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Children's picture books through the lens of pragmatics

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Abstract

This research focuses on the comparative study of pragmatic strategies used in children's picture books written by Thai and American authors in two aspects: conversational utterances between characters and strategies to convey key messages. A total of 80 awarding-winning books are used as references, half written by Thais and the other half by Americans. The analysis is based on the concept of speech act by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975, 1976). In general, the pragmatic strategies in use are found to be similar. Both prefer to communicate straightforwardly, which enables children to understand easily. However, the differences lie in the details. In most areas, the Americans tend to communicate indirectly more often, leaving room for self-interpretation and further imagination. This, in turn, requires higher effort to understand, compared to those reading the Thai books. This is really apparent, especially in the method to convey key messages, where the Thais and Americans prefer completely different strategies. These differences may be due to upbringing, society, culture, and the education system that encourage children to think and use more imagination.

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Introduction

Speech acts are regularly used in daily conversations in people of all ages including young children. Just like in real life, there are many speech acts found in conversational utterances between characters in children's picture books. These utterances convey several communicative intents with features like children's language used in everyday life. After having read many children's picture books for my own daughter, I found that most authors used simple language suitable for young children. However, there were notable differences in the writing styles between the Thai and foreign authors, which triggered my interest to study the topic. Among the children's picture books written by the foreign authors found in libraries and book stores in Thailand, the ones written by Americans are the easiest to find and achieve reasonable sample size suitable for this study. In addition, after going

through various researches in the field of pragmatic strategies, as detailed in the Literature Review section, there has not been any comparative study to understand these different styles.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to compare the pragmatic strategies used in children's picture books written by the Thai and American authors.

Literature Review

The Speech Act theory is applied as a framework to compare these different writing styles, both in the conversational utterances between characters and the strategies to convey key messages of the stories. The theory is used to determine various pragmatic strategies in use by analysing whether each utterance can be interpreted directly as written (e.g. direct speech act or explicit performative) or not (e.g. indirect speech act or implicit performative). The statistical results from these analyses can then determine the preferred pragmatic strategies used by Thai and American authors, which can also be perceived as different writing styles or communicative approaches.

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After examining many documents, textbooks, and other research papers related to children's picture books, many studies were found based on the Speech Act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1976), as seen in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, but nothing directly related to the comparison of pragmatic strategies used in children's picture books written by Thai and American authors. However, there are many Thai text books on how to write children's picture books, and they seem to be in the same direction. In terms of syntax, it is recommended that sentences be simple, short, concise, straight forward, and grammatically correct. Sentences should not be long nor complex (Baikasuyee, 1999; Meekhanmak, 1994; Plaiwech, 2011; Sirising, 1994; Sornsongkram, 1988; Srimanot, 1980; Tanyong, 1986). As for semantics, it is recommended that lexical usage be various and metaphorical use be simple, easy to understand and suitable for children's ages (Sirising, 1994). Tanyong (1986) and Sirising (1994) both suggested that the authors should use simple language and communicate rather directly so that the readers or listeners can interpret the ideas immediately and easily.

In addition, the research of Kanrein (2007) partly studies the sentence users' intentions within children's picture books written by Thai authors based on the concept derived from the work of Phanthumetha (1984). Kanrein (2007) finds that there are three types of sentences categorized by the user's intention: to inform, to ask for an answer, and to tell someone to do something. The first kind, with the intention to inform, seems to be most common.

Methodology

Data Collection

This research collected data from 80 awarding-winning children's picture books, half written by Thais and the other by Americans. These books are designed for children aged 3–12, written in prose, and first published in 1972–2014. With regards to the age range of children's picture books, Bartle (2018) stated that picture books are suitable, but not limited to, children aged 3–12 years old. The same range is used in this research to understand the overall trend. The year 1972 was chosen because it was proclaimed as International Book Year by UNESCO. The Thai government has also acknowledged the policy and arranged the national book competitions regularly since then. The data collection ended in 2014 simply because it was time for proposal presentation. The book-selection process started based on information from multiple web sites. Then, a search for these books was carried out in libraries including the Thai Knowledge Park and the Library of Srinakharinwirot University.

