

THE LANGUAGE OF PARENTING: REVEALING THE USAGE OF CONTROL ACTS IN *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS*

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Abstract: In paternal parenting, compared to the mother, the father tends to use controlling language that provokes conversation, such as WH questions and requests for clarification. Controlling language (control acts) is an attempt to generate a change in the actions of others. Through a pragmatic approach, this qualitative study explores the strategy, pattern, and politeness of controlling language through a paternal parenting perspective. The present study used the theory of controlling language by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1990), direct or indirect speech acts by Searle (1971), and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987). The data in this study are the directive utterances in the film *The Pursuit of Happiness*. These data were collected through content analysis through listening and note-taking technique and analyzed using Spradley (2016). The study found 117 directive speech act data. From the data, order/command of control acts was the dominant act with 56 data. Besides, the most politeness strategy used was positive politeness. The study's finding suggests that all fathers pay more attention to parenting their children because they play a vital role in children's cognitive development. Moreover, in Indonesian society, patriarchy prevails, where fathers act as breadwinners and mothers nurture and educate children at home.

Keywords: Controlling language, Paternal Parenting, Politeness, The Pursuit of Happiness

INTRODUCTION

Various aspects of parenting are known to be fundamental precursors that influence children's future cognitive development. Children's early experiences with caregivers are believed to influence brain development (Bos, 2009). One vital aspect of parent-children interaction is the language aspect because language cannot be separated from everyday communication, from both mother's and father's perspectives. Language often functions as a means to educate and direct the children. However, research on the influence of language use in parenting primarily focuses only on mother-child interactions with little or no father involvement (Harewood et al., 2017).

In order to describe the phenomenon of parenting language, knowledge about understanding the intentions, assumptions, goals, and expected responses is required. In

linguistics, the concept of understanding such language is called pragmatics. According to Yule (2006), by studying pragmatics, one can talk about the meanings intended by other people, their assumptions, their goals or objectives, and the kinds of actions they take when they speak. In addition, Yule (2006) noted that pragmatics examines the extent of information conveyed beyond literal meaning in communication.

In parent-children interaction, parent tends to use controlling language. Controlling language or control acts is an attempt to change the interlocutor's actions. It refers to any movement that can be interpreted by either the speaker or listener to influence the behavior of the recipient or listener (Ervin-Tripp et al., 1990). In pragmatics, it is generally referred to as directive speech acts. According to Searle (1976), a directive speech act is an utterance

addressed to the interlocutor to "make him, or her do something", for example, ordering, requesting, begging, advising, and recommending.

Besides focusing on using control acts, this study also examines the principle of politeness in using these control acts. Politeness discovers a friendly attitude and aims to maintain harmony with the speech partner. In raising children, parents must be careful in choosing language expressions while trying to control the children, assuming the children know anything less than the parents. Brown & Levinson (1987) view politeness as a "face" concept. They represent the face as one's identity or reputation, which can be lost, maintained, or enhanced.

Four types of politeness are introduced: (1) On Record-Baldly Politeness, this politeness strategy is 'face-threatening' since it contains imperatives. It only gives the speech partner a few choices even though it still carries out the speaker's orders. This strategy is often used by people who have high authority, such as experts or supervisors, to their subordinates. (2) Politeness On Record-with Positive Politeness, this strategy is 'face-saving' for the hearer because it promotes solidarity and equality. This method can attract the attention of the speech partner so that the speaker understands the interests, desires, and needs of the speech partner. (3) Politeness On Record-with Negative Politeness, this strategy reduces 'face' threats by showing the distance between the other person and avoiding interference with each other's territory. The main characteristic of this politeness is when the speaker seems indebted to the speech partner and respects him or her very much. (4) Off Record, it is usually conveyed indirectly. This strategy aims to threaten the 'face' of the speech partner when the speaker does not want to be responsible for his actions, so the speech partner needs to interpret the utterance's meaning. The main characteristic of this strategy is that it is ambiguous, too general, and not specific.

Film *The Pursuit of Happyness* was chosen as the data source of the study because it raised the theme of parenting relationships by fathers. The current study is conducted because the film is believed to be one of the strong representations of people's lives. In addition, parenting representations in films

tend to accentuate dialogue. In addition, the use of language in films has specific characteristics, such as metaphors, wordplays, and certain pronouns that differ from other language uses (Salih & Mohammed, 2020). Thus, the parenting pattern of language use in the dialogue within the scene is interesting to study.

