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**UNDERSTANDING PERSON REFERENCES IN WORKPLACE  
GOSSIP AMONG A GROUP OF MALAY PROFESSIONALS**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the type of person reference used among a group of Malay professionals. Person reference in this context refers to words or phrases used by other interlocutors to address a person in an interaction. Additionally, the person being addressed is physically absent; he/she may or may not be the subject of the discussion and is the third-person being mentioned in the conversation. Interestingly, the choices of person reference in interaction reflect an individual's pragmatic interpretations and sociocultural meanings, which go beyond the literal use of pronouns and address form. The data were collected from a group of Malay speakers, consisting of 25 individuals. Their spoken data were gathered naturally from interactions that occurred at the workplace, in which the issues or matters spoken were classified as gossip. The findings show that the participants highly preferred possessive kin terms as they tended to associate the absent person with the hearer as one of their next kin. Other than next of kin, they also frequently associated the absent person as someone who has a close relationship with the hearer, particularly in the context of gossip. In addition, some strategies proposed in the literature were not adhered to, this was possibly due to the context of gossip they were in. They did consider (i) the characteristics of the referent, (ii) the relationship with the referent, and (iii) the context of the communicative event. Interestingly, no profanity was identified in the data although they were in the context of gossip.

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## 1. Introduction

Linguistically, in a conversation, speakers use pronouns to refer to other people or objects. Pronouns are used to avoid repetition of a mentioned noun or a noun that does not need to be named specifically. In an interaction, pronouns are also referred to as person reference. The selected person reference could have a broader interpretation. According to Enfield (2013), speakers choose to use certain names or kinship terms as a form of person reference because it is a way of relating to another person. It is a direct form of drawing one's attention to an object or subject being talked about, can be expressed both in the form of gestures, i.e., literally pointing to the object or person, and the use of lexical variety. Enfield argues that reference made to a person or an object in a conversation is a matter of selection or choices which makes it as an individual preference. The choices reflect how we know that person in context and allow us to take a specific perspective on them.

The current study is interested in examining the lexical choices of third person reference made by a group of respondents in the context of workplace gossip. Third person reference is defined as the missing or absent person being addressed in such a context. In gossip, it is common that stories are told in a reported speech. Thus, third person reference is used when referring to the absent person who is being the subject of the discussion. It is intriguing to see why certain lexical items are used as they could be motivated by certain pragmatic or sociolinguistic reasons. Studies on person reference have established that person reference is organized in a system that entails both cross-linguistic and culture-specific organizing principles (Stivers et al., 2007). In other words, there are specific principles that are observed across cultures, and there are variations in use across cultures. Understanding the respondents' individual preferences on the use of third-person could enlighten us on the reasons behind the respondents' linguistic preferences.

Since the study is pinned on the context of workplace gossip, there is a need to justify why such a context is chosen. Dores Cruz et al. (2021) provide a broad definition of gossip, which they refer it as communication between humans involving a sender, a receiver, and a target. The target is absent or unaware of the communicated content. In the context of organizations, Mohammad and Vásquez (2015) view gossip as a typical, informal talk that takes place in an organization, is commonly evaluative, and revolves around the absent person. In addition, Kong (2018) confirms that 14% workplace coffee break chat is considered gossip, and about 66% of general conversations among employees at workplace relates to social topics about other colleagues. Therefore, gossips and workplace conversation are inextricable.

The study does not aim to examine the dynamic structure of gossip or the reasons that motivate employees to gossip at workplace. Instead, it is confined within the patterns of the third-person reference used and the possible reasons it is used in such a way. Understanding the patterns and the participants' preferences on third-person reference within this specific context may enlighten us about the participants' linguistic styles and discourse practice at the workplace.

In addition, it may illuminate the possible reasons that ground the participants' linguistic choices related to their ethnic identity, who predominantly are Malays. Thus, the findings of the study not only able to shed light on the patterns of third-person reference used among this group of Malays, but it also helps to add to the literature in the area, particularly within the Malay language and its speakers. In a similar vein, Stivers et al. (2007) point out that empirical studies of person reference in natural

conversation have been limited specifically to the scopes of cross-culture, social structure, and language use.

