Missonary Workers’ Use of Language for Communication as a Medium of 
d’a’wah Among Orang Asli in Malaysia

Zulkefli bin Aini, Nur Damia Husna binti Nor Sad

Department of Dakwah dan Leadership Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Accepted 2017-03-10; Published 2017-04-01

Abstract: Communication is basically a process that requires the involvement of the communicator, the message and the recipient of information. In the context of da’wah (missionary work), the missionary workers play the role as the communicator of the message of Islam. In order to relay information about Islam, language becomes the means to communicate verbally with the subject. In fact, the use of language for dakwah is integral in the life of humans as social beings. Moreover, language is able to give a big impact on determining the success of da’wah. However, constraints in terms of the readiness of the missionary worker, effectiveness of delivery and lack of mastery of the language make the da’wah effort become more challenging nowadays. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to study the characteristics of language used for da’wah by the missionary workers in order to communicate with the oboriginals. It is also to analyze the use of language for da’wah among missionary workers when they are communicating verbally with the oboriginals. This is a qualitative research that utilizes case study method. The methodology for data collection is semi-structured interviews that involve nine missionary workers who are directly involved in the da’wah with the oboriginals. The sampling is carried out using purposeful sampling method. Research data are analyzed descriptively after the transcription has been completed, and the theme construction and data coding have been organised in detail. Research outcomes show that the language used for da’wah comprises of four characteristics i.e. proper and honest language, easily understood language, courteous language and language that is clear and organised. It can be seen that missionary workers who use language that is kind and honest are capable of disseminating information that is true. They also incapable of lying and are honest in their action. Missionary workers who use language that is easily understood are those who do not use language laden with scientific terms and is not academic, and also they do not use their own regional dialect. Meanwhile missionary worker who use courteous language are those who do not use language that has negative connotation that can offend the oboriginals. Missionary workers who use clear and organised language are those who communicate using straightforward and well constructed sentences. However, from this research it is found out that there are some missionary workers who are not careful in the use of their language and as a consequence the communication with the subject breaks down. The implication of this research is that it can help the related agencies like the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), State Islamic Councils and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) that are involved in da’wah to continuously improve the quality of communication among the missionary workers especially when they are communicating with the oboriginals. Through the mastery of language for da’wah, it will leave a positive impact on the missionary workers as the communicators of the message of Islam and the the oboriginals as the recipient of the knowledge communicated.

Keywords: Missionary Workers, Councils and Non-Government Organisations

INTRODUCTION

The task carried out by a missionary worker requires mastery of skills and techniques in determining the suitable approach to be used for the target group (Ab. Aziz, 2001). One of these skills and techniques is related to language. In the context of da’wah communication, language is important in complementing the process of communication which involves four elements, i.e. missionary worker as a communicator, the da’wah message presented, approach used in achieving the mission and objective of da’wah (Toto Tasmara, 1997). This is in line with Munif (2015) who states that in the process of information dissemination, language is the main aspect that acts as the mediation tool for humans. However, he also asserts that due to the factors of education, lifestyle, religion, culture and
experience it makes it important for the language that is used as the medium of da’wah to be presented according to the suitability of the time. This is also being discussed by al-Qaradawi (1996) who says that missionary workers must first know the situation and background of those who are the target group of their da’wah so that they can understand the da’wah phenomenon that is taking place. Also, Zaydan (1976) explains that this da’wah effort involves the process of learning and teaching (tarbiyyah dan ta’lim). Therefore, in the context of da’wah among the aboriginals, a missionary worker is referring to an individual who carries the responsibility to do da’wah that is specific to the target group and usually such missionary worker belongs the da’wah entity like Penggerak Masyarakat Orang Asli (PMOA) or Muslim Social Workes of Orang Asli and Panel Dakwah Muallaf (PDM) or Muslim Reverts Panel. Dakwah work for the Orang Asli (the aboriginals) is an effort that is challenging and is in need for a suitable da’wah approach that suits the level of understanding of the target group. This makes the da’wah work not as easy as it is thought to be (Syed Abdurrahan, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this working paper is to discuss the research findings that focus on the aspect of language used in da’wah and how they are to be applied by PMOAs and PDMs in their da’wah efforts among the Orang Asli.

**THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE IN DA’WAH**

Berlo (1960) explains that language is referring to the words and utterances produced by an individual. These words and utterances carry a certain meaning and connotation in the communication process. He further explains that language is not merely represented by symbols, but it contains meaning that interprets what someone intends to say in communication. Language is also known as symbols that bring meaning to every word that is uttered (A. Makarma 2014; Banhart 1976 and Danang Dwi 2015). Meanwhile according to Mustafa Daud (2000) language functions as the medium to spread the da’wah, also as the medium for education, knowledge, politics and for social and commercial activities in Islamic civilization. Furthermore, Samsuri (1980) elaborates that the use of language is absolutely significant in looking at the world of humans that is so centered around day to day discourses. The findings of the research conducted by Nurul Salmi (2014) show the importance of language whereby 70% of an individual’s daily activities involve the use of language.

In the context of da’wah, Munif Zariruddin (2015) explains that language plays an important role in the continuity of the message that is relayed in da’wah. This is because language is the main medium of knowledge transfer between the missionary worker as the communicator and source of information and the target group as the recipient of information. Meanwhile, Djamalul Abidin (1996) characterizes language as the main tool for da’wah and it also shapes the character of the
missionary worker. He believes that the proverb ‘bahasa menunjukkan bangsa’ (language is the character of the race) symbolizes the function and importance of language used by an individual in the process of communication. This is in line with Sulaiman Masri (1998) who explains that the choice and usage of language is important because the listening audience are capable to construe the message delivered by examining the language used by the speaker. Related to this, Saodah Wok et al. (2003) indicate that a missionary worker must employ a suitable form of language that can attract the listener in a communication. Meanwhile, according to Mustafa Masyur (2007) the awareness about the sense of responsibility in observing the proper code of conduct is crucial when initiating a conversation for the benefit of all parties. This is because, according to Zainuddin & Ziadatul (2006) language is venerated if the proper conduct in communication is understood and followed. Therefore, language does not only play the role as the medium of interaction but it also becomes the symbol of manners, behaviour and action of the person who disseminate the message. In other words, it means that those who receive the da’wah message can judge the missionary worker simply from observing the missionary worker’s style of delivery. This process shows that the selection of language form that is suitable with the level of understanding of the target group plays an important part in making the individual’s delivery of the da’wah message to be more effective. The involvement of language as the main tool of communication making it the gauge to see whether the da’wah message is successfully accepted by the target group or otherwise.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the research show that the language used for da’wah employed by missionary workers from PMOA and PDM consists of four features which are identified from the process of da’wah towards the Orang Asli. The language of da’wah that is meant here refers to language that is accurate and honest, language that is easily understood, language that is courtous and language that is clear and organized. However, from the aspect of the missionary workers’ knowledge of the Orang Asli’s languages, the findings indicate that the missionary workers (from PMOA and PDM) do not have the mastery or even understanding of the languages of the Orang Asli.

a. Accurate and Honest Language

Research findings show that missionary workers’ use of language must contain information that is accurate and honest. This is important because according to Asep (2013) an individual is said to have used language that is accurate and honest when he/ she is really concerned about the content that is communicated, the information that is relayed is accurate and there is no element of libel or falsehood in the language that is used. From the interview conducted with PK 5, the interviewee believes that language that is accurate and honest is not only gauged based on the words uttered by the missionary worker, but his/ her every move and action is also being evaluated by the Orang Asli community to determine whether the message of da’wah has been successfully transmitted or not. This is important because the research findings also indicate that there are certain missionary workers who take this matter lightly until it leads to misunderstanding between the missionary worker and the Orang Asli community. This is based on the recorded statement of PK 5 as follows:

“…Because I heard there was a complaint that a PMOA was asking for some amount of money from a muallaf (convert) as a charge for taking him to the office of religious department for some matters concerning marriage. How do you expect to get the respect and trust from the Orang Asli? Ok, most of the Orang Asli are illiterate, so they ask the PMOA to withdraw some money for them at the ATM and say ‘ustaz, please withdraw some money for me, this is my password’. When he receives the money the amount is lesser than what it should be. We sense something wrong is going on here. When we check, the money from the class supposedly should have not decreased. There are so many issues here.
As a PMOA you must have sincerity and honesty. Trustworthiness is important. When the PMOA does his/ her work sincerely, in shaa allah (God wills) the Orang Asli will trust the PMOA more than anyone else. Help with sincerity. Don’t expect for a ‘tip’.

This incident shows us that the aspects of truthfulness and sincerity through words and actions of the missionary workers are inter-related. This is in line with the opinion of Munzier & Harjani (2009) who state that the da’wah method of bi al-Hal or doing da’wah by example is not only limited to the utterances of the missionary worker, but it must also be complemented with the truthful and honest actions of missionary worker. This matter is affirmed by informant 1 who makes the following statement:

“This matter of trust, you must really convince the Orang Asli. For example it must be shown through your attitude and character as well as through the way you communicate with them. You must walk the talk…”.

