"What Subject Is Difficult?: The Sundanese Mothers' Question to Their Children

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Abstract—**Mother-child interaction is an interesting topic to discuss. It exhibits particular characteristics revealing roles in membership categorization. In this article the topics of Sundanese mothers' speech in questioning her children are analyzed to find out topics discussed in a particular circumstance. Since the Sundanese language employs speech levels, the levels used by both participants in the conversations are discussed. The results show that mothers concern a lot about her children's academic performance by asking questions on difficult subjects at school and how to prepare for them. It is also found out that certain information relevant to the child's life at school may alarm mother. Other information maintains and establishes mother's roles in the society.**

Index Terms—**conversational topic, mother-child interaction, Sundanese speech levels**

I. INTRODUCTION

Mother-child interactions carry the roles of being a mother and a child in a family. The interactions can reveal specific topics that concern a mother. Pertinent to the roles of a mother, specific topics are discussed in the interaction.

The research conducted by Chisholm (2014) claims that primary socialization of children does not lie on direct face-to-face interactions but on the power of parents in assigning their children certain tasks or to place children in their surroundings. He adds that mother-infant interaction needs to consider the role of caretakers and interactors. Nelson, et al., (2014) discuss parent-child conflict in the context of a supportive relationship using a holistic analytic approach. Their findings suggest that family stressors shape parent-child interaction patterns. Other studies suggest that mother's elaboration in interacting with children results in children's elaborative speech compared to mothers who use repetition (Haden et al., 2009; Peterson & McCabe, 1992; Peterson, Sales, Rees & Fivush, 2007). Kelly's research (2016) on mother-child interaction in narratives shows that maternal behaviors in an interaction accounts for the child's acquisition of linguistic and cognitive skills. Despite a vast array of literature on mother-child interactions, research on Sundanese mother-child interactions involving the speech levels and conversational topics has not been elaborated.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Membership Categorization Analysis

Sacks (1992b) states membership categories as classification or social types used to describe persons. The focus of membership categorization analysis is the use of "membership categories, membership categorization devices and social analysts in accomplishing naturally occurring activities" (Hester & Eglin, 1997, p. 3). It is apparent that categorization should imply that a particular person falls into a certain group or membership as a role he or she plays in society. In a family the membership may include father, mother, son, daughter, aunt, uncle, etc. Hence, the number of member in a category varies. Another aspect that Sacks puts forward is category bound activities meaning that one activity is bounded to another activity. An example of this is when a baby cries, the scene is not merely described as a baby shedding tears. When a baby cries, the mother would pick him up or do other things that would console him.

Topic organization is another notion worth analyzing as a contribution to the explanation of categories put forward by Sacks. He suggests that "one basic way of that topical talk is exhibited involves the use of co-class membership" (Sacks, 1992a, p. 757). Hester & Eglin (1997) add that from an ethnometodological point of view, categories are set in context category-in-context. Lynch and Peyrot (1992) further mention the notion of context as reference to a reflexively constituted relationship between singular actions and the relevant specifications of identity, place, time, and meaning implicated by the intelligibility of those actions. Watson (1997) further states that categorical system in an interaction informs what an utterance does and how it is formed. However, when a failure occurs, participants make an assumption of the utterance and build newly-built structural analysis.

B. Style

Tannen (2005) defines style as a way of doing something. Style is learnt and the acquisition of style by children shows how they relate to each other and show their identity in their community. Children by the age of four are capable of acquiring syntax, politeness form, and other variables. A study by Schieffelin (1990) demonstrates that children learn social knowledge along with linguistic structure. It means that children can employ certain styles to convey their messages in their speech.