For accuracy reason, the researcher did a detailed background check on all the American authors and related awards to ensure that they were Americans born in the United States of America. In addition, the books were given the awards for their story part (not the illustration part); for example, Irma S. & James H. Black Award (8 books), E.B. White Read Aloud Award (Picture Books) (6 books), and Parents Choice Award (6 books) (Goodreads, n.d.; The Horn Book, n.d.). With regards to the Thai children's picture books

selected under this study, the authors are Thais, and the awards received are based on the whole book, as there is no separation between the story and illustration parts. The awards such as National Book Award (23 books), Nanmeebooks Award (6 books), and Foundation for Children Award (6 books) are most common in this research (Foundation for Children, n.d.; Library Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, n.d.; Nanmeebooks, n.d.).

Data Analysis

To identify the similarities and differences of children's picture books written by the Thai and American authors, the Speech Act theory by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975, 1976) is applied with particular interests in three areas: direct and indirect speech act; explicit and implicit performative; and classification of illocutionary act.

These three areas of Speech Act theory are applied throughout the research with two aspects of interest: conversational utterances between characters and the strategies used to convey key messages. Firstly, to examine the pragmatic strategies used in conversational utterances, each utterance is broken down into one or more smaller "constructural units" which refer to a group of words that is part of an utterance. One unit contains a subject and a verb that can convey a complete idea. However, a subject and/or a verb can be either clearly stated or omitted but well understood from the context. Each constructural unit is then analyzed to determine its type - direct or indirect speech act (Searle, 1975); explicit or implicit performative (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969); representative, directive, expressive, commissive, or declarative illocutionary act (Searle, 1976). Secondly, each book is examined as a whole to understand the overall context, to grasp the main idea, and to identify the strategy used to convey key message(s). Speech Act theory is then applied on the key message to identify whether it is a direct or indirect speech act (Searle, 1975). Finally, the overall statistical results are gathered, summarized, and compared in percentage to determine the significance of the findings. Results of the studies are presented along with relevant examples. Many children's picture books have no page number. In the examples, page number is not used in the citations. The broad transcription of Thai utterances follows the phonemic transcription proposed by Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom (2005).

Results

To understand the pragmatic strategies in use, the data is analyzed and compared in two aspects: conversational utterances between characters and the strategies used to convey key messages. The results are presented as follows.

The Pragmatic Strategies used in Conversational Utterances between Characters

As described earlier, all conversational utterances between characters are first broken down into smaller constructural units. There are 1,821 constructural units from Thai books and 1,999 constructural units from the Americans. Then, each

constructural unit is analyzed, based on the Speech Act theory, in three parts: (Part 1) direct and indirect speech act; (Part 2) explicit and implicit performative; (Part 3) classification of illocutionary act.

In Part 1, from the statistical results, both Thai and American authors clearly prefer the use of direct speech acts at 95.94 percent and 87.69 percent (or 1,747 out of 1,821 and 1,753 out of 1,999 units) respectively. However, the Americans use indirect speech acts more often than the Thais at 12.31 percent compared to 4.06 percent (or 246 out of 1,999 compared to 74 out of 1,821 units).

With regards to constructural-unit functions, it is found that a direct speech act always performs only one function and is, therefore, classified as single-function type. On the other hand, an indirect speech act may perform one or multiple functions, depending on the context. It can then be classified as single- or multiple-function type. From the collected data, all constructural units are found to perform up to three functions each. Both Thai and American authors clearly favor the use of single-function units at 98.63 percent and 92.25 percent (or 1,796 out of 1,821 and 1,844 out of 1,999 units) respectively. However, the Americans use multiple-function units more often than the Thais at 7.75 percent compared to 1.37 percent (or 155 out of 1,999 compared to 25 out of 1,821 units).

The excerpts from children's picture books showing various aspects related to direct and indirect speech act, single- and multiple-function constructural units, combinations of constructural-unit forms and functions are shown in Example 1 and 2.

Example 1 by a Thai author in *Secret in a sack* (Sirising, 2000)

“หมีปู้กแบกอะไรมาล่ะ” หมีปู้กถาม

“**mīpūk bēk aray maa nà**” mīpūk thāam

“**bear name carry what come pragmatic particle**” bear name ask

“**“Pook, what are you carrying?”** Pok asked.”

From Example 1, Pook was a bear who was going to visit his fellow bear friend named Pok. Pook brought some souvenirs with him in a sack. Once he got to his friend's house, Pok asked about the content of the sack. The constructural unit in bold is a direct speech act in interrogative form and serves only one function, which is to ask.