Furthermore, the researcher chose this film because it was produced based on the true story of a very inspiring character named Chris Gardner, played by Will Smith. The film, released in 2006, tells the story of a medical device seller who goes bankrupt and is abandoned by his wife but still has to raise his son, Christopher (played by Jaden Smith), with all his shortcomings.

This study focuses on the linguistic aspect of parenting behavior from a paternal perspective. Many studies have been conducted on directive speech acts; they have generally succeeded in finding their form and function. Surono et al. (2019) looked for directive speech types used by six kindergarten teachers in Yogyakarta and two others outside the city for parenting their students. The result demonstrated that guiding was the most common type used by the teachers. Pratiwi & Laila (2020) discussed the use of speech acts in parenting styles toward their children's self-esteem in the film *Bad Moms*. The result showed that using directive utterances in an authoritative parenting style is intended to make the children independent. Rahayu (2020) analyzed the types and functions of speech acts in the recorded mother's conversation with her child for a month. She argued that the dominant finding was assertive/representative to state and explain certain things. Sari et al. (2022) analyzed the directive speech act used by the teacher in forming the character of Pancasila to students using an in-depth interview method, and the result showed that ordering is the most common type since it makes the expression more apparent without further do. Santoso & Sugiharto (2022) identified the use of directive speech acts by ten teachers during distance learning in Batang District Central Java elementary school students. The result demonstrated that expressions of command are often used to give more straightforward and precise directions.

In addition, research on politeness has also been carried out a lot. Murphy & Felice

(2019) studied the politeness in the use and non-use of *please* in American and British requests from two corpora, with 675 requests annotated manually. They found that using *please* became a marker of conventional politeness in British English but of asymmetry relationship in American English. Sapitri et al. (2020) explored Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies by illustrating the patterns developed at the strength-weakness. They suggested that Brown and Levinson's theory is still used over the past three decades. Nurmalasari et al. (2021) studied the use of non-verbal communication regarding Brown & Levinson's theory among lecturers and students in Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo during English class. The result showed politeness is crucial to maintaining relations and creating a comfortable environment. Erlinda (2019) identified positive politeness strategies in EFL Classroom interaction. She found that age differences, power, position, and the limitation of linguistic ability contribute to the use of positive politeness.

This study elaborates on the theories of Ervin-Tripp et al. (1990) and Searle (1976) to reveal the controlling language used. In Arani (2012), following the Ervin-Trip declaration regarding control acts, Searle's definition has been altered to include actions other than request, order, and command. In the revised definition, acts of prohibition, invitation, offer, claim, statement of intent, permission, call and treat are added. After discovering the use of control acts in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*, a discussion of the politeness principle in control acts using the theory from Brown & Levinson (1987) is presented.

METHOD

This study applied a pragmatic approach to the design of qualitative-descriptive. It examined the controlling language used in *The Pursuit of Happyness* to reveal how the language of parenting through the use of controlling language. The theory of controlling language or control acts was proposed by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1990), which was then extended to Searle's theory of speech acts (1971). In addition, this study employed Brown & Levinson (1987) to reveal the politeness attributes of controlling language

usage from the perspective of parental parenting.

The data in this study are audio-visual because they are art objects in the form of videos and sound (Creswell, 2003). Data in this study are directive utterances from the interaction between Chris Gardner, the main character, and his son, Christopher. The data were collected using purposive sampling with adjusted criteria and based on the theory of control acts. These data were collected through content analysis by using listening and note-taking technique. This technique allows complete data collection from the analysis of parenting language in the form of control acts.

It applied an analytical technique introduced by Spradley (2016) with four stages: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and finding cultural themes. The first stage used domain analysis; Ervin-Tripp's speech act was used to sort out controlling language elaborated with directive speech acts by Searle (1971). After obtaining the data, the taxonomy analysis stage was used to separate the politeness principles by Brown & Levinson (1987). The next stage was componential analysis. At this stage, the findings from the domain and taxonomic analysis stages were presented in tabular form to show the relationship. The last stage was finding cultural themes. At this stage, conclusions about dominant data or submissive data were drawn.

