

## **A STUDY OF STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF GOSSIP AMONG FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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**Abstract.** Artikel ini melaporkan penelitian tentang unsur-unsur struktural percakapan dalam gosip. Gosip adalah salah satu jenis percakapan santai dalam satu kelompok yang terjadi dalam konteks informal. Fokus penelitian adalah menemukan topik dan fungsi gosip di kalangan mahasiswi. Penelitian ini didasarkan atas teori tentang gosip oleh Eggins dan Slade (1997) yang menyatakan bahwa gosip berfungsi untuk membangun dan mempertahankan keanggotaan dalam kelompok dan sebagai salah satu bentuk kontrol sosial. Gosip dapat dianalisis berdasarkan unsur wajib dan pilihannya. Pertanyaan yang diajukan dalam penelitian adalah: (1) apakah topik-topik dalam gosip di kalangan mahasiswi? dan (2) apakah unsur-unsur struktural dalam gosip di kalangan mahasiswi? Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Data diperoleh dari percakapan santai antara mahasiswi di dalam tempat kos mereka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada tiga topik utama dalam gosip di kalangan mahasiswi dan terdapat unsur wajib, pilihan dan tambahan dalam struktur gosip.

**Keywords:** casual conversation, gossip, structural elements

### **INTRODUCTION**

Casual conversation is the type of talk in which we feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most ourselves and is concerned with the joint construction of social reality (Eggins and Slade, 1997:16). In other words, casual conversation is a means to negotiate such important dimensions of social identity as gender, generational location, sexuality, social class membership, ethnicity, and subcultural and social group affiliation. Casual conversation is a term that include various types of talk including narrative, anecdotes, recounts, exemplum, observation/comment, opinion, gossip, joke-telling, sending up and chat.

Gossip is the kind of relaxed in-group talk that goes on between people in informal contexts (Holmes, 1992:331). Gossip, one type of casual conversation, is idle talk or rumour talk by someone that was not there or did not see it happen, especially about the personal or private affairs of others. It is one of the oldest and most common means of sharing fact and views, but also has a reputation for the introduction of errors and variations into the information transmitted. The terms can also imply that the idle chat or rumour is of personal or trivial nature, as opposed to normal conversation. In Western society, gossip is defined as 'idle talk' and considered particularly characteristic of women's interaction (Ludwig:1975). Gossip is a form of talk through which participants can construct solidarity and do their positioning in relation as they explore shared normative judgments about culturally significant behavioral domain in

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order to maintain the value of the social group. Gossiping involves sharing opinions and judgments about a person's behavior or defining a physical norm (Eggins and Slade, 1997:276). In this way gossip reinforces and maintains the value of the social group. According to Eggins and Slade it refers to conversation between two or more people about another person behind his/her back, and involves participants in exchanging pejorative judgments, negative opinions and evaluations about the behavior of a person who is absent (Ibid., 1997:278). Gossip has also been found to be an important means by which people can monitor cooperative reputations and so maintain widespread indirect reciprocity. (Wikipedia, [www.gossip.com](http://www.gossip.com)). Gossip has also been a distinguishing feature of topics in men's and women's talk (Lakoff:1975; Spender:1980; Poynton:1989; Gramley and Patzold:1995).

Gossip is considered as a highly interactive genre; participants frequently co-construct the gossip, recipients provide continual feedback to indicate interest or ask question to elicit more details. Gossip has functional motivation to establish solidarity through shared values and agreed ways of seeing the world and to exert social control. A generic structure and linguistics features are seen to be realization of the functional motivation of gossip. Such a situation is described in the study on the generic structure and social factors of gossip among Surabaya Javanese speakers (Yayuk Mayasanti, 2008).

This study is focused on the activities of gossiping among female university students. The study will specifically investigate the topics and structural elements of gossips. As the subjects are the female students of a private university in Surabaya. This study adopts the theory of gossip in English (Eggins and Slade, 1997) as the starting point for analyzing topics and structural elements of gossip among Indonesian female university students. The problem statements of this study are formulated as follows: (1) What are the topics of gossip among female university students? and (2) what are the structural elements of gossip used by female university students?

