Proceeding Paper

Analysis of Speech Acts in COVID-19-Related Facebook Comments [†]

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Abstract: As one of the most popular social networking sites, people use Facebook to get the latest information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by this trend and the motivation to address the gap in studies on speech acts on Facebook, we sought to examine Facebook users' comments about COVID-19 by identifying the speech acts used to communicate users' thoughts in their comments. These were direct comments posted in response to COVID-19-related posts uploaded by the Malaysian National Security Council on their official Facebook account. Our analysis revealed that five speech acts were used to communicate specific purposes intended for two groups of recipients: the government and citizens.

Keywords: pragmatic; speech act; Facebook

1. Introduction

Starting at the end of 2019, the world was inundated with the sudden wave of the COVID-19 virus, which negatively affected people in many aspects of life. Despite that, the Internet use was increasing as technology facilitated online teaching and learning, work-from-home practices, online shopping and online communication [1–4]. Apart from these activities, the pandemic has contributed to the increase in the use of social media among Internet users such as Facebook, Instagram, Line, WhatsApp and YouTube for at least half an hour to three hours daily [5]. Indeed, social media has become an essential medium for obtaining and sharing COVID-19 information [5,6]. However, this has led to a more serious issue when social media have propagated misinformation, rumors and theories of conspiracy about the virus in the virtual world [7,8]. Although the validity of such information cannot be substantiated, there are individuals who continue to circulate the information despite not trusting its truth [9]. Looking at the adverse impact of unverified information being spread across social media, the present study was conducted to examine the content of online posts uploaded by Internet users in response to COVID-19 information. Specifically, we aimed to address these two research questions: (1) What were said by Internet users in their comments about COVID-l9? (2) Who were these comments addressed to? These research questions were addressed from the speech act perspective.

2. Types of Speech Acts

A typical interaction usually involves a speaker, a hearer and an utterance that is associated with various types of acts. These acts are referred to as speech acts, the minimal units of linguistic communication intended to convey the specific functions or intentions of the speaker [10,11]. Ref. [12] distinguishes speech acts as consisting of the trichotomy of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary act refers to the production of an utterance, illocutionary act is the intended act done through an utterance which can be a promise, request, suggestion and many more, and perlocutionary act is associated with the causal relation between an utterance and its causal effect on the hearer. According

to [13], a speaker who speaks a language is already performing a speech act; thus, all linguistic communication is hypothesized to involve linguistic acts. He challenged Austin's illocutionary act by classifying it as:

1. Assertives–An act that makes a hearer form or attend to the belief that the speaker is committed to a certain belief (e.g., prediction, notification, confession, denial).
2. Directives–An act that gets a hearer to do things through requests for action and requests for information (e.g., command, suggestion, question).
3. Commissives–An act that commits a speaker to a future action (e.g., promise).
4. Expressives–An act that expresses feelings toward a hearer.
5. Declaratives–An act that brings about effects of immediate changes in an institutional state of affairs. It usually carries elaborate extra-linguistic institutions.

A further distinction of speech acts is offered by [14] who distinguishes declarative speech acts as effectives and verdictives.

6. Effectives–An act that is meant to change an institutional state of affairs.
7. Verdictives–An act that determines what is to be the case within the institution.

3. Speech Acts on Social Networking Sites

Internet users communicate virtually using numerous social networking sites and applications that involve various speech acts that are interesting to be researched. Studies on text messages posted by Facebook users in their personal accounts or group accounts show that they were composed using various speech acts. Most of these studies sourced their data from Facebook users' status updates [15–20] and only a couple of studies analyzed speech acts in users' comments [15,21]. Of these seven studies, four selected status updates and comments that were narrowly focused, namely, university-related topics [18], apostasy [19], politics [15] and expressives [16]. Except for two studies, analyses of the five studies were based on Searle's speech acts. For the studies based on [13] typology of speech acts, they commonly found that expressive, assertive, directive speech acts were more frequently employed than others. Commissive speech acts were similarly found to be the least frequent in Facebook users' posts.