Example 2 by an American author in *Officer Buckle & Gloria* (Rathmann, 1995)

Grade schools, high schools, and day-care centers were calling about the safety speech. “Officer Buckle,” they said, “our students want to hear your safety tips! And please, bring along that police dog.”

From Example 2, Officer Buckle was a police officer responsible for promoting safety among children. Gloria was a police canine who usually co-performed with Officer Buckle and made him popular among children. Consequently, he was invited to make the same safety speech in many other schools. The constructural unit in bold is in declarative form and can be interpreted as either direct or indirect speech act. If interpreted with literal meaning, it is a direct speech act with the function to assert the information. If interpreted with non-literal meaning, it is considered an indirect speech act with the function to

invite Officer Buckle to make a safety speech. The context facilitating this interpretation is “*Grade schools, high schools, and day-care centers were calling about the safety speech.*” This is also an example of multiple-function unit. In this case, it performs two functions: to assert and to invite.

In Part 2, the results from the direct and indirect speech act analysis are used as the basic information for further studies, including the performative analysis. From the statistical results, both Thai and American authors preferred the use of implicit performatives at 91.38 percent and 94.5 percent (or 1,664 out of 1,821 and 1,889 out of 1,999 units) respectively. However, the Thais use explicit performatives more frequently at 8.62 percent (157 out of 1,821 units) and with wider variety than the Americans at 5.5 percent (110 out of 1,999 units). The usage examples related to explicit and implicit performatives are shown in Example 3 and 4 respectively.

Example 3 by a Thai author in *Wait! Wait! A delicious cake is coming* (Phothirat, 2008)

“บอกแล้วว่าให้กินซะทั้งหมดเรื่อง” ตัวเบิ้มพึมพำ

“**bòk léew wāa hāy kin sá kǎw**”

“**tell aspect auxiliary complementizer give eat pragmatic particle linker particle mòt rǎn**” dǎn bǎm phumpham be finish matter” grub name murmur

“**I told** you just finish it.” The fat grub murmured.”

In Example 3, it is a conversation between a tiny ant and a fat grub. The argument occurred when the insects found a cake dropped near them. The fat grub was very happy and suggested to share it among friends, but his friends thought they should instead find the rightful owner. The constructural unit in bold is an explicit performative with a verb “**told**”.

Example 4 by an American author in *Art & Max* (Wiesner, 2010)

Max: **I can paint too, Arthur!**

Arthur: **You, Max? Don't be ridiculous.**

In Example 4, Arthur and Max were lizards. Arthur was a great artist. Max asked Arthur whether he could paint. The constructural units in bold are implicit performatives because there is no explicit performative verb in these constructural units.

In Part 3, after all the constructural units are analyzed with the concept of performatives, they are classified into five illocutionary-act types. However, in some cases, one unit can be classified into more than one type. These are defined as multi-type.

The statistical results show that both Thai and American authors clearly prefer the use of single-type illocutionary acts, at 99.51 percent and 97.90 percent (or 1,812 out of 1,821 and 1,957 out of 1,999 units) respectively. The representatives are most commonly used at 64.31 percent and 50.53 percent (or 1,171 out of 1,821 and 1,010 out of 1,999 units) by the Thai and American authors respectively. However, the Americans use the multi-type more often at 2.10 percent compared to 0.49 percent (or 42 out of 1,999 compared to 9 out of 1,821 units). The examples of single- and multi-type illocutionary acts are shown in Example 5 and 6.

Example 5 by a Thai author in *Dog, donkey, and goat cross the bridge* (Sutthisattha, 1981)

ลาสิขาวร้องบอกไปว่า “น้องลาดำ ขอเชิญน้องข้ามมาก่อน”

laa sūkhāw rǎwng bòk pay wāa “**nǎwng laa dam donkey**”

white beg tell go complementizer “younger brother donkey
black khǝǝchǝən nǝwɣ **khām** maa kǝn”

invite younger brother **cross come first**”

‘The white donkey shouted out, “Black donkey, **please cross first.**”’

In Example 5, the scene was about a white and a black donkey, who wanted to cross a narrow bridge at the same time. The structural unit in bold is a direct speech act. It is an illocutionary act classified as directive and used by the speaker to designate the listener to do something, that is, to cross the bridge. This is an example of single-type illocutionary act.