This statement is in accordance with the Holy Quran that shows as in the following verse:

Meaning:

Who is better in speech than one who calls (men) to Allah, works righteousness, and says, “I am of those who bow in Islam”?

(al-Qur’an, Surah Al-Fussilat 41: 33)

Therefore, in order to ensure the continuity of da’wah it calls for the missionary workers to use da’wah language that is truthful and honest and this covers the aspects of language as well the deeds of the missionary workers towards the target group. According to Mustafa (2000), in the context of da’wah the choice of language that is accurate and honest becomes a crucial aspect because language is the important medium of da’wah and has become the symbol of a civilized society. This is in line with the findings of the research by Adawiyah et al. (2014) that states the factor that contributes to the failure of da’wah is due to the approach and appearance shown by the missionary worker himself/ herself. Apt with the statement of Muhammad Natsir (1978), a missionary worker should not only equip himself/ herself with the knowledge, but the character and attitude of the missionary worker must also be present because it reflects the reality of a true missionary worker.

b. Easily Understood Language

Acmad Mubarok (1997) lists the features of da’wah language that is easily understood that include mild presentation, in moderation and easily accepted by the audience. In this research, the result of the interviews with PMOA and PDM shows that there are three elements to the usage of language that is easily understood. The specific element is referring to the situation when the missionary worker does not use terms that are difficult to understand and the missionary worker also does not use his/ her native dialect and he/ she explains his/ her points in the message of da’wah by illustrating them in the “visual” form.

From the interviews conducted, the research finds that PK 1 until PK 8 do not agree with the usage of difficult to understand terms when communicating with the Orang Asli community for example, when a missionary worker uses words borrowed from English like ‘pluralisme’, ‘vandalisme’ and ‘sekularisme’ which is considered not suitable because it can cause a problem for the Orang Asli to understand them. The findings of this research are in line with research conducted by Abdul Razaq & Zalizan (2009) who also find that the da’wah approach of using words that are difficult for the Orang Asli to understand is not suitable as the level of education among the Orang Asli is rather low. In the context of the Revelation, God’s Messengers sent by Allah to humans were all equipped with the ability to communicate with their peoples as mentioned by Allah SWT in the Holy Quran as in the following verse:

Meaning:
We sent not a Messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them. Now Allah leaves straying those whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases: and He is Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom.

(al-Qur’an, Surah Ibrahim 14: 4)

From the aspect of the missionary workers using regional dialects of their native states, the research findings indicate that PK 1 until PK 8 have the same view that is the missionary workers should change his native dialect to a more understandable spoken language if the villagers are not familiar with the dialect. As an example, PK 1 explains the situation when the video of a talk given by a prominent speaker namely Ustaz Azhar Idrus was shown to the Orang Asli, they could not understand the words uttered by the ustaz because the dialect used by him was the Terengganu dialect which the Orang Asli could not understand. PK 1 also explains that the situation would have been different if P. Ramlee’s (Malaysian famous actor as well as composer, singer, film director and comedian) comedy film was shown instead. This is because, according to PK 1, the Orang Asli would have shown a more positive response to the comedic scenes in the movie. This finding is in line with the finding of the research by Abdul Ghafar & Ahmad Redzuwan (2009) who also find that the Orang Asli feel entertained when P. Ramlee movie is shown because it is filled with action and comedy. Therefore, PK 7 further explains that the message relaying method of ‘visible language’ is used by making an analogy involving a tree. According to the PK 3, when communicating the idea of the Magnificent God, the Orang Asli are made to mentally visualize a beautiful tree that produces abundant yields and has leaves that are luscious green. The concept of of storytelling that is by explaining to the Orang Asli how we can see the greatness of God the Creator by looking at His creation (that is the tree) is what termed ‘visible language’.

The same method is also used by PK 7 who gives explicit illustrations of the message to be transmitted to the Orang Asli concerning Heaven and Hell. For PK 7, the content of the message should be simple and can be easily digested by the Orang Asli. Therefore, PK 7 gives an illustration of Heaven and Hell by making them think of someone who is good and loved by people, this person will get the reward of a beautiful and comfortable place while an evil person will end up being punished for the bad things he/ she does. And that is the visualization for Heaven and Hell.