FINDINGS

This study focused on the search for control acts contained in the film, *The Pursuit of Happyness* using the combination theory of Ervin-Tripp et al. (1990) and Searle (1971), as well as the politeness principle according to Brown & Levinson (1987). The results of control act analysis in the interaction between the characters of Chris and Christopher in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness* showed 117 directive speech acts. From these findings, there were at least eight control acts: begging/asking, ordering/commanding, forbidding, inviting/persuading, offering, claiming, wanting, and allowing. In addition, all types of politeness principles were used in expressing the control acts. The following describes the findings of control acts data in the interaction between Chris and Christopher in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

	On Record- Baldly Politeness	Politeness On Record- with Positive Politeness	Politeness On Record- with Negative Politeness	Off- Record
Begging/asking	3	31	0	0
Ordering/commanding	21	28	1	6
Prohibiting	3	3	1	0
Inviting/engaging	3	5	0	0
Offering	1	6	0	0
Claiming	0	2	0	0
Expecting	1	0	0	0
Allowing	0	2	0	0

Control acts: begging/requesting.

The expression begging/asking is uttered for the listener to do something according to the speaker's wants. There found 34 forms of control acts in the study. The politeness implemented in this begging/requesting utterance consisted of 31 positive politeness and three expressions for the bald-on record. The following is the analysis example of the findings.

- (a) Hey. You know what today is?
- (b) When? When do...? When do you watch it? After snacks? After your nap?

Example (a) is categorized as a control act of requesting because Chris asks Christopher the day when the conversation occurred. It is conveyed by Chris to ask for Christopher's answer. The datum contains positive politeness because the scene reminds Christopher to play basketball, Christopher's favorite sport. Because politeness makes Christopher happy, it belongs to positive politeness.

Similar to example (a), example (b) is an expression used to ask for Christopher's answer about his son's daycare activities. The datum contains politeness bald-on record, which means a threat to Christopher's face because Chris directly demands an explanation as to why a small child wants to know about the adult TV show entitled Bonanza. In the context

of data (b), Christopher's face is threatened, so he looks guilty and uncomfortable.

Control acts: ordering/commanding.

Ordering/commanding signifies the speaker's intention for the listener to interpret his/her utterance as a reason to act, even as a sufficient reason to act. The form of control acts is found in 56 data. The politeness strategies implemented in this ordering/commanding utterance consist of 21 data for bald-on-record politeness, 28 data for positive politeness, one datum for negative politeness, and 6 data for off-record politeness. The following are examples of the findings.

- (a) Give me a kiss.
- (b) Hey, uh, put your plate in the sink.
- (c) All right. Okay. All right, go ahead.
- (d) Hey... What did I say?

Excerpt (a) contains positive politeness based on the context of the interaction where Chris tells Christopher to give a kiss to show affection so that he feels comfortable.

Meanwhile, excerpt (b) contains bald-on-record politeness, which means there is a threat to Christopher's face because Chris directly tells him to clean up his plate. In the context of excerpt (b), Christopher's face is threatened, and he looks uncomfortable because, in this scene, Chris and his wife argue about family problems.

Furthermore, excerpt (c) tells the story when Chris orders Christopher not to play basketball day and night because Chris thinks that he will not succeed in basketball. Those

remarks contain negative politeness because, in that scene, Chris feels guilty, so he tries to break the ice because Christopher looks disappointed with Chris's words.

The last example of analysis, excerpt (d), tells the story when Chris sees the thief of his scanner and wants to chase him. Chris tells Christopher not to follow him, but Christopher still goes after his father. The phrase contains an off-record politeness strategy as Chris asks Christopher a rhetorical question to order Christopher to stay in his place.

Control acts: prohibiting.

Prohibition is a condition for the listener not to do something. There are seven forms of control acts found which belong to this category. The politeness strategy implemented in this forbidding speech consists of 3 bald-on-record politeness, three positive politeness, and one negative politeness. The followings are examples.

- (a) No, no. Stay right here.
- (b) Hey. Don't ever let somebody tell you... you can't do something. Not even me. All right?

Excerpt (a) contains a bald-on record strategy based on the context, where Chris tries to ban Christopher from following him because he sees a homeless person stealing his device and wants to take it back.

