, which accounts approximately 12.3% of all responses (n=28). This response is distinguished between general and specific offer. (Yahya, 2010). General offers usually contain utterances like *“Aku selalu ada buat kamu.”* (I will always be there for you) without stating specific offer. Meanwhile, specific offers are usually used in closer relationship, since it offers more personal needs that could bring little joy to the bereaved. Such specific offers would sound like, *“Aku temenin beli es krim yuk.”* (Let’s buy some ice creams together). However, Indonesian adolescents in this study tend to use more general rather than specific offers. This finding indicates that in a collectivistic culture like Indonesia which is based on strong intimacy, offering help are commonly used to relieve bereaved sorrow. (Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh 2015)

4. Future-oriented remarks

Future-oriented remarks was the third most frequent strategy mentioned by the respondents in approximately 18.1% of the responses (n=42). This strategy usually consists of encouraging words. In an informal situation, most respondents would give encouragement advices, such as: *“Aku yakin kamu mampu ngelewatin semua ini.”* (I believe you can get through all of this) or *“Semoga keluarga sekalian diberi ketabahan.”* (I hope your family can get through this) Here the respondent is trying to convince the hearer not to stay in the same mood for the sake of the deceased. *“Kamu tidak usah khawatir lagi. Beliau sudah bahagia dan sehat di alam sana.”* (You do not have to worry anymore. He/she is happy and healthy now up there) Most of the responses were in the form of imperative sentences with various levels of politeness.

5. Expression of concern

Expressing concern relates to showing care for the well-being of the family deceased. This strategy relates to showing care for the well-being of the speaker or his/her family and includes questions like, *“Gimana keadaan*

kamu sekarang?” (How are you now?), *“Kamu kuat kan?”* (Please be strong). Expressing concern became the second least strategy used by respondents in merely 7.5% of all responses (n=17). This finding is in line with previous studies by Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011) and Wakefield and Itakura (2017).

6. Seeking absolution from God

Seeking absolution from God was the most frequent condolences strategy uttered by 27.3% of respondent (n=62). The most dominant expression was *“Innalillahi wa innailahi rajiun,”* which translates to “Indeed, to God we belong and to God we shall return.” The use of this strategy is related to a religious value in a Muslim society that has a strong belief in life after death. Therefore, Indonesian Muslim pray for the person died and asks God to forgive his or her sins, let his or her soul rest in peace.

Thus, the results of this study revealed that almost all respondents use extensive religious references and expression of sympathy to comfort the bereaved. This finding is in accordance with Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh (2011)’s study where the major amount of condolence expression in Persian community was related to utterances of seeking absolution from God and expression of sympathy. The reasons for using such strategies are attributed to respondents’ religious orientations (i.e. Islam) and strong empathy towards other. This would be attributed to their belief of a Muslim’s duty to offer condolences and sympathy to the family of the deceased.

7. Related question

As the name suggests, related questions are concerned with all occurrences of the death. These types of questions can strengthen the relationship between condoler and a bereaved (Yahya, 2010). Nevertheless, the findings show that asking a related question is used by small numbers of respondents in this study (n=15), which take only 5% of all responses. Wakefield and Itakura (2017) noted that it is important to identify how close the condoler to the bereaved in order to ask an appropriate question. The closer the relationship, the respondents would ask a more detailed question.

The finding in this part is in accordance with Yahya (2010) and Lotfollahi & Eslami-Rasekh’s (2011) study where the major amount of condolence expression in Persian and Iranian community was related to utterances of seeking absolution from God and expression of sympathy.

In addition to questions about the degree of familiarity and power, the next part covers discussions on how power and distance between a condoler and a bereaved influence the choice of condolences strategy used by Indonesian adolescents.

B. *The effect of power and distance*

Relating to power and distance, some strategies like seeking absolution from God, expression of sympathy and future-oriented remark has low risk to threat the bereaves face needs. As a result, these strategies can be used to express condolences

in all types of relationships. The excerpt below consists of the combination of three condolences strategies: seeking absolution from God, expression of sympathy, and future-oriented remarks.

"Inalillahi wa innailahi rajiun... turut berduka cita. Semoga keluarga diberi ketabahan."

"Inalillahi wa innailahi rajiun... I am sorry to hear about your loss. I hope your family can get through this."