C. Speech Levels in Sundanese Language

Sundanese language is one of local languages spoken in Indonesia, particularly in West Java. It is a unique language consisting of speech levels. Speech levels denote that Sundanese language recognizes social levels of speakers, hence results in particular word selection in communication (Djajasudarma, 1994). Tamsyah (2007) further adds that speech levels in Sundanese language consider the elements of age, position, speech situation, the partner talking to, and the subject of the conversation. The speech levels are divided into six stages, namely *basa kasar pisan* (BKS—very rude level), *basa kasar* (BK—rude level), *basa sedeng* (BS—medium level), *basa panengah* (BP—near medium level), *basa lem*es (BL—polite level), *basa lemes pisan* (BLP—very polite level).

BKS, also called *cohag* is used when someone is very angry, arguing, or intending to insult others. It is usually intended for animals so when such a level is intended for people, it sounds extremely harsh. BK, also called *loma*, is used between participants who are befriended or familiar with each other, or close friends. It is also used when speaking to someone with lower position, title, or age. Another use is when talking about someone of younger age than the hearer. BS, called *basa lemes keur sorangan* (polite level for oneself), is a level used for oneself or talking about oneself to older participants. BP is used when talking to someone with lower position but older in age than the speaker. BL, called *basa lemes keur batur* (polite level for others) is used when talking to someone with higher position, age or title. It is also used when talking to someone unfamiliar. BLP is used when talking to someone with much higher position or title to show respect.

In practice, Sundanese speech levels are categorized into three main kinds (Tamsyah, 2007). The first kind is the speech levels in which the rude, medium, and polite levels have different vocabulary. The phrase of <u>going home</u> has three different words according to its speech level:

(1) *balik* (BK) – *wangsul* (BS) – *mulih* (BL) – *mantog* (BKP) – *mulang* (BP)

The second kind denotes different vocabulary for the rude level but the same vocabulary for both the medium and polite levels. For example the word <u>barrier</u> has the following words in Sundanese:

(2) *halangan* (BK) – *pambengan* (BS) – *pambengan* (BL)

In the third kind, the vocabulary of both the rude and medium levels is the same but different for the polite level. For example address terms for kinship such as the following:

(3) *adi* (younger brother or sister), *alo* (niece or nephew) *lanceuk* (older sister or brother), and *aki* (grandfather)

In the near medium level the words are preceded by the word *pun,* resulting in:

(4) *pun adi, pun alo, pun lanceuk, pun aki*

The words in the polite level are preceded by the word *tuang*, resulting in

(5) *tuang rai, tuang putra, tuang raka*

D. Sundanese Speech Levels and Ethics

Based on the history, the speech levels entered Sundanese language in the 17th century when some of Sundanese lands (*tatar Sunda*) such as Ciamis, Tasikmalaya, Garut, Bandung, Sumedang, Sukabumi, and Cianjur were under Mataram control. The speech levels developed along with *macapat* (a form of literature) as a result of Mataram Kingdom under the reign of Sultan Agung (Tamsyah, 2007).

Even though some linguists state that speech levels are the reflection of feudalism, Djajasudarma (1994) claims that the speech levels are aesthetical elements of language to show respect among participants. In spoken language the speech levels are accompanied by *lentong* 'intonation', *rengkuh* 'speaking and behaving politely' and *peta* 'motion'. She further states that the speech levels function to rule speakers according to the situation and to account for the relationship among the participants as the realization of language ethics.

The relationship between ethics and speech levels in Sundanese is manifested when someone applies it in daily conversations. A Sundanese person will use different words to signal the position of herself/himself. For example, in Sundanese the word meaning <u>to eat</u> has three distinct words:

(6) *neda* 'to eat' used for oneself

(7) *tuang* 'to eat' used for others

(8) *nyatu* 'to eat' used for animals

The use of different words to mean the same thing or activity signals the ethics in Sundanese language. If the word *tuang* 'to eat', which is used for others, is used to refer to oneself, she herself will be considered arrogant. On the other hand, if the word *nyatu* 'to eat' in the extremely rude level is used, the person positions himself as an animal. What is considered more dangerous is when the word *nyatu* is used to ask someone to eat. Such a condition is recognized as an offense or insult resulting in severe social punishment.