This study is expected to give contribution to the study of linguistics in general and discourse analysis in particular, that this study will benefit readers with more information about structural elements of gossip among Indonesian female university students.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

The word *gossip* comes from the old English word *godsibb*. *Godsibb* came from the word *god* plus *sib*, a word used to show a close relationship. The word *siblings* which means 'brothers or sisters of the same parents', comes from the same word. Of course, *godsibbs* were people you knew well enough to talk openly with, to tell your secrets too. So, over centuries, the word *godsibb* or *gossip* came to be used for a person you could talk easily. By Shakespeare's time, a gossip was a person who talked too much, too easily, and who told secrets, just as a gossip today (Miller and Swift: 1976, Wikipedia).

According to Coates, women is usually said to be more than men, they spend much more time in the home with other people; cooking and washing and another house work. It differs with men who are busy with their work, silent and often on their

own for the whole day (Coates, 1985:42). Women's gossip usually focuses on personal experiences and personal relationships, on personal problems and feelings. So it may include criticism of the behaviour of others. In gossiping, women avoid criticizing people directly, but some common male react negatively on this behaviour and label it as two faced (Gluckman, 1963).

Gossip has been one of the most important ways of integrating a large number of social relationships, thus enabling big groups to cohere and to control the behavior of group members. Gossiping deals with how other individuals are likely to behave, how we should react to them when we actually meet them and what kinds of relationship they have with the third parties. All these things allow us to coordinate our social relationships within a group more effectively, and this is likely to be especially important in the dispersed groups that are characteristic of humans. This would explain our fascination for social gossip in the newspaper and why gossip about relationship accounts for an overwhelming proportion of human conversations (Robin Dunbar 1992:31).

Gossip is defined here in a more specific sense to that used by other linguists such as Jones (1980:243), who defines gossip as "a way of talking between women in their roles as women" and Coates who defines gossip as encompasses talk by women in all women interactions and as such is much broader than the generic sense in which we are using it. Similarly, Tannen's definition in *you just don't understand* (1990). Tannen says: telling details about others' lives is partly the result of women's telling their friends details of their own lives. These details become gossip; the friend to whom they are told repeats them to someone else-presumably another friend (1990:97).

Tannen equates telling gossip as a "grown up version of telling secrets" (1990:97). Bergman similarly defines gossip as "news about the personal affairs of others" (1993:45). Tannen and Bergman's definitions encompass the passing on of any details about a friend's life. Only if such conversations were extended, and pejorative opinions of the friend were exchanged and elaborated, would they fit the definition of gossip.

Gossip is the kind of relaxed in group talk that goes on between people in informal contexts (Holmes, 1992:331). In western society, gossip is defined as 'idle talk' and considered particularly characteristic of women's interaction. Gossip is a form of talk through participants can construct solidarity and do their positioning in relation as they explore shared normative judgments about culturally significant behavioral domain in other to maintain the value of the social group. Gossiping involves sharing opinions and judgments about a person's behavior or physical attributes, and by doing so implicitly assessing appropriate behavior or defining a physical norm (Eggins and Slade, 1997:276). In this way gossip reinforces and maintains the value of the social group. According to Eggins and Slade it refers to conversation between two or more people about another person behind his/her back, and involves participants in exchanging pejorative judgment. Negative opinions and evaluations about the behavior of a person are absent (1997:278).

Gossip occurs frequently in the all women group, not at all in the all male group and only minimally in the mixed group. The men very rarely discuss personal details

and their chat tends to be about work, rugby, soccer, etc. however, women discuss quite personal details including boyfriend, wedding, marriages, children, relative, future plans and past activities in detail. Gossip functions for women are to affirm solidarity and maintain the relationship, on personal problems and feelings. It may include criticism of behavior of others. In gossip session women provide a sympathetic response to any experience recounted on the affective message. However, the topics men discuss about thing and activities, rather than personal experiences and feelings (Holmes, 1992:313).