Seeking absolution from God is the most frequently used condolences strategy in this study. Moreover, this strategy is widely used in situation 1 (equal power, close distance) and 3 (higher power, close distance) which illustrate a close relationship even though there is a difference in term of power between the respondent and the bereaved as can be seen in Table I. The use of the religious expression *"Inalillahi wa innailahi rajiun"* (Indeed, to God we belong and to God we shall return) dominates the use of this strategy. In addition, it is also dominated by similar expression in Indonesian language such as, *"Semoga amal ibadahnya di terima."* (May God bless him/her).

The second frequently used strategy was an expression of sympathy. According to Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2015), people tend to include expression of sympathy in almost every condolence comment. Thus, this strategy is considered as a 'core' of condolence speech act. Relating to FTAs, expression of sympathy is one of the strategies that is considered to have a small risk to threaten the bereaved's face, hence it is called lower-risk strategies (Williams, 2006). This statement is supported by the large number of respondents who use the strategy in situations 2, 4, and 6. These three situations illustrate distant relationships between one and another.

The future-oriented remark was the third most dominant strategy used by adolescence to express their condolences. This strategy is used frequently in situation 6 since it requires respondents to give condolences to younger neighbors who lost one of her or his parents. Therefore, the respondents intensified the use of this strategy to condole the young bereaved even though they did not have a close relationship. An example is shown below:

"Sayang, ibu kamu uda gak sakit lagi, dia uda bahagia di Surga. Kamu semangat ya."

"Sweetie, your mother is no longer in pain. She is happy now in heaven. Have courage."

Offering assistance was commonly used in situation 1 and 5 where respondents had a close relationship and equal or higher power with the bereaved. Moreover, situation 1 and 5 are related to the friendship domain, which frequently uses informal language variety. Nonetheless, in situations 2 and 4 where the relationship between individuals is distant, some adolescents were still willing to offer help and support to the bereaved. In a country that has a collectivistic culture like Indonesia, offering help can be seen as an attempt to assure bereaved that they still have someone to rely on and help them to relieve the sorrow:

"... Kamu tau aku akan selalu ada untuk mu jadi jangan sungkan untuk hubungi aku kapan pun itu."

"...Just letting you know that I will always be there for you, so feel reach me out anytime."

Expression of concern indicates that people are showing care for the well-being of the bereaved family. It is interesting to note that in the situation 1 respondents use expression of concern more often than in other given situations. However, this strategy has lower frequency than previous strategies that has been discussed. The example of expressing concern strategy can be seen in underlined clause below:

"Turut berduka cita ya, kamu kuat kan?"

"I'm sorry for your loss. You are strong enough, right?"

In related question strategy, the most common topic to ask about was how a person passed away. According to Williams (2006), this strategy has the highest risk to threatening others' faces since it requires the bereaved to give more specific and very personal information about the deceased. In situation 2, where the powers are equal but the relationship is quite distant, the respondents have the courage to ask the bereaved how his or her mother passed away. It can be presumed that the respondent might not familiar with bereaved's family background. Therefore, in order to get closer and become more empathetic, they would choose this strategy even though both faces might get threatened.

"Inalillahi wa innailahi rajiun. Kalau boleh tahu, kronologinya gimana?"

"Inalillahi wa innailahi rajiun. If I may ask, how did it happen?"

Finally, the least used strategy was the acknowledgement of death. This strategy consists of interjections like "Ya Tuhan" or "Oh, my God." In Wakefield and Itakura's (2017) study, acknowledgment of the death becomes the most common response from a native-English speaker. They chose an expression of sorrow using the word "Sorry" or "Oh no." By contrast, acknowledging the death became the least strategy used by Indonesian people.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study was able to reveal seven condolences strategies that in line with Elwood (2004)'s categorization. Seeking absolution from God and expression of sympathy appears as the dominant strategy used by the respondents with 27.3% and 26.9% occurrences respectively, followed by future-oriented remarks (18.1%), offer of assistance (12.3%), expression of concern (7.5%), related question (6.6%), and acknowledgment of the death (1.3%). This finding indicated that respondents tend to use those dominant strategies because it is attributed to their religious beliefs. Present research highlights the great effect of the religion and collectivistic values on adolescents.

The effect of both power and distance in the choice of condolences strategies shows that variation in strategies of condolence expression appears to be motivated by the factors of the relationship. When the power is almost equal and both individuals are familiar with each other, adolescents would choose higher-risk strategies. However, when power is unequal and relationships are distant, the adolescent would use three core

strategies namely 'seeking absolution from God', 'expression of sympathy', and 'future-oriented remarks'. The findings of present study indicated that Indonesian adolescents were fully aware of power and distance differences between themselves and the bereaved.

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