According to Sang, Mok Soon (2012), among the effective methods used by teachers in their teaching is the concept of storytelling and demonstrating and they are done by drawing and
and making a diagram in order to make it easy for the students to understand the lesson. In line with the finding of the research by Wee, Chiong Lee (2009) it is found out that the visual method when used on the students it can attract their attention to the lesson. According to this research, students will start to guess the pictures drawn by the teacher and show their interest to listen to the teacher’s story. This shows that a missionary worker can utilize their storytelling, and drawing skills in their effort to make it easy for the Orang Asli to understand the da’wah message. In addition to that, the research by Rohani & Jamil (2010) shows that the teaching process should be done in a creative and innovative manner so that the teacher’s delivery of the knowledge can be more effective and interesting. In the pedagogy method, the research by Haslinda et al. (2015) finds out that teachers play their part through their hands-on and minds-on approach toward the children of Orang Asli. The learning-through-playing method is considered to be a priority in the teaching and learning process. Other than that, the research by Sarjit et al. (2010) shows that Orang Asli are not really responsive towards activities that are informal.

c. Courteous Language

According to Achmad Mubarok (1999), the courteous language of da’wah is referring to the situation where the missionary worker speaks courteously, calmly and he/she is not harsh and hasty when talking. The language culture of being courteous shows that one is not going against the norm of the audience who listen to the message that one sends (Sara & Indirawari, 2015).

From the interviews conducted with the PKs, two elements categorized as courteous language of da’wah have been identified. These elements include the utilization of words or phrases welcomed by the Orang Asli and not using words and phrases loathed by them like words and phrases that touch on their superstitious belief of do’s and don’t’s and anything that could bring negative elements to their lives. Mohd Yusof (1990) states that a missionary worker is required to speak in a mild manner and this is the crucial principle in Islamic communication. The parable of Prophet Musa (Moses) AS and Prophet Harun (Aaron) AS with Pharaoh becomes an example of how we should speak courteously even to a despotic and cruel leader. This matter is mentioned in the Holy Quran where Allah SWT says:

Meaning:

“Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds; “But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah).”

(al-Qur’an, Surah Taha 20: 43-44)

From the aspect of using words and phrases that the Orang Asli are fond of, the result of the interviews with PK 5, PK 7 and PK 8 indicate that the Orang Asli favor the da’wah language that emphasizes words and phrases that have positive connotations and are motivational and flattering and also avoid the usage of words and phrases that touch on their superstitious belief. This is contained in the statement by PK 5 as follows:

“These compliments are like the word ‘beautiful’. So he or she will be sheepish or embarrassed when praised….Like when we agree with them or give them support….For example we say ‘I am certain that you really can do it…’. They really like it. Another example, compliment him/ her by saying ‘you’re so clever…’.”

From PK 5’s statement we learn that words like ‘cantik’ (beautiful), ‘boleh’ (can do something) and ‘pandai’ (clever) are capable of giving a positive effect towards the Orang Asli when the communication process is taking place. This is because these words have positive, flattery and motivational effects on the Orang Asli community. The statement by Abdullah Hassan (2007) shows that a language can have a significant impact on the listener. He explains that humans prefer and are easily influenced by the choice of positive words in their everyday life. For this positive impact to materialize it depends on one’s skills in making sure that the communication method that is employed can have a positive effect on the listener.
Besides that, the concern and care in choosing the ‘right’ words is important in order to avoid the missionary workers from encroaching on the sensitivity and taboos of the Orang Asli community. From the interviews with PK 1 until PK 9 it can clearly be seen that the missionary workers are forbidden altogether from saying words like ‘Sakai’ and ‘Jakun’ when speaking about the Orang Asli. Muhammad Busu (2016) states that the terms ‘Sakai’ and ‘Jakun’ are the words that are unacceptable in the life of the Orang Asli community. However, the result of the study shows that these words are considered sensitive among certain Orang Asli community depending on their settlement area. This demands for the sensitivity of the missionary worker in identifying the sensitivities of each locality. For example, PK 2 and PK 8 say that the Orang Asli in the village where they do their da’wah activity cannot accept any missionary worker saying words ‘Hitam’ (dark) dan ‘Orang Hutan’ (jungle people). For the villagers, the usage the words ‘Hitam’ (dark) and ‘Orang Hutan’ (jungle people) is considered denigrating as these terms are the condescending terms to refer to the Orang Asli community.

Ramlee Abdullah (2016) also mentions that the missionary worker’s attitude that is not sensitive and does not concern about the Orang Asli community will give a negative effect toward the missionary worker himself/herself. This is because according to Jo Komar & W. A Amir (2014) the Orang Asli community strictly observe the good conduct and avoid the taboos in their everyday life. In fact, they have a principle that they live by that is “Biar matik enek, jangan matik adat” which means “biar mati anak, jangan mati adat” (One should accept the death of one’s child but one should never ever let the traditions to perish). In addition to that, the research by Juli Edo (1988) shows that the Orang Asli community are heavily influenced by the traditions and values that are handed down to them from the previous generation. This makes every tribe in the Orang asli settlement has their own ethnic eccentricity and traditions (Siti Aminah & Seow, 2013).

