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CONVERSION TO ISLAM CEREMONY INTERVIEW: STARTING THE INTERVIEW ON THE RIGHT FOOT

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Abstract

A good interview should be more like a guided conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee. It is key that the interviewer skillfully controls the conversation in order to obtain the desired information. The opening of an interview is considered an important part of any interview as it sets the tone for the rest of the interview. This paper reports on the discourse strategies employed by two *daees* (propagators of Islam) during a particular *da'wah*/Islamic propagation communicative event i.e. Conversion to Islam Ceremony Interview. The main objectives of the Conversion to Islam Ceremony Interview are to discover the potential converts' feelings about their conversion to Islam, their knowledge about Islam and conversion to Islam and to rectify misunderstandings about conversion to Islam. The focus of the paper is on the opening of the interview, that is, the analysis of the spoken discourse strategies that the *daees* employ to open the interviews so as to create non-threatening atmosphere of interaction and tease out the required contextual information. Ethnography discourse analysis i.e. Ethnography of Speaking is used to analyze the interaction between the *daees* and the potential converts. The analysis reveals that during the opening of the interview the *daees* subtly bridge the gap by getting the names of the potential converts' right, warm up the interview by asking general questions, and collect information and confirm a matter tactfully and swiftly by asking close-ended/yes-no questions.

Keywords: interview opening, ethnography discourse analysis, ethnography of speaking, conversion to Islam, da'wah

INTRODUCTION

An interview is conducted for particular purposes. It is a tool that is commonly used to determine 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where', 'how' and 'why'. Thus, a successful interviewer is an interviewer that manages to steer the interaction between him/her and his/her interviewee in the preferred direction and gather the necessary facts for decision making purposes (e.g. Conducting Effective Interviews, n.d. p. 2; Heydon, 2005; Milne & Powell, 2010; Woods, 2006; Zainal Ariff, 2012). An interview, in general, can be divided into three parts i.e. opening, main body and ending (e.g. Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003; Milne & Powell, 2010; Walker, 2014). The focus of this paper is on the opening. This paper reports on the opening of the interview of a particular *da'wah* communicative event i.e. Conversion to Islam Ceremony at an established *da'wah* centre called X Islamic *Da'wah* Centre, Malaysia (XIDC) (pseudonym). The opening of an interview is considered an important part of any interview as it sets the tone for the rest of the interview and it is also a means to collect contextual information that aids the formulation of interview questions (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003; Walker, 2014).

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The Conversion to Islam Ceremony is a formal ceremony held when an individual non-Muslim comes to seek conversion to Islam service from a *da'wah* centre like XIDC. In the case of XIDC, conversion to Islam is one of the key services as well as one of the most popular services demanded from XIDC. To date, XIDC is one of the prominent *da'wah* centers in Malaysia that is recognized by the religious authorities in Malaysia and in some parts of the world. In Malaysia, especially, for a marriage to be considered valid, a Malaysian Muslim who wishes to marry a non-Muslim can only marry a non-Muslim if the non-Muslim converts to Islam before the marriage takes place.