Furthermore, excerpt (b) tells the moment Chris encourages Christopher to never think about other people's words that are meant to discourage him. The ban contains positive politeness that Chris is directly concerned about Christopher's interest and desire to become a professional basketball player. In excerpt (b), Christopher's face becomes calmer, making him comfortable.

Control acts: inviting/engaging.

Inviting can be categorized as an extension of begging or request. There found eight forms of control acts. The politeness strategies implemented in the inviting/engaging speech acts consist of 3 bald-on records of politeness and five positive politeness. The following are examples of the findings.

- (a) Let's get ready for bed.

- (b) We gotta find someplace safe.

Excerpt (a) contains a bald-on record politeness strategy based on the context, where Chris invites Christopher to get ready for bed. At the moment, Christopher's face is threatened, and he looks uncomfortable because Chris and his wife are arguing about family problems.

Excerpt (b) contains a positive politeness strategy because, in this scene, Chris shows closeness and solidarity with Christopher by inviting him to imagine a trip to the time of the dinosaurs.

Control acts: offering.

An offering is a common word in the everyday language used to present a thing (to offer someone a drink, money, or favor) or to express someone's willingness or intention to do something or leave it. There are eight forms of control acts that belong to this category. Control acts are all delivered literally. The politeness strategy implemented in the speech consists of 1 bald-on record and six positive politeness strategies. The following are examples of the findings.

- (a) How about that? Wanna do that?
- (b) Which one? You like that one?

Excerpt (a) contains the bald-on record strategy. Based on the context, Chris offers Christopher to sell a bone density scanner. In this scene, Christopher feels disappointed with Chris's invitation, so his face is threatened.

Meanwhile, excerpt (b) contains positive politeness because Chris tries to understand what Christopher wants and needs by offering snacks.

Control acts: claiming

Claiming is the speech act of asking or demanding recognition of a fact that a person, an organization, an association, or a state has the right to own or have the right to something. The form of control acts can be found in 2 data. The politeness implemented in this utterance consists of positive politeness. The following excerpts are the examples of the findings.

- (a) You gotta close your eyes.
- (b) That's an adult word to show anger and, um... other things.

Excerpt (a) contains positive politeness based on the interaction context where Chris wants to show how his scanner works which also functions as a time machine, by claiming that when Christopher closes his eyes, the scanner will work. In this interaction, Christopher feels comfortable with Chris' statement because they are playing with their imaginations.

Excerpt (b) happens when Chris explains the use of the word f*ck to Christopher. He claims that adults can only use the word to express anger and other similar emotions. The explanation is conveyed with positive politeness so that Christopher understands quickly and intends not to say those words.

Control acts: expecting.

Expecting is an expression of the speaker's desire or want to expect it to come true. There is only 1 form of control act, which contains bald-on-record politeness. The following is an example.

Oh, um... I'm gonna need to take you with me this weekend.

The speech is bald on record because Chris expects Christopher to accompany him to sell a bone density scanner on the weekend. However, Christopher feels tired and bored because he is always asked to sell the device.

Control acts: allowing.

Allowing is intended to grant a request for permission or to remove some previous restriction on the action. There are two control acts in the scene. The politeness implemented in this act is positive politeness. The following is an example.

- (a) Yeah, make a list.
- (b) Sure, man. Why not?

Data (a) contains positive politeness based on the context of the interactions that Chris supports and allows Christopher to make lists of his birthday present. In this interaction, Christopher is excited by Chris' statement.

Excerpt (b) also contains positive politeness. The conversation occurs when Chris allows Christopher's request to play on the playground.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the type or form of control acts most dominantly expressed by the character Chris Gardner to Christopher is command/order. In the father's speech to his son, positive politeness is prominent, while negative politeness is less emphasized in politeness strategies.

The control act of ordering/commanding, which is the dominant finding, reflects the cultural conditions of black Americans, who are known to be synonymous with strict parenting styles. Parents do it to protect children from crime and violence (Elliott & Reid, 2019). Mental strengthening of children is a top priority for the Black American community because, to date, there are still various acts of racism that befall Black people (Anderson et al., 2022). On the one hand, the use of control acts ordering a reflection of black American culture, so it is generally not face-threatening. However, on the other hand, the use of this speech act potentially threatens face because of the limitations children have to understand the language and the surrounding context.