According to Eggins and Slade (1997:282-283), gossip has two functions: namely, *to establish and reinforce group membership* and *as a form of social control*. In its first function, gossip is a way of asserting social unity. It unities a group but it can also provides a means of entry into a group. It provides a means of exploring similarity and shared values; this explanation of similarity being the mechanism by which people develop social bonds. Gossip, therefore, become a 'duty of membership of the group' (Gluckman, 1968:313). Secondly, as a form of social control, gossip maintains, modifies and reconstructs reality by labeling and judging various elements of experience in term of the actions or behaviour of an absent person as deviant and unacceptable and in this way makes clear what is considered appropriate behaviour. Gossip is vehicle for maintaining the unity, morals and values of social group and it is also enables the group to control the behaviour of its member. Moreover, Eggins and Slade (1997:192) also categorize the functions of the elements of gossip into opening element, sustaining element, responding element/ reaction.

Beside the function, gossip can also be analyzed into structural elements. According to Eggins and Slade (1997:274), the structural elements of gossip are obligatory, optional, and the additional.

The obligatory elements of gossip are: *third person focus*, *substantiating behavior* and *pejorative evaluation*.

*Third person focus* function is to introduce the third person and in most cases to frame the deviant behavior of person in her/ his social environment. The personal attribute or behavior which is disapproved is also mentioned. This is where the functional motivation for establishing and maintaining in group membership is immediately reflected in the text by setting up the 'us versus them' or the 'we' versus 'they'. The third person is immediately established as outside the group by being the group's judgement. The third person focus also serve to give a thematic prediction that a gossip text is about to begin and this make the listener'tune in'to what is to follow (Eggins and slade, 1997:299).

*In substantiating behavior*, the speaker provides evidence or information which enables the participants to make a negative evaluation. The speaker describes an event which highlights some departure from normality and this is then used as a hook on which to hang the evaluation. It is this building up of evidence that allows the participant to established share attitudes and values and therefore in the case of the work place acquaintances, it is away of establishing similarity; it is a way of getting to know each other better. With close friend, this stage function to justify the speaker's negative evaluation of the third party and by doing so to elaborate on what is thought to be appropriate way to behave (Eggins and Slade, 1997:285).

In *pejorative evaluation*, the judgements which have been fueled by the substantiating behaviour are made explicit. Two aspects of the functional motivation of gossip, i.e. as a form of social control and an indicator of in group membership, are reflected in the semantic and linguistic strategies of pejorative evaluation (Eggins and Slade, 1997:300).

The optional elements of gossip are *probe* and *wrap-up*. In *probe*, the participants who do not have previous knowledge have not been involved in supplying evidence. These participants ask questions for requesting more detail. Probes are the stages in the talk where participants probe for more details, for more gossip by asking questions and by showing interest and implicit agreement with the gossip. It enables the text or gossip to continue (Eggins and Slade, 1997:304). *Wrap-up* element provides a thematic summation of the event or behaviour outlined in the text. It often picks up on the deviant behaviour mentioned in the third person focus (1997:286).

The additional elements in the gossip structure are *defense*, *response to defense* and *concession*. *Defense* is where a listener disagrees with the speaker by defending some aspect of the person being gossiped about. *Responding to the defense* is where the participant gives response to the defense. *Concession* is that a compromise position is usually reached when one and other of the parties concedes. It is to close the gossip so there may be no *Wrap-up*.

Beside having specific structure and functions, gossip may be done around some topics, including intimate or personal matter, sharing opinions about others and other's personal affairs (Eggins and Slade, 1997:268-277).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research design of this study is descriptive qualitative because, qualitative research is a research that describes phenomenon in words instead of number of measure (Yule, 2006:55), and in a basic qualitative research, data are often collected through interviews, observation, and/or focus groups, with the analysis identifying patterns within, and across cases to provide a descriptive of this pattern (Miller, Day and Michelle, 2004:17). The subject of the study involves nine female students whose identities are kept confidential. They are studying in some private universities in Surabaya. They are between 19 to 24 years old, and they major in different areas, including English Department. They live in the some boarding houses nearby campus. Considering their familiarity with each other, it is reasonable that they often do gossiping. The data are taken from the subjects by the recording their conversations from March 2011 to December 2012, and they were observed in informal situation. The total recording time is 300 minutes.