Example 6 by an American author in *A chair for my mother* (Williams, 1982)

Mama yelled, “**Where’s Mother?**”

I yelled, “**Where’s my grandma?**”

Example 6 was an excerpt from a story about a girl who lived with her mother and grandmother. One day her house was on fire, so they were all worried about each other. The structural units in bold are direct speech acts with literal meaning. They can be categorized as either directives or expressives. As directives, they perform interrogations. As expressives, they express worries. These are examples of multi-type illocutionary acts.

Strategies used to Convey Key Messages

After analyzing the conversational utterances between characters to understand the pragmatic strategies in use, all the books are analyzed as a whole to understand the strategies used by the authors to convey key messages. Three strategies are found: (Strategy 1) embedding key messages in conversational utterances using direct speech acts, (Strategy 2) summarizing key messages by the narrators using direct speech acts, and (Strategy 3) indirectly implanting key messages in the whole story. The results clearly show that the Thai and American authors prefer completely different strategies. The Thais prefer the direct approach by mainly using either Strategy 1 (37.5% or 15 out of 40 books) or Strategy 2 (42.5% or 17 out of 40 books), whereas the Americans prefer the indirect approach by mainly using Strategy 3 (80% or 32 out of 40 books). The examples are shown in the following Example 7, 8, and 9.

Example 7 by a Thai author in *The beloved box* (Meesukhon, 2013)

น้องคุ้นเล็กบอกพี่ว่า “เราแกะกล่องดูกันไหมว่ามีอะไร”

nǝwɣ tǝn lék bǝǝk phǝiphǝi wǝa “raw kǝ

younger brother mole small say older brothers
complementizer “first-person pronoun open

klǝwɣ duu kan mǝy wǝa mǝi aray”

box look reciprocal question particle complementizer
have what”

‘The youngest mole said to other siblings, “Shall we open it?”’

พี่คุ้นรองแย้งว่า “ไม่คิดมั้ง เราน่าจะเอาไปคืนเจ้าของมากกว่า”

phǝi tǝn rǝwɣ yǝɛɣ wǝa “mǝy dǝi mǝnɣ

older brother mole second argue complementizer
“negative marker good pragmatic particle

raw nǝa cà aw pay khuun càwkhǝwɣ mǝak kwǝa”

first-person pronoun should will take go return owner
more than”

‘The middle one argued, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. **We should return it to the owner.**”’

Example 7 is about a story of a box that fell from a pick-up truck. The three-sibling moles saw and picked it up. They argued about what to do with it. The key message of this story is that one should not take what belongs to another. The utterance in bold is the statement, by the second eldest mole, suggesting that the box should have been returned to its owner, which is in line with the key message, and shows how the author conveys it through the conversational utterance between characters.

Example 8 by a Thai author in *True Friend* (Yensabay, 1979)

*The crippled bear cub smiled happily when he realized that **the result of doing good deeds by helping those who were in danger or in need was a way to create love and friendship that one wished for.***

The story in Example 8 was about a bear cub, who was orphaned and crippled. He was frequently teased and picked on. One day, there was a forest fire. Little Rabbit, Monkey and a Piglet implored the strong tiger cub to help them, but they were flatly denied. However, the crippled bear cub helped them to escape from the fire until he passed out. The three friends helped nurse him back to consciousness and warmly welcomed the bear as their friend. The key message of the story is in bold and conveyed through the narrator at the end of the story. The utterance is a direct speech act in declarative form and serves as an assertion with the purpose to exhort. It is literal in meaning without an explicit performative verb. It is also a directive.

Example 9 by an American author in *When Dinosaurs Came with Everything* (Broach, 2007)

Today is a special day. It is a dream comes true for a boy to get dinosaurs from shops and services. At the bakery, the barbershop, movies, or even the doctor’s office, the boy gets so many dinosaurs! The boy is so happy, but the mother is concerned about what to do with these creatures. As part of the family, the dinosaurs try to adapt into a new home and help with the errands as they all get home. The mother is happy and even calls to order some more donuts!

Example 9 shows the case when the key message is indirectly embedded throughout the entire story for readers or listeners to infer. In this story, the key message can be inferred that if we change our perspectives, things thought to cause confusion or difficulty can be fully exploited. It is a directive.