Generally, it is understood that it takes only a *shahada*/Islamic declaration of faith by a non-Muslim to convert to Islam. By verbally expressing the *shahada*, the person declares his/her belief of the basic statement of the Islamic faith - *Ashaduallah illahaillallah, waashaduanna muhammadar rasullullah* (I declare that there is no God other than *Allah* and that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the messenger of *Allah*). *Shahada* should be done willingly, with conviction and not by force or coerced or out of convenience. Due to these particular reasons, the conversion ceremonies observed at XIDC, as a whole, were more elaborate (Zainal Ariff, 2010; 2012). A *daee* during a Conversion to Islam Ceremony who acts as the Master of Ceremony would typically interact with a potential convert who comes to seek a conversion service before deciding to move on to the recitation of *shahada*. The interaction was more like an investigative interview where the *daee* would take the role of an interviewer, and the potential convert as the interviewee (Zainal Ariff, 2010; 2012) and thus, for the purpose of the study the question and answer session between the *daee* and the potential converts is referred to as an interview. The asymmetrical role between the two main participants of the event did give the *daee* the advantage of exerting control over the interaction. And like most investigative interviews, the *daee* i.e. the interviewer had a rather obvious authority to organize speaking turns, and also the topic to be focused on during the interaction (Heydon, 2005; Woods, 2006; Zainal Ariff, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Ethnography discourse analysis i.e. Ethnography of Speaking (EOS) is used to analyze the interaction between the *daees* and the potential converts. EOS is commonly used in studies that are interested to study spoken discourse strategies, that is, spoken language use strategies in its social and cultural context (Bhatia et al., 2008; Cameron, 2001; Schiffrin, 1994; Zainal Ariff, 2012; Zainal Ariff & Baharun, 2014). Primarily, it concerns with understanding and analyzing the role of language and communication in a particular group of people (discourse community), and understanding and analyzing the texts of discourse with reference to their wider social and cultural context (e.g. Cameron, 2001; Duranti, 2001; Smart, 2008).

Communicative event is the unit of analysis in EOS i.e. the event in which rules of speaking apply (Cameron, 2001). A communicative event according to Hymes (1974) is an event that has a recognizable beginning and end, governed by a particular convention for speech, and the goals or objectives of the event could likely be achieved through the use of language. By analysing a particular communicative event of a particular discourse community, 'not only rules of communication (both linguistics and sociolinguistics) and shared rules of interaction, but also the cultural rules and knowledge that are the basis for the context and content' (Saville-Troike, 2003 p.3) can be identified and understood.

In the case of this paper, the XIDC *daees* is considered as a discourse community i.e. a group of people who shares similar goals, has particular participatory mechanism or means of communication, has particular ways of exchanging information, has community specific genres, has particular set of vocabulary, has changing membership and varying level of expertise (Swales, 1990), and XIDC's Conversion to Islam Ceremony is considered as a communicative event, to be specific a *da'wah* communicative event. The main focus of the paper, however, is on the opening of the interviews/interactions between the XIDC *daees* and the potential converts, that is, the analysis of the spoken discourse strategies/language use that the *daees* employ to try to create non-threatening atmosphere of conversation from the beginning of the interaction so as to promote interaction and tease out the relevant contextual information from the potential converts.

For the purpose of the study, the interactions between two experienced *daees* i.e. Brother Sahid and Brother Zam, and several potential converts were observed and audio recorded. In addition, interviews were also conducted with the *daees*, potential converts and two XIDC management representatives i.e. Sister Asha and Sister Salma for triangulation purposes (were conducted when permitted).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The overarching aims of Conversion to Islam Ceremony Interview is parallel to the general aims of *da'wah*, that is, to promote and convey true Islamic values, teachings and practices, and to rectify misunderstanding about Islam. And the specific objectives of the interview is to identify whether the potential converts are ready and willing to convert to Islam i.e. not forced or coerced or converting out of convenience and to rectify misunderstanding about conversion to Islam.

With reference to the aims of the interview, and *da'wah* in general, it was essential that the *daees* try to close the social gap between them and the potential converts from the beginning in order to promote interaction. The *daees* utilized several key discourse strategies to establish rapport with the potential converts. To start, the *daees* would usually make sure they addressed the potential converts by their preferred names, and initiate the interview with general yet personal opening questions concerning the potential converts, to show care and concern. The general questions asked during the opening of the interview could be categorized into three types: questions concerning past activities; questions concerning current activities, and questions concerning future plans. Questions concerning past and current activities would usually arise from the personal information of the potential converts that the *daees* have known or gathered before the interview such as past/current place of stay/occupation/interest via telephone conversation, email communication and casual chats. These information were usually gathered from the potential converts who made reservation (via telephone and email) for their appointment/conversion ceremony in advance i.e. scheduled conversion ceremony. Future-related questions revolved around some personal information that the *daees* do not know or have not gathered before the interview, but would like to know or confirm (e.g. plans after conversion, matters related to a potential convert-Muslim partner relationship that is deemed important to potential converts' conversion to Islam). These information were gathered from potential converts who have scheduled their conversion ceremony and from potential converts who have not reserved their conversion session i.e. walk-in conversion ceremony. It was also observed that the *daees* tend to use a lot of close-ended or yes/no questions to politely clarify/inquire certain information from the potential converts at the opening of the interview.