The following research questions of the study are sought:

- i. What are the lexical variations of third-person reference used by the participants in the context of workplace gossip?
- ii. What are the strategies used by the participants in choosing the third-person reference in interactions?

### **1.1. Literature review**

A pronoun is a word that is used to replace a noun or a noun phrase in a sentence. Personal pronouns are used to refer to the person or people speaking and can be divided into three categories which are the first person (I, we), the second-person (you) and the third-person (he, she, it). The first-person refers to the person speaking, the second person is the person or people being spoken to, and the third-person refers to the person or object being talked about.

#### **1.1.1. Pronouns in Malay language**

Pronouns in Malay language is known as kata ganti diri share some similarities with the ones in English language. There are three forms of personal pronouns namely first-person personal pronouns, such as saya, aku, kami, kita; second-person pronouns, such as awak, kamu, engkau; third-person pronouns, for example ia, dia, beliau, mereka. Personal pronouns in Malay can be divided into subtle or respectful forms like saya, kami and kita and harsh forms like aku and engkau (Nik Safiah et al., 2015).

In the Malay language, a word that refers to the speaker or the person being addressed is not used arbitrarily. In the sociolinguistic context, the use of personal pronouns is closely related to the context, which includes social status, the degree of closeness or relationship, and the title of the conversation of language users involved in the communication (Asmah, 2015). Moain (1989) states three aspects that need to be considered when addressing a person in the Malay language system which are:

- i. the referent's characteristics
- ii. the features of the relationship that the speaker has with the referent, and
- iii. the atmosphere where the interaction happens.

The first aspect is the characteristics of the referent which include whether he/she is a child or an adult, the gender, and the marital status. The second aspect is the relationship between the speaker and the referent. This is reflected in three components which are the role of the referent, his/her age, and the blood relation. The role refers to the social status that the speaker has with the referent, for instance, the post that the person holds at the workplace. The age component may influence the use of kinship terms, although both the referent and the addressee do not have any blood relation. This is where the terms that are supposed to be used within the family circle are used with strangers. This is common among the Malays as they generally address the elderly as makcik (aunt) or atuk (grandpa) although they have no blood ties. The last component is the blood tie which determines the rank of the person in the family. The Malays address their uncles and aunties differently according to their birth rank; for example, mak long or pak long is a reference for the eldest aunt or uncle, and this only happens within the family circle. The

third aspect is the atmosphere where the interaction happens, referring to the context of the communicative event and the level of formality of the situation.

In the Malay culture, politeness is highly emphasized in interaction. Communicating politely to others, using bahasa halus (refined/educated language) in decent tones and attitudes, is a form of expressing respect to others. If speakers do not conform to this principle, they may be considered as being unrefined or ill mannered (Asmah, 1996). Hence, the selection of person reference should reflect a certain level of politeness whereby the use of pronouns, nicknames, name callings, references and the choice of words should not offend a person (Zainon Hamzah & Mat Hasan, 2012). In other words, the use of person pronoun is dependent on the speaker's attachment and social relationship with the hearer. The use of incorrect or inaccurate person references can cause issues and confrontation in communication because it relates to linguistic politeness.

Studies on person reference in the context of Malay language speakers are widely discussed in various aspects and discourse contexts. There are studies that examined pronouns or person reference used in social media such as Yusof (2018) and Aziz (2020) who examined person reference used in WhatsApp and Telegram. Other studies investigated the person reference used within Malay sub-ethnic groups. Susilawati and Asmah (2017) explored the address forms and its system used within the speech community of the Malay Sambas, in which they highlighted that linguistic politeness and social meanings shaped the preferences and the practices of the speakers. Another research focuses on the Jambi Malay community (Rahima, 2021), which investigated the variations of person reference used in greetings, the factors that governed the selection, as well as the sentence patterns.

