Popular Culture: Power and Position in Popular TV Fiction

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Abstract

Research by Jiang & Leung (2012) has shown that television fiction (TV fiction) has often been identified as a platform where realities are portrayed. These realities include, but are not limited to, the lifestyles and everyday narrative appeals. In Malaysia, a majority of Malay TV fiction emphasize Malay identities and everyday lifestyles. Such emphases are most clearly expressed in the scripted talk that the characters act out. Despite the importance of the talk, however, a comprehensive and precise understanding of what the talk entails remains scarce in Malaysia. Based on Conversation Analysis (CA) (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) of 20 relevant scripted talks, we attempt to show that Malay TV fiction constitutes struggles for power and position. For example, we show that power over arguments involves Malays competing for the position of the “dominant knower.” “A dominant knower” wins conversation by employing reasons related to religion, society, and culture over logical bases to settle their disagreements. This study contributes to our awareness on the nature of power and position in the popular culture scene.

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1. Introduction

Scripted talk in the Malaysian popular culture is an important constituent of discourses of media. With Malay TV fiction becoming central to the popular culture scene in Malaysia, a research into the nature of scripted talk or the characters' talk-in-interaction is undeniably relevant to this field of scholarship. Even at the beginning of the popular culture where novels (Ruzy & Hamdan, 2010; Hamdan, Ruzy & Yusof, 2012) and reality TV shows (Yoon & Garma, 2006; Mohamed & Mukhiar, 2007; Shamshudeen, 2011) have dominated the media scene in

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Malaysia, it is common for researchers to base their argumentation on the interplay of verbatim and interpretations.

For the viewers, they move from one TV fiction to another, without intervening. As such, the viewers are left largely to themselves to self-monitor and negotiate their identities throughout these dramas. Taking such control of “ownership” of the viewers enhances the viewers’ autonomy in observing and understanding the identities. To better understand what might be happening in conversations that take place in the scripted talk of the Malay dramas, the researchers collected data of 2 hours, culled from 20 hours of Malay dramas. The authors focused on one straightforward but important research question—“What is going on in these Malay dramas?” Given that there are more than just issues of identities taking place simultaneously within these episodes, the findings may also speak to some other issues of power and position often overlooked in this kind of research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

The selected TV fiction scenes for this research are from Julia. There are two main protagonists—Julia and Amir who find themselves in love while studying in Korea. They later get married in Malaysia. While in Korea, Julia helps Amir in getting through his studies, guiding and sharing notes, although, at the same time, Amir falls in love with another girl—Sophia. Eventually, Amir has to choose between the rural and hardworking girl, Julia, or the elegant, affluent, Sophia. Conflicts unfold when memories of the past collide with the existing ones, at a time when all three work at the same company upon returning to the homeland—Malaysia.

2.2. Data collection

The transcription of Julia in this study followed the methodology of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) to illuminate the dynamics of interactions of these characters. In particular, this study may be characteristic to the applied CA, given its focus on specific institutional activities. The conversation episodes were transcribed in its entirety following the tradition of CA after which they were reread, including the dominant themes which were identified and isolated. The researchers sought to let the data speaks for the findings and interpretation, consistent with the CA methodology.

3. Position and power

As can be seen in Table 1, the turn-taking protocols exemplified in this excerpt (as well as the full data set in general) largely heed an equal power speech exchange system (Markee, 2000). The data comprises minimal interruption and frequent speaker alternation (lines 1-4). In addition, the characters have roughly the same number of turns, indicating that the participation was “balanced” at least in this regard.