Excerpts 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate the usual way the *daees* opened their interviews with potential converts who have scheduled their conversion ceremony in advance. In all three cases, the potential converts came well prepared with the required documents for conversion documentation purposes (e.g. passport/identification card and passport size pictures), witnesses and showed that they were ready to convert, and hence converted to Islam immediately. Excerpt 1 is a typical example of how a *daee* confirmed a potential convert's name in order to bridge the gap between him and the potential convert. Excerpt 2 is an example of a *daee* opening up an interview with past and current activity-related questions, and Excerpt 3 is an example of how a *daee* opened an interview with future-related questions. Excerpt 4, on the other hand, is an example of the opening interview of a walk-in conversion ceremony interview that typically did not end up with an immediate conversion. The *daees*, as mentioned earlier, would usually use close-ended or yes/no questions to quickly gather some specific information from the potential converts at the beginning of the interview. Excerpt 4 shows how a *daee* used close-ended or yes/no questions to find out how involved and supportive a potential convert's partner was in her conversion to Islam.

Unlike some interviews/interactions, it was observed that the potential converts would generally "introduce themselves using their first names" and "we (XIDC and the *daees*) feel much closer with them (potential converts) if we call them by their first name" [CCMRA.SUN10; CCDS.SUN10]. Thus, throughout the observation period, the *daees* did not address the potential converts using their surnames or generic titles such as Sir, Madam or Ms.

a. Bridging the social gap: Getting the name right

Excerpt 1 "So Dave yes?"

Davidson, an American expatriate working for a multinational oil and gas firm in Malaysia. He, at the time of observation, plans to marry his Malaysian Malay Muslim girlfriend, Lina. Their marriage is to be held one year after his conversion. He made the appointment for conversion about a month before the date of his conversion ceremony. On the day of his conversion ceremony Davidson came to XIDC with his girlfriend and two of his Muslim male friends. They were ushered into the discussion room where conversion ceremonies are usually held. The room is average in size, air-conditioned, brightly lit, minimally decorated, and equipped with an average six-seater conference-like round table. Although a Conversion to Islam Ceremony is considered private, especially to the potential convert, it is necessary in Malaysia, in XIDC for example, that any particular conversion ceremony be witnessed by at least four other Muslims (e.g. friends of the potential converts and/or XIDC management representatives). Upon conversion, the potential convert turned Muslim and his/her witnesses are required to read, complete and sign the conversion related forms for documentation/record keeping purposes. The presence of the witnesses during the ceremony made the ceremony less private. When all the relevant parties have gathered and taken their seat (usually the potential convert will sit next to the appointed *daee*), an XIDC Management Representative would normally briefly introduce him/herself to everybody, and then introduce the potential convert, the witnesses and the *daee* to each other. The *daee* during the Conversion to Islam Ceremony would take up the role as the Master of Ceremony. After the formal introductions, the XIDC Management Representative explains the Conversion to Islam Ceremony procedure (including informing the potential converts that the Master of Ceremony "will talk a bit" with them before proceeding to the *shahada*), distributes two sets of forms and explains the forms (conversion related forms). After the briefing, the XIDC Management would signal the Master of Ceremony (the *daee*) to take over and begin the Conversion to Islam Ceremony session (e.g. "Ok Brother Sahid you can start.")

During the briefing of his conversion ceremony, Davidson interrupted, Sister Asha (XIDC Management Representative) who referred to Davidson as "Davidson" and informed that he preferred to be called by his short name Dave and not Davidson. He did not explain why he preferred Dave to his official first name Davidson, nor did anybody during the ceremony ask him to explain his preference. Sister Asha then quickly switched from Davidson to Dave and signal Brother Sahid to start the ceremony. Brother Sahid looked at Dave and then began to initiate the interview.