Therefore, speaking Sundanese not only denotes intelligence in applying the speech levels but also prioritizes four elements, namely brain, morale, enthusiasm, and behavior (Warnaen, 1987). Brain refers to cognitive knowledge and experiences as it is used to comprehend the mind and memory. Morale is used in distinguishing between good deeds and bad ones, and is evaluative in nature. Enthusiasm refers to living force or passion, condition of the mind, and feelings which are in line with conative aspects. Behavior refers to observable deeds. All aspects in speaking the language, thus, reflect how Sundanese people show respect to each other.

III. METHODOLOGY

Since the research employs an ethnography approach, data were collected qualitatively. Two families residing in one village in Majalengka Municipality were involved. The variables in the research were the mother and the children. The mothers were housewives, meaning that they had their entire time take care of the children and other household matters. Children involved were aged 5-12 years old. This group age was selected due to complete linguistic acquisition of Sundanese language. This group age also denoted that children had other interactions outside home that might contribute to topics discussed at home.

The participants involved were named family 1 and 2. Family 1 consisted of a mother aged 57 years old with a daughter aged 12 years old and a son aged 10 years old. Both children went to the same primary school nearby. Family 2 consisted of a mother aged 32 years old and her two sons and a daughter. The first son was 10 years of age; the second son was 8 years old, the youngest was a daughter aged 5 years old.

Conversations between the mothers and their children were recorded and transcribed. The conversations recorded were in the afternoon after school.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the theory of membership categorization, the participants involved are mothers and her daughters and sons aged 5-12 years old in a domestic domain. The contexts taking place were after school when they were about to have lunch. It was common for the families to talk at that particular time.

1. Family 1
Transcript 1

Mother (M)	:	*Pelajaran na naon wae?*
		'What were the subjects?'
Daughter (D)	:	*Matematika, bahasa Indonesia, IPA.*
		'Math, Indonesian language, science'
M	:	*Nu paling susah naon?*
		'What was the most difficult?'
D	:	*IPA*
		'Science'
M	:	*Tara ngapalkeun meureun*
		'Rarely study maybe.'
D	:	*Hmm*
		'Hmm'
M	:	*Osok?*
		'Usually study?'
D	:	[nodded]

The above piece of conversation between a mother and her daughter denotes a concern on academic performance. The daughter had just taken National Examination of Primary School. The results of the exams determined chances of admission to state secondary schools. Firstly, she asked about the subjects her daughter took for the examination. Secondly, she asked about the hardest subject on the examination. Her daughter replied that science was the hardest. The mother seemed to blame her daughter for that by saying that she rarely studied. However, she asked for confirmation on what she thought by asking whether her daughter usually studied. Her daughter nodded, signaling that she had done her best.

From the script, the mother used the word *meureun* 'maybe' signaling rude speech level. However, this speech level is not uncommon in daily conversations, particularly between close participants. In this conversation, as the participants are a mother and her daughter, it is generally acceptable. In general, the speech level was the medium level.

Transcript 2

Mother	:	*Asep naon nu susah pelajaranna?*
(M)		'Asep, what subject was difficult?'
Son (S)	:	*Inggris sama matematika*
		'English and math'
M	:	*Bahasa Inggris sama matematika?*
		'English and math?'
S		[nodded]
M	:	*Kaeusian sadaya soalna?*
		'Did you answer all questions?'
S	:	*Kaeusian.*
		'All were answered'
M	:	*Ngapalkeun.*
		'Study.'
S		[nodded and smiled]

Turning to her son, she similarly asked about academic performance. In transcript (2) the mother was still concerned with the subjects her son took for the summative examination held at the end of the semester. What differed the speech style employed when talking to her daughter and her son was when the mother asked about difficult subjects, she directly commanded her son to study, whereas when talking to her daughter she needed to confirm whether her daughter rarely studied. It may be due to previous academic performances. Apart from difficult subjects, the mother asked about easy ones to appreciate what her children had done. Asking such questions to some extent would balance her view of the children's academic performances as well as confirmed that as a mother she had helped her children to perform well enough academically as was expected from the society. It is shown in transcript (3).