These studies have shown that texts posted by Internet users in or through their Facebook accounts reflect the speech acts commonly found in face-to-face interactions. However, most of the studies collected their data from Facebook users' status updates, although Facebook users can also write their posts in other ways (e.g., write comments in response to other Facebook users' posts and comments). Our summary of past studies also indicated that the online posts analyzed in the studies were random and not written about specific topics or issues. Hence, we aimed to examine Facebook users' online posts, particularly their comments toward posts about COVID-19 uploaded to a government agency's official Facebook page.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Data Sampling

The study corpus consisted of 555 Facebook comments collected using the purposive sampling method. They were posted in response to daily reports of COVID-19 cases on the Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council in July and August 2021. The Malaysian National Security Council is a government agency responsible for the management and coordination of security-related policies, such as safety issues related to COVID-19 [22]. The agency fully utilizes its Facebook page by posting current updates about the pandemic on its social network. The agency's Facebook page was selected as the basis for our corpus, as it played an active role in sharing essential information with the public on a daily basis and the information shared received direct feedback from its 1.1 million followers. The comments recruited as our research sample were those written in response to the Malaysian National Security Council's Facebook posts in July and August 2021. We selected these two months because SOP relaxation was administered by the

Malaysian government after a series of movement control orders were enforced in the country. Many feared that the ease of SOP could exacerbate the spread of COVID-19. Data were selected based on the main inclusion criterion–each comment was sent as a direct response to the Malaysian National Security Council's Facebook posts. Comments were otherwise excluded if they were sent to another comment (referred to as indirect comments in this study) and contained statements that were irrelevant to the daily reports. Every comment was collected using the copy-paste method in a .doc file. There were originally 570 comments recruited into the corpus; however, 15 were irrelevant to the Facebook posts. All in all, there were 555 direct comments that were written in English and Malay languages, 32 and 523 comments, respectively.

4.2. Data Codification

We coded the data in several rounds by addressing one question at a time using ATLAS.ti version 22 as our main coding software. This software which was developed by Thomas Muhr and assisted by Jörg Hecker, can be directly downloaded from the website: https://atlasti.com/. The main advantage of using ATLAS.ti as a tool for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) is that it eases data management and data retrieval compared to performing manual data analysis. Nonetheless, our primary role in identifying the meanings and determining and applying the codes to the data was not substituted by the software because it only functioned as a tool to support our analysis process [23]. Both researchers were involved in the coding process, primarily to identify the types of speech acts in the comments, guided by the analytical framework developed for this study, adapted from [24]. The analytical framework used in this study is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Framework of speech act analysis.

Speech Act	Speech Act Properties
Assertive	Statements of fact, getting the viewer to form or attend a belief
Directive	The sender uses this to get the receiver to do something
Commissive	The sender commits himself to do something
Expressive	Sender expresses feeling toward (though not necessarily about) the receiver
Effective	To change an institutional state of affairs
Verdictive	To determine what is the case in an institution
Quotation	The message is not originally produced by the sender

5. Results

5.1. Frequency of Speech Acts in Facebook Comments

The following chart delineates the frequency of five types of speech acts that occurred in the Facebook comments to the daily statistics about COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, as reported on the official Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security Council. Assertives, expressives and directives were the most frequent speech acts employed by the Facebook users, while the other two speech acts—commissives and quotations—were found to account for only one per cent each in the comments. Figure 1 shows the speech act distribution found in the study.
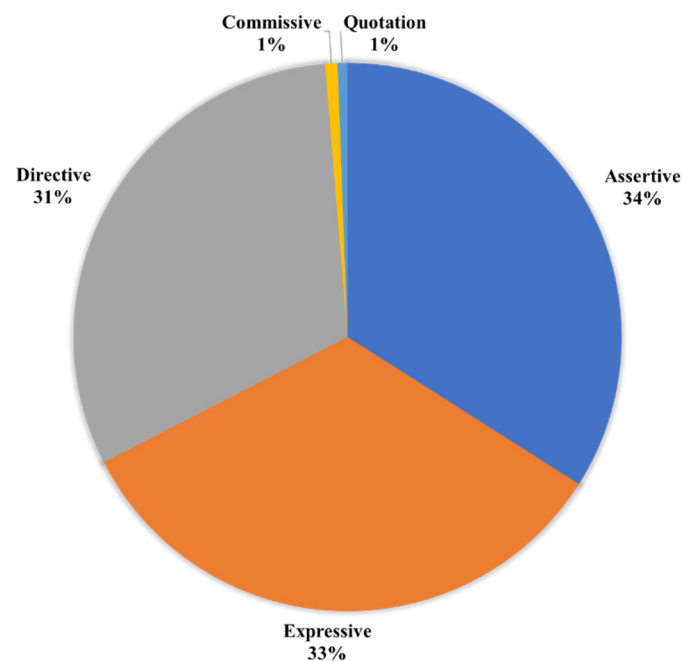
Figure 1. Frequency of speech acts in Facebook comments.