- 32 Bro Sahid: ((smiles)) So Dave yes?
 33 Dave: ((smiles)) Yes.
 34 Bro Sahid: ((in a cheerful tone)) You are all set to be a Muslim?
 35 Dave: ((in a confident tone)) Yes!
 36 Bro Sahid: ((smiles)) *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah) good.
 37 Dave: ((smiles)) Yes.

As mentioned earlier, bridging the social gap in a *daee*-potential convert interview is important so as to create a friendly atmosphere of interaction, and thus encourage interaction. Brother Sahid, firstly, before anything else, acknowledged the potential convert by referring to him by his preferred name “Dave” on line 32. This move could be viewed as a move to show his respect towards the potential convert’s name preference, and thus functioned as a politeness strategy. By calling the potential convert by a name that he liked shows that Brother Sahid listened and is being sensitive to the potential convert i.e. making the effort to satisfy the potential convert’s positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Dave did not mention why he preferred his short name to his full first name, but nevertheless, Brother Sahid explained, “We need to get the name right... we don’t want to annoy them (the potential converts)” [Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN10]. Studies have shown that calling a person by his/her preferred or desired name would have a positive psychological impact on the person and enhance relationship (e.g. Bell, 1984, 2001; Nevala, 2004). Improper calling of names would create unhappiness and may be regarded as insensitive by the potential convert (e.g. Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002). Thus, in the case of conversion ceremonies, it is important to be sensitive and be attentive to the potential convert’s needs should the *daee* want to establish rapport with the potential convert.

Based on the literature of professional-client interaction, in a setting where the professional interviews the client, the professional would usually address the client by a formal term of address or with a general term of address. In a doctor-patient interview or police-suspect interview, for instance, the doctor/police would either refer to the patient/witness as ‘Mr.’ or ‘Mrs.’ or just ‘you’ (e.g. Adegbite & Odebunmi, 2006; Heydon, 2005). Although the doctors/police aim to get vital information from the patient/witness, showing politeness through careful use of name could possibly not be the main priority. In the *daee*-potential convert interview, however, referring to the potential convert by the name that the potential convert approves of is necessary so as to bond with the potential convert (Zainal Ariff, 2010).

b. Warming up the interview: Asking general questions

i. Asking about the past and present

Excerpt 2 “So Jean, you were in Sandakan before KL?”

Like Brother Sahid, Brother Zam also tended to use the information that he gathered about the potential convert before the conversion ceremony interview starts as a source for opening questions. In Excerpt 2, Brother Zam was the Master of Ceremony for Jean’s conversion to Islam. Jean is a French businessman who lived in Sandakan, for four years before setting up an office in Kuala Lumpur. While he was living in Sandakan, Jean got married to a Malaysian non-Muslim. The marriage, however, only lasted for about two years. Then during a business meeting in Kuala Lumpur, a year after his divorce, Jean met Mira, a Malaysian Malay Muslim. They had a long distance relationship for more than a year (Jean was in Sandakan, and Mira was in Kuala Lumpur). It was after Jean had moved to Kuala Lumpur that the couple decided to tie the knot. At the time of observation, Jean has already lived in Kuala Lumpur for almost a year.

Excerpt 2 shows how a *daee*, Brother Zam, started an interview by asking a series of questions pertaining to a potential convert’s past and present situation/dealing.

- 31 Bro Zam: ((smiles)) So Jean, you were in Sandakan before KL?
 32 Jean: ((smiles)) Yes. Was there for four years. My ex-wife is from
 33 there.
 34 Bro Zam: I see. Must be quiet as compared to KL?

- 35 Jean: Yes more relax...not much activity. But moving to KL was good.
 36 I secured a one year project with Company R here last year when I
 37 was in Sandakan...easy to monitor from here.
 38 Bro Zam: ((smiles)) I see. The project must be almost finishing now?
 39 Jean: Yes, but I got some new projects to work on.