Specifically, the conflict in this sequence involves Ju, being a grown-up and having studied in Korea, attempting to establish herself by fleshing out rational and logical bases in that if one questions, another answers, rather than submissively following direction (lines 3-4). However, during the course of establishing the “knower” position, Julia forgets to situate herself in the locale contexts within the domains of Malay family and culture in which daughters have to submit to their fathers (lines 5-6). Although Julia seemed to prevail, the conflict takes turn to escalate when she insisted on having rights to respond to questions or comments (lines 8-9). In response, the father repeatedly reminded Ju of the responsibility of Ju to respect others, by applying repetitions and prolonged sounds of syllables (lines 11-12). He even appears to scold Ju for her lack of understanding of respecting the elders, indicated with loud speech and stressed on the syllables (lines 11-12).
Of particular relevance here is the fact that in addition to the father making his views count, his subsequent utterances were all that mattered. This was further supported by Ju’s mother who sided with her husband (lines 14-20), reminding Ju of her role as a daughter and that the tradition is to allow preceding sibling to get married. This contends that the parent-children interaction is not equal; the parents would always have “the final word” in disputes on family matters (Gibson, 2008). In response to the “the final word” utterance, Ju felt she was marginalized and wrongly assumed as the stepdaughter of the family (lines 21-26). This episode sheds light on the role of parenthood in family matters, and whether power struggles and/or marginalization were present. The fact that Ju’s argument was turned down by her father and was well supported by the mother who played her role as the traditional “moral” supporter of the family somehow reaffirms the parent’s role as the ultimate “knower” or “expert” in the Malay community; someone who could fortify either of the character’s claim for dominance. The ultimate “knower” or expert is seen as either argues based on traditional hierarchy of Malay society or culture.

4. Power and "Malayness"
This escalating dispute took place during a scene in which Amir and Julia were waiting for a bus. Julia met Amir while waiting for the same bus. Julia welcomed Amir and began to flesh out her thoughts. She began by exploring her cognitive operations of being Malay — Malays do not wear shorts or revealing clothes, and definitely do not do piercings nor wallowing in alcohol.

In Table 2, She voiced these issues to Amir (lines 1-7). Amir began to feel a surge of shock and returned her question sarcastically by referring Ju’s question to a real examination question (lines 8-9). Although there was a presence of equal turn takings, and no overlaps except for a jump-start-rush talk, the illumination of power struggle was beginning to be seen (lines 10-11). Specifically, the dynamics of this power exchange initialized when Julia repeated her question and demanded a respond with a quiet speech. Of particular concern here is the fact that while the decisions to perform daily activities and wear clothes are of individual interests, Julia poses the same question to which Amir orients. This is in line with the power dynamics prescribed in Malay societies where inappropriate clothing is concerned; they are repeatedly brought to the fore. The way Julia framed her question is indirect, applying the concept of “saving face,” commonly found in most Asian societies (Ruzy, 2011). In response, Amir did not use the same technique of reformulation of indirect question but instead utilized a direct question, maintaining his individual principles and indicating that he was not pleased with Julia’s reactions (lines 12-15). The central argument of this conversation started to emerge when Julia frames Amir’s family in this conversation. Specifically, in response to Amir’s declarative statement, Julia turned the question blaming Amir’s actions as affecting his mother (lines 16-17). Sensing the potential of losing face should he retaliated; Amir chose to respond by clarifying the sequence of argument and eventually gave in (18-19), already having lost face and uttered a sigh of disappointment (line 19). What this scene helps in our comprehending the power and position in describing Malay subjectivities is that resistance to principles other than culture is unsuccessful, as they are seen as prescribing institutional Malay discourse.

4. Conclusion

We have presented some evidence concerning the emergence of power and position in the interplay of scripted talk across TV fiction. Firstly, we have shown that the use of hesitations, repetitions, direct and indirect
formulations, unruly turn-takings, and quiet speech have each been employed in the quest to attain power and position in argumentation. Secondly, the “dominant knower” who supports his or her arguments using customs, culture, and religion are likely to win even when other viewpoints might consider the issue at hand a personal choice. The echoes of this argument strategy become more acute, when some TV fiction is set outside the land of Malaysia and where personal preference is of prime importance. Having presented these arguments, we are, in our view, confronted with the following hypothesis- the entrenched role of this discourse in reproducing power and position across TV fiction through the use of customs, religion, and adat holds little possibility for challenge or transformation and has possible consequences on media appropriation.

References