Another important thing is context; Chris has good context awareness. For example, when Chris realizes that his words can threaten Christopher's face, he immediately breaks the ice by uttering positive politeness so that Christopher feels cared for and understood. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to accurately comprehend the contextual circumstances and the child's emotional state in order to determine the appropriate interaction strategy. It aligns with the research that proposes the notion that a style of parenting characterized by parental behaviors that are nurturing, attuned to the child's emotional and physical cues, and in harmony with them can foster a secure attachment between parent and child. (Madigan et al., 2019).

Furthermore, begging/asking for control also becomes a productive control act of father-daughter interaction in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*. In contrast to commanding/commanding, the act of control asking is more likely to be expressed indirectly.

The dominant use of this controlling act in an indirect form reflects Chris' attempts to maintain his relationship with Christopher. As is known, in the film, Chris is told to be in a problematic condition. However, Chris still tries to understand Christopher's feelings by indirectly conveying the act of controlling questions. Parenting experts Faber & King (2017) argue that indirect speech is a great trick to win people's hearts, including children. In addition, they also believe that from a parent's perspective, with indirect speech, parents will not feel hurt when their child refuses. However, direct and indirect affirmation speech acts can express the speaker's feelings and convey the affirmation's meaning (Alfaleh, 2019; Ibraheem, 2018; Maruti, 2022; Sari et al., 2022).

Next, following the control ask indirectly tends to contain positive politeness. It proves that using the act of control by asking indirectly will give a sense of comfort to the child. In other words, the child will not feel pressured or demanded to meet the order of their parents. It corresponds to the results of research that fathers tend to use speeches that provoke conversation, such as WH questions and requests for clarification (Leech, 1983). When the parents use that language, the child will feel comfortable and involved, trained to be strong. Children are considered individuals who can think, consider, and make decisions. Therefore, in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Christopher feels very close to Chris. It is the result of paternal upbringing. Chris cares about Christopher's feelings by paying attention to context, the form of interaction, control act, and strategy politeness. Faber & King (2017) stated that when a child's feeling is not okay, he or she will not be well-behaved.

This study confirms the previous studies that the use of speech acts by parents to children or teachers to students is mainly in the form of directive speech acts. It is reasonable because parents and teachers can guide their children or students. The directive speech act is also used to reduce miscommunication and increase effectiveness in communication. Then this study also agrees that positive politeness,

as in the previous research, is most widely used to communicate with children or students.

The finding concluded that paternal parenting contributes to a child's growth. The mother usually bears childcare because of hereditary cultural influences, and she is more responsive to everyday tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and others, while the father is the protector and supporter (Elvira & Santoso, 2022). Unexpectedly, the father only focuses on making a living, and the mother takes care of the household. That way, the involvement of the father's role in raising children becomes smaller than the mother. Although there are many studies on the effect of parenting on parent-child interaction and child development, most of these studies focus on maternal parenting with little or no consideration of father involvement (Harewood et al., 2017). In building and developing a secure attachment with children, the quality of the mother's relationship is fundamental, but now there is evidence that fathers also play a role in child development, especially in social and communicative skills (Bentenuto & Venuti, 2019). Fathers are essential for developing executive functions in their children, so it is recommended that they be included in parenting research and interventions (Meuwissen & Carlson, 2015). Thus, fathers are necessary, though often underrepresented in family interventions (Wong et al., 2013).

Control acts (Ervin-Tripp et al., 1990) were initially formulated to describe the language used by children to negotiate their interests in interpersonal interactions. Thus, using the term control act in paternal parenting is deemed inappropriate because fathers do not ultimately attempt to control their children, yet they try to understand them. Therefore, since this study focuses on the use of language in parenting contexts, control acts in parenting perspectives may use general terms, parenting linguistics.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the behavior of control acts from the perspective of paternal parenting in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

It suggests that direct order/command is dominantly employed by the father in the scene, reflecting the cultural conditions of black Americans, who are known to be strict in parenting. Also, Christopher primarily uses positive politeness during the conversation with Christopher since it generates a sense of comfort.

This research is expected to contribute to the world of parenting in terms of linguistics.

Thus, parents always consider the context and character of their children before using specific languages, as the research finding implies a connection between linguistics and parenting. Thus, future research may examine the relationship between parents' language form and children's behavior since the language of parenting and children's matter has a significant concern.

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