From the aspect of politeness in language, most scholars discuss person references from the point of view of appropriate and accurate usage. Nik Safiah et al. (2015) for instance, acknowledge the communication patterns that exist between the speaker and the hearer in the context of work. They point out that language users commit errors due to their ignorance of pronouns in Malay, their meanings, and how they are used in formal and informal settings. The inappropriate pronoun patterns may have effects on certain aspects, such as violations of the rules of language use and linguistic etiquette and politeness. In the context of school setting, Hamid and Naidatul (2013) found that the failure of using proper pronouns can jeopardize the harmony of inter-ethnic relations. Thus, the learning of pronouns should not be seen as mastery of grammatical aspects per se, but emphasis should also be given in the function of pronouns as civilized utterances in linguistic politeness.

## **1.2. Variations of person reference**

Person reference can be formulated in a variety of ways. Taken from Stivers et al. (2007), the following examples show an array of formats of person reference. It includes simple first name Laurie, first-name-plus-surname Serena Edwards, title-plus-surname Missus Hallman. Some may include kin terms such as Suzanne's husband, Laurie's dad, and some names come with descriptions such as that guy in the commercials. Schegloff (in Stivers et al., 2007, p. 10) believes that speakers have their own reasons for selecting such name formats as they want to 'do more than just achieve reference to the person'.

In discussing the framework of person reference, Stivers et al. (2007) work has been the main reference in this study, as they discuss in detail the variation of person reference across cultures. They believe that the person reference chosen by language users fall between ‘absolute versus relative frame of reference’. Person reference in the form of names is absolute because names directly convey information about their referent. Names may not directly imply individual characteristics, but they are stable, which means they are connected to any specific communicative intent and are simply used to identify an individual. Stivers et al. (2007) further explain that unlike names, the use of possessed kin terms is relative because the absent person is associated with another person (propositus). When speakers choose this option, they have certain attributes in mind i.e., by connecting the referent to someone else. Similarly, this also applies to person reference where ‘a novel description’ is used such as ‘the girl who wears orange’ or another person being associated with, such as “Roger’s lawyer” (Stivers et al., 2007, p. 17). A summary of person reference is shown in Table 1.

Another way of categorising person reference is by looking at whether it is marked or unmarked. Unmarked form refers to the standard way of calling a person, hence calling a person in an uncommon way is a marked reference. Semantically marked references may have additional semantic specifications, as in ‘the parent’s brother vs. uncle’. In terms of pragmatics, markedness might be determined using an unexpected or atypical form of reference in a specific context, is sensitive to social situational usage, depending on the locally defined contextual expectations.

**Table 1.** Types of person references (Stivers et al., 2007)

Category	Person reference	
Absolute	A person specific name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify an individual- convey information about the referent</li> <li>May/ may not pick out particular attributes of the individual</li> <li>Stable- attributes do not automatically reflect specific communicative intent</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Associate the referent to the propositus</li> </ul>
Relative (having the connection with)	Possessed kin terms ‘My aunt’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A person is identified via kin relation term</li> <li>The referent is associated with some chosen attributes</li> </ul>
	Other triangulation ‘Roger’s lawyer’	
	A novel description ‘the girl who wears orange’	

### 1.3. Preferences in using person reference

Scholars like Sacks and Schegloff (2007) argue that there are reasons why speakers opt for specific person reference in conversation. They proposed ‘minimize-optimize’ strategy whereby when choosing a person reference, speakers commonly decide for two reasons simultaneously, namely minimality and recognition. Minimality refers to a reference formulation that consists only one referring unit. Speakers try to minimize the lexical unit used as ‘giving too much information is costly in two senses: first, it means more effort in the production of an action/ utterance, and second, it means greater likelihood of

distracting or confusing the hearer with information over and above what he/she needs' (Enfield, 2013, p. 438).

Simultaneously, the formulation used by the speaker should also achieve recognition i.e., it should be easily recognized by the hearer. Therefore, in English a person's first name is 'a default format for initial mention of persons'. This is also called 'referring simpliciter', meaning when the speaker uses this formula, he/she directly refers to a person without any special indication or specific reason (Enfield, 2013).