Transcript 3

Mother	:	*Nu gampil naon?*
(M)		'What was easy?'
Son (S)	:	*Nu gampil SBK jeung penjas.*
		'SBK (Arts and Culture) and physical education were easy.'
M	:	*SBK jeung penjas. Ai neng nu gampil naon?*
		SBK and physical education. How about you girl, what was easy?'
Daughter	:	*Matematika, Bahasa Indonesia.*
(D)		'Math, Indonesian language'

With regard to the speech level, the mother, as shown in her use of the word *sadaya* meaning *all*, used the polite speech level in talking to her son. If compared, it is not at the same level as when she used the word *meureun* in the rude level (transcript 1). Such a polite speech level was commonly used between close participants in Sundanese culture.

The vocabulary used in this conversation show the medium speech level signaling close relationship between the mother and her children. However, the word *jeung* as used by the son in "*SBK jeung penjas"* denotes a shift in the speech level from the medium level to the rude level. Yet it is suggested that the son use the polite speech level as his mother used the polite level. Therefore, it is considered inappropriate that a son replied in such a way. The mother did not correct her son's inappropriate word choice in this transcript, instead she continued with other questions.

Still in relation to academic performances, the mother compared her children's academic performances with other children's. This was done to ensure that what she did to and for her children was also done by other mothers. In transcript (4) the mother confirmed this. By that, it established the membership categorization of being a mother in the society.

Transcript 4

M	:	*Temen-temen gampang?*
		'Your friends, they thought they were easy?'
D	:	*Aya nu gampang aya nu susah.*
		'Some were easy some were hard'
M	:	*Aya nu gampang aya nu susah?*
		'Some were easy some were hard?'

Another topic of conversation deals with her children's friends as shown in transcript (5). In this conversation, the mother asked about her daughter's friends' plan to continue their study. It was revealed that some of her daughter's friends would continue their study to *pasantren* (an Islamic boarding school). Knowing this, she asked if her daughter would continue there but her daughter was unwilling to do so. She preferred to continue to a nearby senior high school (SMP).

Transcript 5

M	:	*Mun Dais diteruskeun na kamana?*
		'How about you Dais, where do you want to continue?'
D	:	*SMP.*
		'Senior High School'
M	:	*Aya nu ngilu pesantren?*
		'Does anybody go to *pesantren*?'
D	:	[nodded]
M	:	*Saha nu masantrenna?*
		Who goes there?
D	:	*Hilma, Kepin, Dita*
		'Hilma, Kepin, Dita'
M	:	*Kamana pasantren na?*
		'Whereto?'
D	:	*Dita ka Cirebon, Kepin, Hilma mah ke Tasik.*
		'Dita to Cirebon, but Kepin, Hilma to Tasik.'
M	:	*Dais mau pasantren?*
		'Dais, are you going to *pasantren*?'
D	:	[shook her head]
M	:	*Alim? Alim pasantren?*
		'No? No to pasantren?'
D	:	[nodded]

In transcript (6) the mother asked her son, asking about his friends. On this occasion, she asked about his son's friend's moving because he was still on the fourth grade. She might ask this because it was common that a student moved from one school to another for a particular reason. By asking questions about her children's friends, she would be sure that her children befriended with good students in a good environment.