5.2. Assertive Speech Act

Assertive speech acts (34%) were the most frequently employed speech acts by Facebook users to write comments. Based on our findings, there were four ways in which this speech act was used in the comments. The four functions of assertive speech acts are summarized as follows:

1. To make statements about the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme. 16 juta daripada 60+-juta jumlah dos. (English translation: 16 million out of 60+-million number of doses.)
2. To share information obtained from other sources. Semalam saya ada mendengar penerangan yang sangat jelas dan padu daripada Pakar Virologi yang berpengalaman lebih 30 tahun, Dr [name] mengenai COVID-19 dan kaedah menanganinya. (English translation: Yesterday I listened to a very clear and comprehensive explanation from an expert in virology with more than 30 years of experience, Dr [name], related to COVID-19 and ways to combat it.)
3. To make statements about new cases related to the COVID-19. Mti msih lbih dr 200 ye (English translation: There are still more than 200 deaths) To assert controversial remarks about the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme saya rasa tembak air, takkan makin banyak vaksin makin banyak case (English translation: I think (they) injected plain water, how come with more (people) vaccinated there are more cases).

5.3. Expressive Speech Act

The second most frequent speech act in our corpus was the expressive speech act (33%). Because this speech act is performed by speakers to express their emotions, we found that the Facebook users in our corpus used the expressive speech act to convey a range of emotions, from positive to negative, which were triggered by the alarming rate of COVID-19 infection. Thus, the expressive speech acts in the Facebook comments were classified according to the following five functions:

1. To express shock.
   OMG: the death rate
2. To express worry and sadness.

Dua bulan ku duk umah dah,makin meningkat kes harian . . . aaahhhh ku sedih (English translation: I stayed at home for two months, daily cases are increasing . . . aaahhhh I am sad)

3. To express frustration and anger.
   Begini kawal keselamatan negara! Mengecewakan! (English translation: Is this how to control the country's safety! Frustrating!)
4. To express sarcasm and skepticism.
   Terbaik..makin ramai di vaksin makin naik kes.pelik bin ajaib. (English translation: Excellent..more are vaccinated there are more cases, utterly weird.)
5. To express hope.
   Rabbi yassir wala tu'assir rabbi tammim bil khair Ya Allah permudahkanlah jangan dipersulitkan dan Kau akhirkanlah dengan kebaikan. (English translation: Oh Allah, make this task easy and do not make it difficult. Oh, Allah! Make it end well.)

5.4. Directive Speech Act

Of the speech acts found in our corpus, 31% were composed of directive speech acts. For this speech act, we identified two target recipients of the directives in our corpus, i.e., the government and the public (fellow Facebook users and fellow Malaysians). When the speech acts were directed at the government, their functions were to advise the government about dissemination of COVID-19-related information, to advise the government about The National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme, to advise the government to adapt COVID-19 management of other countries, to advise the government to enforce a stricter law on the movement control order and to request relaxation on the movement control order. Through this speech act and its specific functions, Facebook users appeared to reflect a negative attitude toward the government's efforts to curb the proliferation of the virus across the country. Therefore, their directive speech acts were most probably motivated by their intention to protect society for collective well-being. Another function of the directive speech act was to give advice to their fellow Malaysians. In contrast to the directive speech acts intended for the government, which were realized in their comments due to their dissatisfaction with the government's efforts, Facebook users who employed directive speech acts in their messages for fellow Malaysians did so because they were concerned about each other's well-being.