In the interview with PK 5 it is stated that the language choice by the missionary worker when communicating with the Orang Asli is important in order to avoid misunderstanding. This is because, even though the missionary worker has no intention to hurt the feelings of the Orang Asli, their sensitive nature makes them form a wrong impression toward the missionary worker. PK 5’s statement is as follows:

“…Until they become disheartened. They do not want to join any program. To a point they are not on a speaking term with the missionary workers. They are quite sensitive. When the PMOA reminds or advises them that they shouldn’t do certain things or they should wear the head scarf because it’s a sin that can lead them to Hell. They refuse to attend the class after the rebuke. Even though what the missionary
Zulkefli bin Aini. Missionary Workers’ Use of Language for Communication as a Medium of da’wah Among Orang Asli in Malaysia

worker does is merely giving them advice they take it as if they are being reprimanded. So they sulk and refuse to attend any program and don’t want to go to the class…”.

Being wary in choosing the way to express one’s thought and idea in the process of da’wah is important according to Bahiyah et al. (2013), the Orang Asli community have a sensitive feeling and are easily hurt. The research by Abdul Razaq & Zalizan (2009) also finds that besides their sensitive feeling, the Orang Asli are also sulky and have low self-esteem.

d. Language That Is Clear and Organized

From the interview process conducted for this research, the result shows that the da’wah language that is clear and organized is referring to the situation where the missionary worker communicates with the Orang Asli in a concise manner and not talking too fast until what is said is unintelligible to the Orang Asli. PK 1, PK 7, PK 8 and PK 9 explain that missionary workers are not advised to be detailed in their explanation as it is sufficient for them to use words that are short and simple in order to make it easy for the Orang Asli to understand the da’wah message. For example, PK 1 explains that when the process of teaching and learning is taking place, the duration of the class must not exceed 2 hours. This research finding is corroborated by PK 7 who says that the span of learning among the Orang Asli for topics like prayer, fasting and others will take a long time to finish. PK 5 adds, missionary workers must always repeat the lessons taught as the Orang Asli are not good at memorizing. This is in line with the research by Shaari et al. (2011) that finds this happens (missionary workers have to always repeat the lessons taught) because the Orang Asli are not good at memorization as their their level of thinking is still low. In addition to that, the same finding is obtained from the research by Abdul Razaq & Zalizan (2009) that is the Orang Asli children are only capable to pay attention to the lessons in class for only 15 minutes because they easily become bored with the teaching and learning process.

In line with that, the research finding also shows that the Orang Asli have no interest to listen to wordy sentences. For them the missionary worker who goes on and on when preaching the da’wah message speaker easily makes them bored. The following is the statement of PK 5:

“They are easily bored. We shouldn’t give a long lecture to the Orang Asli. Only say what is necessary and that’s about it. The following day see them and speak to them again…”.

However, one research finds that if the teaching and learning process is conducted in the area like near the river or under the tree, the Orang Asli children can retain their attention for 30 minutes (Abdul Razaq & Zulizan, 2009). From the explanation of Ma’rof & Sarjit (2008) they say that the Orang Asli children prefer to have an informal learning environment that is free and not confined in the classroom. Related to this, the research by Shaari et al. (2011) also finds that the Orang Asli have fascination with the nature and outdoor activities. This indicates that there is a need for a reformation in the approach like the teaching and learning process should be conducted outdoors.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the research findings show that the features of the da’wah language cover the following aspects: accurate and honest language, easily understood language, courteous language and also language that is clear and organized. Every language feature that is stated has its own criteria as discussed in this paper. However, in terms of the mastery of the Orang Asli languages, this research has found that the missionary workers are not capable of speaking or even understanding the languages. This calls for the need to provide the missionary workers from PMOA and PMD with the training from time to learn the languages of the Orang Asli. This effort is vital as one of the necessary skills to approach the Orang Asli community is by communicating with them in their
own languages. Besides that, one’s understanding of the choice of language feature and the effective utilization of the *da’wah* language that has been discussed here should be given the emphasis as these language elements play a crucial role in ensuring the communication process is carried out effectively.

**Acknowledgement:** The National University of Malaysia (UKM) Research Fund namely Geran Galakan Penyelidik Muda (GGPM-2016-051) is gratefully acknowledged.

**REFERENCES**


Zulkefli bin Aini. Missionary Workers’ Use of Language for Communication as a Medium of da’wah Among Orang Asli in Malaysia