## RESULT

The results of the analysis of the topics and structural elements of gossips among female university students are presented in separate subsections.

## 1. Topics of Female Students' Gossips

The analysis on the topics of gossips results in three topics of the conversations: personal or intimate matter, sharing opinion about others and other's personal affair.

The first topic on intimate or personal matters occurs when the subjects discussed personal details including boyfriends, weddings, marriages, children and relatives. They also discussed their future plans and past activities in detail. Personal topic may involve telling secret of the speaker. The first topic is found in data 5, 8 and 9. As an illustration is the following excerpt:

(1) Data 8 move 3

Move	Speaker	Text
3/a	L	<i>Kaka mungkin tidak tahu kenapa selama ini saya mau bertahan pacaran sama dia.</i>
3/b		<i>Walaupun dia sudah sering sekali bikin saya sakit hati.</i>
3/c		<i>Sekarang mendingan saya saya jujur.</i>
3/d		<i>Tapi tolong kakak jangan bilang siapa- siapa.</i>
3/e		<i>Sebenarnya saya sudah tidak perawan lagi</i>
3/f		<i>Saya sudah tidur dengaan dia kak.</i>
3/g		<i>Makannya saya menyesal.,</i>
3/h		<i>Bingung mau buat apa lagi.</i>

In this data, the speaker talks about her private problem that she lost virginity and she feels confused with her life. She tries to open mind to her friend and tells secret that she keeps in her heart for a long time. She wants to talk about her boyfriend who is not responsible and uncharacteristic behavior.

The second topic is *sharing opinions* about others. In this stage, the participants usually ask questions or use assessments or newsmaker. This topic can be seen in Data 1:

(2) Data 1

Move	Speaker	Text
1	T	<i>Menurut kakak Orin kelihatan berubah tidak?</i>
2	E	<i>Berubah apanya?</i>

In this data, the speaker talks about the third person (Orin). She wants to share her opinion about her friend's unusual behavior and action. In the data she uses questions. As shown in move 1 *Menurut kakak Orin kelihatan berubah tidak?* She asks question to another participant here make sure that what she thinks about the third person is true and everyone knows about it.

*The third topic* is other's personal affairs. In this stage, the participants give pejorative comment or negative judgement about attribute or action of the absent person in their social environment. Judgement involves expressing evaluation about ethics, morality, or social values of people's behavior. In this thesis, the writer finds that most the data closed to this topic. This topic is found in data 2,3,5,7 and 10. As an illustration:

(3) Data 2

Move	Speaker	Text
5/c	T	<i>Lihat si D, mengaku punya pacar orang kaya</i>
5/d		<i>Tapi buktinya apa.</i>
5/e		<i>Malahan saya sering dengar dia yang transfer uang buat pacarnya.</i>
5/f		<i>Bodoh sekali dia</i>

In this data, the speaker talks about D's behavior. She gives comments on her inappropriate behavior in supporting him financially. The speaker here uses a negative evaluation such as in move 5/d *Bodoh sekali dia*. She demonstrates that D is a foolish girl.

## 2. The structural elements of gossip

The second question of the study is about the structural elements of gossips among Indonesian female students. The analysis includes finding the obligatory, optional and additional elements of the gossips. The data analysis shows that the conversations contain the three structural elements of the gossips: obligatory, optional and additional elements. These major elements are presented separately in the following sections.

### a. The Obligatory Elements

There are three obligatory elements found in the data: *third person focus*, *substantiating behaviour*, and *pejorative evaluation*.

#### i. Third person focus

In gossip, the participants are talking about an absent person. The third person focus introduces the person being gossiping about. The analysis shows that all data contain third person focus. This element usually occurs at the beginning of the beginning of the conversations, usually at turn 1, and only one data (data 5) has the third person focus much later. The third person focus may be marked with a question of someone's whereabouts who is not involved in the chat. A third person focus may come in question form (data 1, 2 and 3), as illustrated below.