Discussion

The overall results show that the pragmatic strategies used in children’s picture books written by the Thai and American authors are generally similar in many areas. However, there are clear differences in the details. The key findings are as follows.

Generally, the pragmatic strategies in conversational utterances between characters used by the Thai and American authors are rather similar. Both prefer simple pragmatic strategies like the use of direct speech acts, single-function structural units, and single-type illocutionary acts. When classifying the illocutionary acts, the results show that the representative type is the most common one, as most

constructural units are meant for telling stories and hence classified as representative type.

However, the clear differences are in the details. In many aspects, the Americans use rather indirect approach to communicate much more often than the Thais including the use of indirect speech acts, multiple-function constructural units, and multi-type illocutionary acts. The American authors not only prefer the indirect approach in pragmatic strategies used in conversational utterances between characters but also in the way they communicate the main ideas of the stories. The most common strategy is to implant the key message throughout the entire story rather than embedding it or summarizing it somehow. Such usage is in the exact opposite direction for the Thais.

When indirect pragmatic strategies are used (e.g., indirect speech acts, multiple-function units, implicit performatives, multi-type illocutionary acts), the readers or listeners cannot interpret the utterances directly as written. One needs to understand the relevant context to capture the hidden meanings behind the words. Sometimes, the authors also leave certain points open in their stories for the readers or listeners to fill in using their imagination. The preference by the Americans on the indirect approach as described above, in turn, requires deeper understanding and higher effort to interpret the intended meaning, when compared to reading the Thai books.

There are various possible reasons. Firstly, the Thai education system and culture may not encourage children to be as creative as the American. Pianpiamsin et al. (2018) mentions that the Thai early-childhood education system is still based on rigid curriculum and requires children to memorize rather than to understand the context. Children are not encouraged to think nor to express their feeling freely. On the other hand, the American focuses more on child-centered approach that allows them to learn at different pace through self-learning activities. With regards to culture, according to Isaranurak and Suthisukon (2007), eastern culture including the Thai generally gives high importance to close family relationship. Young children tend to be overly protected and largely dependent on adults in many aspects. Western culture including the American, on the other hand, generally teach children to be independent from a young age. Children can think and decide on their own. This results in better child development, especially in terms of creativity.

Secondly, many Thai textbooks or documents related to language to be used in children's picture books all suggest in the same way that the language should be simple and easy to understand, as described in Literature Review.

Thirdly, the Thai reading promotion policy and tax exemption law has been implemented since 2009. This has positively affected the industry mainly on the quantity of books (Ngamwittayaphong, 2010), including children's picture books, but probably not on the quality, judging from the lower number of awards being given during recent years.

Even though this research and Kanrein (2007), as described in Literature Review, study the authors' intentions in the utterances (sentences) within the children's picture books, there are a few differences. This research is based on the concept of Speech Act by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975, 1976). The concept is used to interpret and to analyze

the constructural units along with relevant context from 80 children's picture books, half written by Thais and another by Americans. The statistical results are summarized in percentage and compared. On the other hand, Kanrein (2007) is based on the sentence analysis theory developed by Phanthumetha (1984), which focuses on the sentence interpretation according to its sentence form from 15 Thai children's picture books. The results are described as observation only. The similar finding from both researches is the declarative form being the most common. This may be because the children's picture books are written mainly to tell the stories and are supposed to be fun for children.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In general, the pragmatic strategies used in children's picture books written by Thai and American authors are found to be similar, simple, and direct. However, when it comes to the indirect approach in many areas, both in the pragmatic strategies used in conversational utterances and the way to convey key messages, the usage by the Americans is much higher. This, in turn, requires higher effort to understand.

This leads to a question whether Thai children's picture books should be more complex like the Americans. If the answer is yes, then the results of this research may be beneficial for those who desire to improve the quality of Thai children's picture books and those who need to choose the books for children. In addition, the government should not only encourage more reading but also support the end-to-end process from the authors, publishers, and to the readers so that our children have more high-quality children's picture books that encourage more creativity and imagination, easily available at reasonable price. As children hold the key to our national development, the researcher believes that these suggestions are important and should be taken seriously to properly prepare our youth for the future.

As this research seems to be the first of its kind, as described in Literature Review, the study aims to understand the overall trends with reasonable sample size at this point. However, further studies to compare different age groups and different publishing periods may be of interest for those in linguistics and children's literature fields.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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