Brother Zam opened the interview by firstly, showing some interest in Jean's relocation (from Sandakan to Kuala Lumpur) and current business project (lines 31 to 38). Brother Zam knew Jean's story as he was briefed by XIDC management before the ceremony. Brother Zam's questions were general (e.g. lines 31, 34, and 38). Based on interview literature, it is rather common to start an interview with general questions regarding the past and current activities that do not put much pressure on the respondent, and operate as openers to more specific questions (e.g. Keats, 2000; McNamara, 2006). In the case of Excerpt 2, Brother Zam's opening questions concerning Jean's past and present activities has helped set the mood of the interaction to be more casual. Jean appeared to be rather relaxed when responding to Brother Zam.

During the opening of the interview, the *daees* did not usually ask about the potential converts' previous marriages or relationships. According to Brother Zam, "...what happened to their previous marriage is not really our concern, so we, the *daees*, don't pry. That's not our focus." [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN26]. In Excerpt 2, for instance, although Jean mentioned "ex-wife" on line 32, and Brother Zam knew that Jean is a divorcee before the ceremony, Brother Zam did not make it a focus of the conversation. Therefore, it could be said that Brother Zam tried to keep the opening of the interview as light and in focus as much as possible. In order to maintain focus in the interview, the *daees* needed to know the sort of questions or topics of conversation that should be avoided. The aim of the interview is to find out whether the potential converts are ready and willing to convert, and to rectify misunderstanding about conversion to Islam. Therefore, questions about past marriages/relationships are considered irrelevant and inappropriate for the *daee*-potential convert interview. This is rather similar to the opening of a job interview, where a good interviewer should try to keep his/her general questions casual, and control the interview so as to avoid the interviewees from rambling on matters that could sidetrack the interview (e.g. Yate, 2005).

ii. Asking about the future

Excerpt 3 "Getting married in Malaysia or Sri Lanka?"

Besides initiating an interview with questions concerning the potential converts' past and current activities, the *daees* would also usually ask about the potential converts' future plans. Excerpt 3 is an example of how a *daee* initiated an interview by asking a potential convert about her plan after her conversion to Islam. Lini is a cheerful young Singhalese girl in her early twenties. She is, at the time of observation, a law student at a university in Malaysia. In her first year of study, she fell in love with a Malaysian Indian Muslim, Rafi, a fellow law student who was in his final year. After two years of getting to know each other, they decided to get married. The couple decided to get married while Lini is still studying.

Like most of the potential converts who came for their scheduled conversion ceremony, Lini came prepared. Her boyfriend Rafi and their Muslims friends came to support and witness her conversion. Lini's conversion ceremony was conducted by Brother Sahid.

- 33 Bro Sahid: ((smiles)) Lini from Sri Lanka...
 34 Lini: Yes ((smiles))
 35 Bro Sahid: How's your study getting on? Studying law right?
 36 Lini: Yes. Fine ((soft giggles)). Just finished two tests!
 37 Bro Sahid: Oh you must be so relief! ((laughs)) You are in you second year?
 38 Lini: ((laughs)) Third year. I have one more year to go ((smiles))
 39 Bro Sahid: ((Smiles)) You'll be fine, don't worry. So, you're planning to get
 40 married this coming December, yes?

- 41 Lini: ((smiles and nods her head)) Yes. That's the plan.
 42 Bro Sahid: Getting married in Malaysia or Sri Lanka?
 43 Lini: The *aqad* (solemnization) will be in KL...and one reception in KL
 44 and one in Sri Lanka ((smiles))
 45 Bro Sahid: ((smiles)) I see. Very nice. So after getting married, you're going
 46 to live in Malaysia?
 47 Lini: Well that's the plan. My boyfriend is working here, so yes may be
 48 staying here