Sacks and Schegloff (2007) also observed that speakers have the tendency to directly relate the participant in the conversation with someone; hence possessive words are used. They further exemplify the possessive used such as 'my sister' (associated with 'me'), 'your husband' (associated with 'you'), 'your wife's colleague' (associated with 'your wife', associated in turn with 'you'), 'her son's classmate' (associated with 'her son', associated in turn with 'her'). This 'associative strategy' is an unmarked form of person reference and is pragmatically dependant, whereby in certain language like English, this is done only when it carries a significant function (Stivers et al., 2007). This strategy is also observed in Tzeltal, the language spoken by the Mayan community of upland Mexico, where the association of kinship terms and fictive kinship are typical (Brown, 2007). Unlike English, this community seems to relate the referent to the participants in the conversation even it does not serve any significant functions.

## **2. Research Methods**

This study is qualitative research that employed a naturalistic approach. The data were obtained via observations so that the participants' verbal production could be gathered in their actual setting. A naturalistic approach is an approach that aims to understand a phenomenon in a context-specific setting and the data is not elicited or affected by the research's actions. In this study, the participants were observed, and their verbal data were collected via natural daily conversations and interactions at the workplace. They were not stimulated to produce the intended data, but rather they spoke naturally about the topics. The participants were not informed that their utterances were recorded during the data collection process for the purpose of preserving the natural setting and the authenticity of the data. This method does not interrupt the natural-occurring conversation; hence it allows the participants to interact freely in a relaxed manner (Potter & Shaw, 2018).

The participants who took part in this research are a group of professionals consisting of 25 Malays, two Indians and one Chinese, whose professions are in the teaching field. Only verbal data from the Malay participants were managed to be extracted, which reflects the title of this article. The participants were all native speakers of Malay and used the Malay language as the medium of interaction, but some spoke English or some English words to interact and express themselves. Hence, the data gathered could be in the mixture of Malay and English or purely in the Malay language.

As many as 125 occurrences were recorded. The collected data were transcribed. Pseudonyms were used to replace the actual names, positions mentioned and any words that are sensitive to the participants' identities. The data presented in this paper are the actual language used by the participants, i.e., in Malay and English, and are translated where necessary.

For the limitations, the study does not intend to examine other emerging discourse patterns from the data, such as the mixture of English and Malay words and the observable dialect used. Also, it is not the aim of the study to see the impact of gossip on employees or organizations but more to understand and explore the participants' preferences of the third-person reference.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

The first part of the discussion answers the first research question, that is identifying the types of person reference used by the participants. There are six types of the third-person reference used, and it is displayed in Table 2. The third-person reference identified in the data basically falls into a range described as 'specific to general' or 'absolute to relative'.

**Table 2.** Variations of person referent used by the participants

Types of person reference		Range	
i	(a) a person's specific name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Including the person's short name, e.g. Halimah binti Abu (Halimah)</li> </ul>	Absolute / specific
	(b) acronym of name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Halimah binti Abu (HA)</li> </ul>	
ii	The use of possessive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your sister</li> <li><i>kakak</i> you (your sister)</li> <li>Lily's sister</li> <li><i>adik hang</i> (your younger brother/sister)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>adik angkat</i> Lily (Lily's adopted younger brother/sister)</li> <li><i>mak tiri</i> (stepmother)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>your best friend</li> <li>your friend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>kawan hang</i> (your friend)</li> </ul>
iii	post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Pengarah program</i> (program director)</li> <li>KJ (<i>Ketua Jabatan</i>/ Head of Department)</li> <li>KK (<i>Ketua Kursus</i>/ Head of Program)</li> <li>SU (<i>setiausaha</i>/ secretary)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Big boss</li> <li>Boss <i>kecil</i> (little boss)</li> <li>your multitasking vice director</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Jantan</i> (male/man)</li> <li><i>perempuan</i> (female/woman)</li> </ul>	Relative/ general
vi	gender		

\**hang* means 'you' in Malay northern dialect, commonly spoken by people from states of Kedah, Penang, and Perlis

The following section explains the second research question, which is the strategies employed by the participants in using the selected person reference. The strategies are illuminated in the type of person reference used, the way how the person reference is expressed and the plausible reasons that render their preferences.