(4)

Data No.	Move	Speaker	Text
1	1a	T	<i>kakak menurut kakak Orin kelihatan berubah tidak?</i>
2	1	A	<i>si D dengan si R mau kemana?</i>
3	7/b	S	<i>Laura kemana kak Itha?</i>

The third person focus may also be presented in indirect question form (Data 7) and in declarative form Data 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10). The illustration is shown in examples (5) for indirect question and (6) for declarative form:

(5) Data 7: 1/a (E) *kakak tadi saya coba Tanya ke Orin dia benaran hamil atau tidak.*

(6) Data 4: 1/b (D) *sumpah mangkel beneran aku sama nenek buyutnya cowokku.*

The above data shows that the mention of absent persons, such as *Orin* (in Data 1) and *nenek buyutnya cowokku* (in Data 4).

Introduction of the third person focus may be done gradually, or step by step, as shown in Data 7 Move 1.

(7) Data 7 Move 1.

1/a	<i>Kakak tadi saya coba Tanya ke Orin dia benaran hamil atau tidak.</i>
1/b	<i>Saya bilang ke dia</i>
1/c	<i>'orin beneran tah kamu hamil??</i>
1/d	<i>anak-di kampus loh curiga kamu hamil''</i>
1/e	<i>Soalnya kamu sekarang jarang ke kampus</i>
1/f	<i>Jarang kumpul sama anak-anak juga.</i>
1/g	<i>tapi dia jawab santai saja</i>
1/I	<i>aku gak hamil kok.</i>

### ii. Substantiating Behavior

Substantiating behavior means that the speaker provides evidence or information which enables the participant to make a negative evaluation. It tells about third person's unacceptable, uncharacteristic and inappropriate behavior or attribute (Eggins and Slade, 1997:285, 299). The result shows that all data have the substantiating behavior element, as illustrated in excerpt (8).

(8) Data 1 move 3

Move	Speaker	Text
3/a	T	<i>Dia sekarang tambah gemuk kak,</i>
3/b		<i>Anak-anak di kampus curiga kalau dia lagi hamil</i>
3/c		<i>Karena dulu badannya tidak pernah naik drastis begitu</i>
3/d		<i>Saya juga sempat curiga sih semenjak dia pulang liburan Agustus kemarin</i>

In this data, the substantiating behavior is identified when the speaker evaluates O's inappropriate negative behavior.

### iii. Pejorative Evaluation

In gossip, the judgments which have been fueled by the substantiating behaviors are made explicit. Two aspects of the functional motivation of gossip, i.e. as a form of social control and an indicator of in-group membership, are reflected in the semantic and linguistic strategies of pejorative evaluation (Eggins and Slade, 1997:300). In the data analysis, the pejorative evaluation elements are identified to occur all data, as illustrated in excerpt (9) below:

(9) Data 1 in move 5/a

Move	Speaker	Text
5/a	E	<i>Pantasan dia sering tutupi badan pakai kain kalau lagi nonton tv</i>

Excerpt (9) comes after the the data shown in (8) above. Here, the pejorative evaluation is expressed when the speaker comments on Orin's putting a sheet or cloth over her when watching television together, as if she's covering her body. This manner is considered unusual and thus negatively evaluated.

*b. The Optional Elements*

There are two optional elements of gossip. They are probe and Wrap Up.

*i. Probe*

Probes are the stages in the talk where the participants probe for more details, for more gossip by asking question and by showing interest and implicit agreement with the gossip. It enables the gossip to be continued. Almost all of the data closed to this element, as illustrated in excerpt (10) below.

(10) Data 2 in move 3

Move	Speaker	Text
2/a	E	<i>Laki-laki yang mana?</i>
2/b		<i>yang kemarin itu kah?</i>

The speaker here asks a question about the detail information about the guy who comes to the boarding house on yesterday. This probe functions to show the speaker's interest and indicate the other person to continue giving more information about the third person.