It was common to see the *daees*, such as Brother Zam and Brother Sahid to briefly ask about the future plans of the potential converts, especially after marriage. According to Brother Sahid, "...their plans, potential converts' marriage plans or future plans... do not show whether they are ready to convert or not. We, *daees*, ask because we care." [Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN29]. In job interviews, for example, the interviewer would normally ask a respondent about his/her future plan so as to find out his/her career plans/short or long term plans (e.g. Fry, 2009; Oliver, 2005). The particular question is said to be, amongst others, important so as to identify a job candidate with a vision, passion and who is proactive. Thus, the answer to the question would usually be an important material for evaluation by the interviewer. However, in the case of a conversion ceremony, the questions related to potential converts' future plans (e.g. marriage related plans) were not forwarded in the same spirit as in the job interview context. The questions (as on lines 42 and 45 to 46) were put forward as polite gestures. It could be said that by showing his interest in Lini's plans, Brother Sahid was trying to enhance his relationship with Lini, that is, a politeness strategy to maintain alignment with Lini (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

c. Collecting information and confirming a matter tactfully: Close-ended/yes-no questions

Excerpt 4 "You came alone?"

During the time of observation, there were three walk-in conversion ceremonies. Out of the three, two of the potential converts who came to seek conversion via walk-in were two young Malaysian ladies, and one American expatriate. The American expatriate came complete with his Muslim partner and friends, and the relevant documents, and was converted immediately. The two young ladies, however, did not proceed with their conversion and decided to take up the *daees*' advice to familiarize themselves with Islam first. The two ladies came to seek conversion service from XIDC without their Muslim partners or friends by their side. They also did not bring the complete set of documents needed to document their conversion. This scenario according to the *daees* "has becoming normal", but nevertheless "gives a bad impression of their Muslim partners" [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN17; Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15]. The *daees* and XIDC Management Representatives feel that a female potential convert's Muslim partner's participation in the conversion process was crucial as conversion for marriage purposes "requires full commitment and support from the Muslim partner" i.e. husband-to-be should "understand that conversion is a huge decision" and he should "demonstrate that he is responsible" [Sis Salma CCMRA.SUN8; Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN17; Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15].

Based on the *daees* and XIDC's experience, these ladies were usually "not really prepared" and "looks as if somebody is rushing her into conversion" (e.g. [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN17; Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15]). Therefore, the fact that the ladies came on their own, and were on their own during the ceremony was generally viewed by the *daees* as "not so good" [Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15; CCDZ.SUN17/6/07]. The *daees* so as not to "pass early judgment" [Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15; Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8] would usually subtly and quickly find out the basic information about the ladies' Muslim partners during the opening of the interview. The *daees* would try to find out how supportive the partners are towards the potential converts' conversion. Excerpt 4 demonstrates how a *daee* initiated an interview with a female potential convert who sought conversion via walk-in without the presence of her Muslim partner.

In Excerpt 4, Jez, a young Eurasian Malaysian lady, came into the XIDC office unaccompanied. Sister Asha (XIDC management representative) who happened to be at the receptionist desk greeted Jez and introduced herself. Jez without wasting much time coolly told Sister Asha “I would like to convert...umm plan to get married early next year.” Sister Asha then asked Jez whether she is familiar with the conversion procedure. Jez answers, “I was told about it by my friend.” Although Sister Asha felt that probably Jez did not really know the requirement and procedure (as Jez did not come with any proper witnesses), she did not dismiss Jez. As explained by Sister Asha, “We don’t want to be quick to judge.” [Sis Asha CCMRA.SUN8]. The issue of potential converts not bringing proper witnesses to the ceremony is not considered a big issue as XIDC could try to arrange to get their people (the *daees* and XIDC officers) to witness Jez’s conversion. So as to accommodate Jez, Sister Asha asked the receptionist to call Sister Salma, Brother Abu (another XIDC officer), and to find out the *daees* available to conduct and/or attend a conversion ceremony. Sister Asha told the receptionist to inform all of them to assemble in the discussion room.