1. To advise the government about the dissemination of COVID-19-related information.
   Pls publish these info daily instead of the usual one from MOH.
2. To advise the government about the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme.
   Suntik je lah vaksin Dari umah ke rumah . . . mcm banci penduduk . . . jd kurangla risiko jangkitan semasa mengambil vaksin (English translation: Just administer home to home vaccination . . . like population census . . . so, lesser risk of infection while getting vaccinated)
3. To advise the government to adapt COVID-19 management to other countries.
   apakata mkn hantar mana2 menteri pergi wuhan n belajar handle covid case. (English translation: Why not mkn deploy any ministers to wuhan and learn how to handle covid cases.)
4. To advise the government to enforce a stricter law on the movement control order.
   minta kerajaan serta MKN lockdown semua sektor untuk 2 minggu supaya kes turun serta vaksin dipercepatkan . . . Takkan nak tunggu makin teruk . . . (English translation: hope that the government and MKN lockdown all sectors for 2 weeks so that new cases will decrease and vaccination can be sped up . . . we should not wait until it gets worse. . .)
5. To request the government for relaxation of the movement control order.
   MKN boleh dah kot buka sektor bekerja sendiri,sebagai contoh tukang persendirian,dah dekat 3 bulan projek rumah org tak siap..kesian dekat tuan rumah bersama tukang persendirian. (English translation: Perhaps MKN could now re-open self-employed

sector like builder, nearly 3 months housing project was left incomplete pity the house owners and the builders.)
6.   To advise fellow Malaysian citizens about their personal well-being.
      Terus jaga SOP, keluar bila perlu shj. #stayathome (English translation: Keep abiding by the SOP, go out only when necessary. #stayathome)

5.5. Commissive and Quotation Speech Acts

Besides the three very frequently occurring speech acts, our corpus also had instances of commissive and quotation speech acts, which occurred at a much lower frequency than those three. The commissive speech act was often used to warn the government out of their disappointment with the increasing number of COVID-19 cases.

7.   Aku tak maw mngundi da smpai bila2 . . . (English translation: I'm not going to vote ever. . .)

As for the quotation speech act, the quotations were adopted from the widely used tagline derived from the Malaysian government's campaign to increase awareness among Malaysians about the importance of safeguarding themselves and their loved ones against the COVID-19.

8.   #stayathome

5.6. Target Recipients of the Speech Acts

Interestingly, we found that the comments posted by the users were intended for two groups of recipients. One of the target recipients was the government, which formed the large majority of the recipients, while the other was fellow citizens. When the speech acts were directed at the government, it was obvious that the users blamed the government for the perceived failure of COVID-19 management. Through the speech acts, blaming was expressed overtly by stating the recipient as the government, "kerajaan" in general or as a specific organization, "Majlis Keselamatan Negara" (English equivalent: National Security Council). In some cases, the organization was mentioned in an abbreviated form, such as "KKM," which stands for Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia (English equivalent: Malaysian Ministry of Health). There were also cases in which the government or its related organizations were not mentioned, but through a closer scrutiny of the speech acts, we could understand that the users were trying to blame the government for the seemingly weak government enforcement of the movement control order.

When the comments were targeted at fellow citizens, the terms of address used were 'guys', 'korang' (English equivalent: you), 'kita' (English equivalent: we), 'sesiapa' (English equivalent: anyone) and 'semua' (English equivalent: all of you), which were meant for any public in general. The use of 'kita' (English equivalent: we) indicates solidarity among Facebook users, especially in coping with the pandemic. There was an instance that addressed the recipients very specifically, "ibu mengandung," to address expecting or pregnant mothers. Other than these, the target recipients were embedded in the speech acts. In other words, they were not clearly addressed but could be identified through a close examination of the comments.