### 3.1. (a & b) A Person's specific name

The first pattern observed was the use of a person's actual name. The participants may not be using the full name of the absent person, but they seemed to prefer using the nickname or the shorter version of the name. This could be observed in Sample 1 and 2. The translated version utterances are placed in [ ].

Sample 1:

A: *Ha..aku nak gossip ni.*

[Hey... I want to gossip]

B: *Pagi-pagi dah gossip.*

[Early in the morning?]

A: *Hari tu aku pergi Café A. Dah lewat petang dah. Aku nampak Hana tengah berbincang dengan seorang lelaki. Lelaki tu membelakangi aku. Lama jugak la diorang berbincang.*

[I went to Café A. It was quite late in the evening. I saw Hana talking with a man. He was facing the other side. They discussed for quite a while.]

This practice is rather universal across cultures and contexts. For this preference, minimizing and recognition strategy are applied; hence the referent is rather direct, easily recognized as interlocutors may not have difficulty understanding or referring to who the absent person is. Levinson (2007) and Stivers et al. (2007) agree that a person's specific name is chosen because it conveys information about the referent. It is stable in the way that it does not indicate the speaker's other communicative intent, and it is absolute i.e., it is chosen simply to identify the individual.

Another minimizing strategy chosen by the participants is by using acronyms of the name. For example, "*MJ kata dia tak kenal kau*" (MJ said she didn't know you), the acronyms MJ was used to represent Maria Jamal. This kind of person reference is rather vague and confusing as the hearer has to guess and imply who the person is being referred to. Thus, interlocutors tend to rely on the letters and the spoken context to accurately guess who the person is. This formulation opposes the recognition condition yet abides by minimizing strategy.

Sample 2:

A: *Kau tahu tak, Maria Jamal tu pergi melobi diri untuk jawatan pengarah.*

[Did you know that Maria Jamal lobbied herself to be the next director.]

B: *La ye ke. Confident ye.*

[Really? she is confident.]

A: *Ye...tiap-tiap petang dia pergi bersembang dengan boss.*

[Yes, she went to see the boss every evening it seems.]

In Sample 2, the third-person's name Maria was mentioned along with her surname Jamal. This contradicts Levinson's condition whereby the respondent did use binomials as their person reference. Typically, this is done when there is more than one person with a similar name; hence the father's name needs to be mentioned along, probably to enhance clarity. It could be seen the emphasis on recognition in this preference.



### 3.2. The use of possessive

#### 3.2.1. Possessed Kin Terms (a)

Possessed kin terms are the most common person reference found in the data. The respondents seemed to associate the absent person/the referent to the hearer's next of kin. Among the examples are *kakak* you (your sister) in Sample 4, *abang kau* (your brother) in Sample 6 and *mak tiri kau* (your stepmother). More examples are listed in Table 2. This associative strategy appears to be the unmarked form of person reference whereby speakers work to explicitly associate the referent directly to the current conversation participants, i.e., the reference associated with 'you' (Stivers et al., 2007).

Sample 4

A: *Dia cakap dia tak kenal you all.*

[She said she did not know all of you.]

B: *Ya. Tak kenal. Dah lama kerja pun tak kenal.*

[Yes...She didn't know. Though you have been working together for a long time.]

C: *Siapa?*

[who]

A: *Kakak you la, siapa lagi.*

[Your sister la, who else?]

C: *Kakak I? Yang mana satu?*

[My sister? Which one?]

B: *Yang dekat admin tu*

[The one at the administration office.]

Sample 5:

Lily: *Bila dia nak pencen kak?*

[When is she retiring?]