Transcript 6

M	:	*Asep, aya nu pindah temenna?*
		'Asep, is there your friend moving?'
S	:	*Aya.*
		'Yes.'
M	:	*Aya? Ngaranna?*
		'There is. His name?'
S	:	*Iwan.*
		'Iwan.'
M	:	*Iwan? Kamana? Pindahna pedah naon?*
		'Iwan? Where to? Why did he move?'
S	:	*Diheureuyan.*
		'He was made fun of.'
M	:	*Diheureuyan jadi pundung kitu? Ulah diheureuyan karunya. Asep mah ntong nya ntong ngahereuyan.*
		'He was made fun so he moved? Don't make fun of him; poor him. Asep, don't ever make fun of someone.'
S	:	*Si Raja ngaheureuyan mah.*
		'Raja was the one who made fun of him.'
M	:	*Raja teh orang mana?*
		'Where does Raja live?'
S	:	*Blok Minggu.*
		'Block Minggu.'
M	:	*Blok Minggu?*
		'Block Minggu?'

Asking about her children's friends revealed there might be a bullying act in his son's school resulting the moving of one of his son's friends. It was accidentally found out, and knowing this, the mother advised her son not to make fun of someone. Hence, it is important that a mother asks further about what happens at school or to her children's friends as it may reveal unsolicited matters. It is recommended that parents always check with their children about their experiences at school. Such a pathetic experience can be anticipated if a mother digs deeper information about her children. Good communication between a mother and her children may also provide children with assurance of being protected and well taken care of resulting in self-confidence.

If previous transcripts reveal the medium speech level in Sundanese, transcript (7) demonstrates a different speech level.

Transcript 7

M	:	*Telor asin oleh oleh Brebes, naek naon didituna piknik teh?*
		'*Telor asin is from Brebes. What did you ride?'*
D	:	Naek wahana.
		'*Rode some wahana.'*
M	:	Naek wahana? Wahana na teh naon ibu nanya.
		Rode a wahana? What is wahana I ask you.
D	:	Rumah Hantu, Kora-kora.
		'*A Ghost House, Kora-kora.'*
M	:	Kora-kora? Ibu guruna naek?
		'*Kora-kora? Did your female teacher ride it*?
D	:	He'euh.
		'*Yes'.*

The word *he'euh* as used by the daughter in transcript (7) is in a very rude speech level. Even though the mother used the rude speech level, the daughter should be able to select other words instead. She could use the word *enya* with the same meaning but in a different speech level. Another word she could use was *muhun*, which is in polite speech level. However, the mother did not correct her for this inappropriate speech level.

2. Family 2

Family 2 consisted of a 32-year old mother along with two sons—aged 10 and 8—and a daughter of 5 years old. Both sons were in the primary school and the daughter was at kindergarten—about to enter primary school. She took Islamic lessons in the afternoon.

The mother in this family asked about what her daughter usually did at school. The daughter replied that she learned *abatasa*. *Abatasa* were the Arabic letters she learned since there was no specific lesson she learned at kindergarten. The mother seemed to inquire more so she asked other lessons she learned by repeating the questions. However, her daughter did not reply as demonstrated in transcript (5). Besides signaling that she did not want to answer her mother's question, silence in this transcript meant that the daughter thought what her mother asked was too much.

Transcript 8

M	:	*Biasa belajar naon?*
		What do you usually learn?
D	:	*Abatasa*
		Abatasa
M	:	*Abatasa? Hmm… Teras naon deui? Hmm? Teras belajar naon deui?*
		Abatasa? Hmm…what else? Hmmm? What else do you study?
D	:	[silence]

Talking to one of her sons, she asked subjects he learned at school as shown in transcript (6). Knowing that her son learned social sciences, she further asked if he could answer questions on social sciences. Asking such a question, she assured herself that her son could do relatively well at school at different subjects. This tends to signal that when a mother gets an answer, she digs other information on similar subjects. The answer her son gave her was not satisfactory enough so she inquired further. It is found out that when a mother does not get a satisfactory answer, she may inquiry further by asking other subjects.