Although a large part of the blaming was directed at the government, there was still a small number of users who blamed their fellow citizens and attributed the reason for the spike in COVID-19 cases to their faults. These people were specifically addressed in the comments as "Pembawa virus senyap" (English translation: Silent virus carriers), "Cluster COVID Perhimpunan Baju Hitam" (English translation: COVID Cluster of the Black Shirt Assembly) and "kluster raya" (English translation: the raya cluster)–raya refers to the Eid al-Fitr, a festival celebrated by Muslims after the fasting month of Ramadhan.

6. Discussion

The study sought to examine what Facebook users do through their comments on the COVID-19 report posted on the official Facebook page of the Malaysian National Security

Council. Our analysis revealed that the users communicated their intent in various ways, which can be organized in different types of speech acts. The three most frequent types of speech acts through which the users communicated their intent in a textual form were assertive, expressive and directive. When applied in online communication, specifically one that transpires via social media such as Facebook, an assertive speech act is employed by a user to state a belief regardless of its truth [17]. Through our findings, this speech act was intended to state facts and opinions regarding the COVID-19 specifically about the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme and statistics of new COVID-19 cases, vaccinated individuals and deaths. When these statements were posted on Facebook, especially those that lacked validity, it suggested that Facebook is also utilized as a medium to communicate one's personal assumptions and rumors with others in a virtual form. Social media provide an open platform for Internet users to share news, stories, personal experiences and viewpoints [25]; therefore, people can simply post unverified statements and information that can be easily circulated by others using the same or different platforms. Expressive speech acts are realized by Facebook users to express their psychological states on the online platform [17]. Our study showed that users expressed a variety of positive and negative emotions through expressive speech acts. The platform was used to convey their emotions, which were affected by the COVID-19. Furthermore, Facebook is utilized as a means to express one's positive and negative emotions, as it is considered a more appropriate medium to do so compared to other social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram [26]. As for the directive speech act, our study found that the advice, commands, suggestions and requests were addressed to the Malaysian government and Malaysian citizens. By employing directive speech acts in their comments, the users seemed to exhibit a certain level of personal knowledge about COVID-19 and proper or practical ways to handle the issue to the two addressees. Because everyone had dealt and lived with COVID-19 for more than a year, through the speech acts, these users showed that they were experienced and well informed about COVID-19 management implemented in the country and other foreign countries. Furthermore, Malaysians were already taking precautions on their own, even before the movement control order was enforced nationwide [27]. Addressing the second research question, our analysis revealed that the comments were intended for two groups of recipients, i.e., the Malaysian government and Malaysian citizens. In their comments, the Facebook users also appeared to blame these two addressees, rather than themselves, if there was yet another alarming COVID-19 outbreak in the community due to the loopholes in the movement control order. The pandemic, which had continued for many years, triggered fear among people. Thus, it is a natural reaction to first ascribe the fault to others instead of to oneself. In other cases, people even blamed citizens of other countries and international travelers for COVID-19 upsurges [28,29]. Users might perceive themselves as self-disciplined and law-abiding, but blaming others as the causes of any COVID-19 pandemic reflects collectivity and solidarity with the Malaysian community to fight against selfless, individualistic people [29].

7. Conclusions

The present study has attempted to scrutinize Facebook users' comments sent in response to daily reports of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia uploaded by the Malaysian National Security Council on its official Facebook page, while the country was undergoing one of the phases of movement control order. Through the study, Facebook users were seen to employ at least five types of speech acts–assertive, expressive, directive, commissive and quotation. We learned that the Facebook users had a specific target audience to address their comments to and these were stated either in a covert or overt form. Although our study did attempt to fill the gap based on past studies conducted in a similar context, there are several limitations that should be addressed by future studies. First, the study collected comments that were mostly written in the Malay language and only a small number of comments posted in English. We suggest that a comparative study be conducted on online speech acts realized in these two languages. Second, the study only focused on

the functions of each speech act without examining the linguistic realization of the speech acts, which should be considered by future studies. Third, the study was mostly reported in a qualitative form, with only a little report of the quantitative findings. Hence, future studies are recommended to include quantitative findings, such as statistically significant differences in the data. Online communication has become even more frequent since the development of more advanced technology. Considering this trend, more studies on speech acts in online communication should be conducted, as it is a blend of written and spoken communication that could produce new themes or sub-themes under the existing speech acts.

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