B: *Lambat lagi. Tak sabar aku.*

[Soon. I cannot wait.]

C: Pray that she would opt for early retirement.

D: *Siapa?*

[Who?]

B: Lily's sister.

Sample 6:

A: *Lan tak apa, dia ada abang.*

[Lan need not to be worried. He has his brother]

B: *Ha... apa lagi Lan, abang kau kan boleh tolong payung.*

[Ha...why wait Lan? Your brother will surely support you.]

Traditionally, in the Malay culture, using kin terms in interaction is common, particularly when addressing the second person. It is an indication of respect, especially when there is an age gap between speakers. The younger speaker typically will use kin terms for an older person such as *kakak* (elder sister)

or *abang* (elder brother), or *makcik* (aunt) (Moain, 1989). However, it is interesting to observe this pattern when it is addressed to the referent/ absent person since speakers are not obliged to demonstrate respect to the absent person as he/she is not physically there. Perhaps, the possessive adjectives are used to mockingly imply how closely related the absent person is to the hearer; hence the possessives and kin terms are used. It is also fascinating to see that the participants still adhered to the age gap rules, i.e., if the hearer is older than the absent person, a younger kin term is used, for example *adik kau* (your younger brother/sister). This pattern is also observed among people in Tzetzal who speak the Mayan language. Brown (2007) views this as fictive kinship as the relationship between the referent and the hearer is not real, and it is made up for the gossip purposes.

Meanwhile the term *mak/ibu tiri* (stepmother) typically has negative connotations among the conventional Malays as it portrays a figure who is aggressive, vicious and hates her stepchildren. This perhaps is induced by Malay movies dan dramas that typically portray stepparents in such an image. Such a reference is used to portray the referent's personality or character, although it is contextualized within a workplace.

### 3.2.2. (Possessed) Someone Who Has Close Relationship (b)

The possessive adjective is not only paired with kinship terms, but the participants also used it with the word *kawan* (friend). This is where the speaker ties the hearer to the referent as a 'friend', where a possessive adjective is applied. In certain situations, the adjectives 'close' or 'best' are used to describe the type of connection or relation that the two have, for example, 'your friend' and 'your best friend' (Sample 7 and 8). The hearer is associated with the referent as a friend, possibly to highlight the proximity that the hearer and the referent have but in a derisive manner. The preference is not absolute; hence the word 'best' and 'close' are used.

Sample 7

A: *Kenapa dia cakap macam tu. Macam orang buat announcement.*

[Why did she say like that? Like making an announcement.]

B: *Eh dia memang cakap macam tu. Kawan kau tu kan.*

[Eh, she does speak like that. Don't you still know your friend?]

Sample 8

A: They asked me to move up (upper floor).

B: *Ye ke. Why la?*

[Really. Why?]

A: Some people said that my place is messy.

B: Who?

A: Your best friend la.

B: Choi! (laughing)

The data demonstrate some contradictions from what is stated in the literature. Theoretically, speakers would choose a strategy that is absolute, which means the type of person reference selected should ease understanding and interpretation. Person reference that contains absolute elements could reduce ambiguity, optimize the clarity of the person being talked about and minimize the lexical length or

difficulty. However, the participants in this study were found to employ vague person references, particularly in the context of gossip.

As shown in the data, the participants were less likely to opt for the 'minimize-optimize' principle (Sacks & Schegloff, 2007), whereby neither minimality nor recognition was chosen as one of their strategies. The speaker did not seem to provide sufficient information for the hearer; hence the hearer had to ask further questions. In other words, this type of reference was chosen intentionally so that the hearer had to guess who the third person was.

This was evident in the cases where the hearer sounded unsure and confused about whom the speaker was talking about. As in Sample 8, it is clear to B who the 'best friend' is. But in Sample 4, C is unsure who his *kakak* (sister) is, therefore trying to confirm by asking, "*Kakak* I (my sister)? *Yang mana satu* (which one)?". Further description is given by B, *Yang dekat admin tu* (The one at the administration office.) so that C could guess the absent person more precisely.