*ii. Wrap Up*

This element is about the summation of the event or behavior outlined in the text. It often picks up on the deviant behavior mentioned in the third person focus. The data shows that not all of the conversations are closed with Wrap Up. This element occurs in Data 2 and 10 as illustrated in excerpt (11):

(11) Data 2: move 10/E : *Banyak orang-orang sinting di ini kost*

Data 10: move 10/F : *Perempuan di belakang ni juga sok artis*

After the participant makes some evaluation about third person's behavior (mas Feri's wife), the speaker makes the summation of the event in the gossip with talk about other person. F picks up the gossip with her explicit judgement.

*c. The Additional Element*

There are three additional elements: *defence*, *response to defence* and *concession*. *Defence* is when a listener disagrees with the speakers by defending some aspect of the third person being gossiped (Eggins and Slade:1997:292). In this data, the defence is only found in three data (Data 1, 4 and 6). As an illustration:

(12) Data 1

Move	Speaker	Text
4/a	L	<i>Tau sendiri dia sibuk makan terus</i>
4/b		<i>Wajar saja dia gemuk</i>
4/c		<i>Tapi belum tentu juga dia hamil</i>
4/d		<i>Sembarangan saja</i>

In this data analysis, the defence element is expressed in move 4 and may be done step by step. When L says, *Tapi belum tentu juga dia hamil*. Here the listener disagrees with the speaker that the third person is pregnant.

*Responding to defence* is where the participants gives response to the defence (Eggins and Slade, 1997:292). In this data analysis, response to defence is found only in Data 3:

(13) Data 3 move 16/a      I      *Memang kenyataan juga*

Concession is a compromise position and usually reached when one and other of the parties concedes (Eggins and Slade, 1997:292). In this thesis, two data are found to have this structure (Data 8 and 9). As an illustration:

(14) Data 8 move 14

Move	Speaker	Text
14	E	<i>Baguslah kau sudah sadar [laughing]</i>

In this move, after the speaker makes many judgements about her friend, she takes a compromise position to close the gossip.

## **DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the structural elements of gossip among female university students shows some important points. First, the topics of gossips seem to be around relationships among young people, especially male-female relationships. Three topics are specifically found in the analysis: intimate or personal matters, sharing opinions about others, and other's personal affairs. All these three topics concern with others who are not involved in the conversation. Such topics are understandable to be talked about among university students. In their age, thoughts and opinions about relationships are always exciting. Of course, one's behaviour in relationships always becomes an interest of others, as well as personal judgement on such behaviours.

Second, analysis of the structural elements of gossips finds that gossips among female university students have three functions: (1) The obligatory elements, They are: third person focus, substantiating behaviour, and pejorative evaluation. (2) The optional elements, There are two optional elements of gossip, probe and Wrap Up. and (3) The additional element of structure, There are three additional elements of gossips: defence, response to defence and concession.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study is about the structural elements of gossip among female university students. Specifically it focuses on the topics and structural elements of gossips. The results of the study found three main topics of gossips: intimate or personal matter, sharing opinions about others, and other's personal affairs. The study also found that the structural elements of gossips are: the obligatory elements, the optional elements, and the additional element of structure. The analysis of the structural elements of gossip also found that, in general, the data on gossips among female university students show similar functional elements with the model proposed by Eggins and Slade. The data shows the elements of obligatory elements, they are: third person

focus. The function is to introduce the third person and in most cases to frame the deviant behavior of person in her/ his social environment. In Substantiating behavior, the speaker provides evidence or information which enables the participants to make a negative evaluation, and Pejorative evaluation, the judgements which have been fueled by the substantiating behaviour are made explicit. From the data analyzed in this thesis, the writer finds that nine data of gossips are begun by introducing the absent persons. In optional elements, the writer has found that this element includes probe and wrap up. The probe is done by the participant to getting more information and usually in question form. In additional elements, the writer has found that not all of the data closed to defence, from all of the conversations the speaker rarely shows her disagreement with other participants, they always support each other's opinion. It is the same with response to defence and concession. From the data analysis, additional elements such defence only found in three data, response to defence in one data, and concession in two data.

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