Transcript 9

M	:	*Ari aa tadi belajar naon?*
		'Boy, what did you learn?'
S	:	*IPS*
		'*IPS* (Social sciences)'
M	:	*Kumaha tiasa teu?*
		'Could you do it?'
S	:	[nodded]
M	:	*Ari IPA, tiasa teu?*
		'How about IPA (natural sciences), could you do it?'
S	:	*Tiasa.*
		'Yes.'

Another strategy she used was asking her daughter about her performance at school as shown in transcript (10). Since her daughter was about to enter primary school, she asked about her daughter's ability to read. Her daughter only nodded signaling that she could read. Getting the answer, she turned her attention to her older son, still asked about his performance at school. She asked about difficult subjects he might encounter. From this we can conclude that the mother concerned a lot about her children's performance at school.

Transcript 10

M	:	*Ari eneng, kumaha eneng? Bade ka kelas hiji tiasa teu macana? Tiasa teu? Eh ditaros teh, tiasa teu neng?*
		'My girl, how about you? To the first grade, can you read? Can you? Ah I ask you, can you girl?'
D	:	[nodded]
M	:	[asks to her boy] *Ari aa?*
		'How about you, son?'
S	:	*Enggeus, maca mah diajar.*
		'I have already, I've learned to read'
M	:	*Ari nu teu tiasa pelajaran naon?*
		'What subject is difficult?'
S	:	*Matematika.*
		'Math'
M	:	*Enjing sakola keneh?*
		'Do you still go to school tomorrow?'
S	:	*Sakola.*
		'Yes.'

With regard to the speech level, the mother used medium level, which was commonly used among close participants. Yet, in one of the utterances, the son used the word *enggeus* 'I have already', which is in the rude level. Since the mother used the medium level, it was inappropriate that such a word was used to speak to his mother. Instead, the word *atos*, which is in the polite level, should be used. It is not revealed, however, that the mother corrected this.

Transcript 11

M	:	*Ai kamari teh THB na tiasa henteu?*
		'Yesterday, could you do the final exam?'
S	:	*Tiasa.*
		'Yes'.
M	:	*Nu leres tiasa atawa henteu?*
		'Come on, could you?'
S	:	*Tiasa.*
		'Yes.'
M	:	*Kamari naon ceuk ibu guruna…ceuk Ibu guruna kamari Julpa? Mun hoyong naek kelas kumaha cenah?*
		'Yesterday, what did your teacher tell you? What did she tell you, Julpa? If you want to pass, what did she tell you?'
S	:	*Kudu nulis.*
		'I have to write.'
M	:	*Ngaregepkeun? terus naon deui? tos kitu wae?*
		'Study? Then what? Only that?'
S	:	*Tos.*
		'Yes.'
M	:	*Maenya kitu wae.*
		'Only that?'

Besides concerning academic performance, in transcript (11) it is shown that the mother inquired about what her son did at school as well as how he should prepare for class. She asked what his teacher told him to do to succeed in class and his son's reply that he had to write did not satisfy her. She made it clearer by saying that he had to study. However, as she concerned about his academic performance, she wanted to find out whether it was the only thing his teacher said. On the son's part, the answer was agreeing to her mother, but the mother doubted if it was the only thing that mattered to his teacher. The tone of doubt was clearly seen from the mother's speech *maenya kitu wae* 'only that?' Even though it is a statement, the speech conveys the meaning of doubt.

When mother asked to her child, she sometimes repeated what she asked or rephrased her question. This was done to ensure that her child understood the question and replied in an expected manner.

V. CONCLUSION

Sundanese mother-child interactions demonstrated that topics discussed in a setting after school were on academic performances. The mothers showed their concerns by asking difficult subjects; yet in appreciating what their children did, the mothers asked about easy subjects. Such a strategy balanced her view that there were always two sides of a thing. With older children, the mother straightly asked questions while talking to younger child, the mother sometimes repeated what she asked. Pertaining to speech level, the participants used medium speech level.

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