### 3.3. Post and gender

Posts are also used as a type of reference, and they are identified according to their position titles. In Sample 9, the referent is addressed as 'boss' and then further described as *boss kecil* (little boss). Perhaps the word 'boss' is rather general; thus, the descriptor *kecil* or little is added to help clarify which boss the speaker is referring to. This indicates that in using general terms that are relative and lack clarity, speakers still provide clues and signals to ease understanding and avoid confusion. The use of 'post' as a person reference could possibly indicate two meanings; (i) it literally addresses the person who holds an official post in the organization or a person who leads certain programs or events, and (ii) it refers to a person who is bossy, this type of reference is used.

#### Sample 9

A: *Tiada sesiapa yang membantah ke dalam meeting? Takkan la semua setuju je?*

[Did anybody object in the meeting? Don't tell me everyone supports the idea?]

B: *Hang ingat KJ-KJ ni berani sangat nak membantah?*

[Do you think all the HoDs dare to protest?]

A: *Tapi dia kan bos, bos kecil.*

[By the way, isn't she the little boss?]

Another ambiguous person reference used is the word *perempuan* (female/woman) which represents gender as in Sample 10. The gender term for reference is more general than the role. However, *perempuan* seems to be an inappropriate lexical selection to address an absent person. *Perempuan* in Malay means *wanita* and is translated as woman/ female in English. Compared to *wanita* (woman), the word *perempuan* suggests more negative collocations since it is associated with many other negative words (Rahim, 2005). It could be said that the reference *perempuan* could be considered the most impolite word used among the participants.

#### Sample 10

A: *Dia ada tanya hang pasal kucing tu?*

[Did she ask you about the cat?]

B: *Siapa?*

[Who?]

A: *Perempuan tu la.*

[That woman la]

B: *Oh ya. Dia tanya, so aku bagi la IG kucing tu.*

[Oh yes, she asked so I just gave her the IG link]

In addition, the data confirmed that none of profanity words were used, although, in some situations, there were expressions of anger, annoyance, and dissatisfaction. The participants' profiles who are in teaching profession with good academic backgrounds could lend a hand to reasons why profanity is uncommon in their daily conversations. This is also in agreement with Nik Safiah et al. (2015) who state that the use of incorrect person references may project the speaker as a person who is rude and lacks a good upbringing. Furthermore, incorrect person references could be seen as an insult to the person being spoken about.

#### 4. Conclusion

There are several salient findings that could be highlighted from the study. First, the participants showed high preference for possessive kin terms such as your sister, your brother; and they preferred referring the absent person as someone who is close to the hearer, particularly in the context of gossiping.

Secondly, the findings also confirmed that the participants did intentionally use ambiguous person reference. In certain situations, the participants had to get more clues to correctly guess the absent person. This specific action violates Sacks and Schegloff's 'minimize-optimize' strategy and Stiver's et al.'s absolute principle. The findings also substantiate that the speakers in this study did not always opt for person reference that contains minimum words, the one that is easily recognised and not relative. This could be influenced by the topics of conversation, which are contextualized on gossips. When gossiping, for instance, speakers may be more careful not to disclose the referent's identity, and consequently, the identified references were chosen. It could also be concluded that the participants abide by the rules of choosing person reference as practiced in the Malay language, even in the context of gossips. They did consider (i) the characteristics of the referent, (ii) the relationship with the referent, and (iii) the context of the communicative event, as discussed bin Moain (1989).

Thirdly, it is interesting to highlight that the respondents did not use any profanity in selecting person reference. The only least appropriate word identified was 'perempuan' which has higher negative associations as compared to the reference 'woman'. This could be contributed by the participants' academic background and their careers, i.e., teaching professionals. Finally, it is suggested that future research could be explored with participants from different demographic backgrounds, perhaps with a younger generation with different levels of education. In addition, further exploration into the choice of person reference and its social meaning, as well as their cultural practices, could also be tapped into.

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