On the day Jez came to seek conversion, Sister Asha knew that most of the *daees* would be busy conducting other programs at the centre. Due to the lack of *daees* available to witness Jez’s conversion, Sister Asha had to bring in Sister Salma and Brother Abu (XIDC staff), and invited the researcher to also become a witness to Jez’s conversion. Brother Zam, the only available *daee* on that day was appointed as the Master of Ceremony. After quickly grabbing the necessary forms to be filled in by Jez and her witnesses from her office, Sister Asha invited Jez to follow her to the discussion room. Sister Asha and Jez reached the discussion room a few minutes earlier than the rest of the people who were called for the ceremony. Once all the parties involved in the ceremony were present and seated, Sister Asha proceeded with her briefing. She also briefly informed the quorum that Jez was planning to get married soon. It was during the briefing that Jez admitted that she did not know fully the conversion requirement and procedure. Jez not only did not know that she had to bring some witnesses with her, she also did not bring with her passport size photos. The photo, according to XIDC and *daees* was also not a big issue as it could easily be solved, and was not a “reason to stop conversion” [Sis Asha_CCMRA.SUN8; Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8]. As explained by Brother Zam “...we try to accommodate them, the potential converts and not make things difficult. As long as they are ready mentally, spiritually and willing, we can proceed.” [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8]. Thus, after the formal introduction of the individuals involved in her (Jez’s) conversion ceremony and briefing, Sister Asha cued Brother Zam to start the conversion ceremony.

Due to Jez’s way of seeking conversion, Brother Zam from the beginning of the interview tried to indirectly clarify Jez’s Muslim partner’s involvement in her conversion process. The *daees* would usually view the fact that the Muslim partners of the potential converts did not come with them as “taking conversion lightly” [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8; Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15]. As demonstrated in Excerpt 4, it was during the opening of the interview that it was discovered that Jez was actually driven by her Muslim partner to XIDC, Jez’s boyfriend was in the XIDC compound during the proceedings but chose to not attend the ceremony, and Jez and her boyfriend assumed that conversion was easy.

- 31 Bro Zam: Jez, how did you come to know XIDC?
- 32 Jez: Through a friend.
- 33 Bro Zam: ((smiles)) I see. You came alone?
- 34 Jez: No. My partner is waiting in the car.
- 35 Bro Zam: I see. Would you want us to invite him in?
- 36 Jez: Umm...I did ask him. ((rolls up her eyes)) But he said he rather
- 37 wait outside. No point asking him...
- 38 Bro Zam: I see. It’s very hot today. He must have been waiting for awhile?
- 39 Jez: Yeah. We thought it’s going to be quick and easy ((smiles)).
- 40 Bro Zam: Yes conversion is not difficult. You just have to be sure that’s
- 41 all..and we need to document some things ((smiles))
- 42 Jez: Yes. I should have called to ask about the procedure.

Instead of asking directly how supportive and involved her partner is with her decision to convert, Brother Zam began the interview with a close-ended question on line 31. Brother Zam continued to use close-ended question on lines 33, 35 and 38. In job interviews, the value of close-ended questions is argued to be that they 'provide the opportunity to clarify any specific points economically' (Bunting, 2005 p. 4). It is held that close-ended questions when managed properly could yield quick answers and thus speed up the interviewer's process of evaluation. In police interviews, for example, the police use close-ended or yes/no questions to demand fast and specific answers to help them clarify and collect evidence or testimony from the witnesses/suspects (e.g. Haworth, 2006). For medical interviews, the close-ended or yes/no questions are used to identify, clarify and evaluate the medical condition of the patients being interviewed (e.g. Adegbite & Odebunmi, 2005). Similarly, in the case of Excerpt 4, Brother Zam, before anything else, was interested to find out about Jez's partner. Quoting Brother Zam, "We know she's converting because she wants to get married. Ok... that's ok. But because the future husband is not there, we need to find out about him a little." [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8]. Brother Zam used close-ended questions on lines 31, 33, 35 and 38 to stimulate Jez to provide short responses that would nevertheless clarify and confirm his perception about the couple, especially the Muslim partner. In cases such as Jez's, the *daees* disclosed that "...is important and number one for us to see if they (potential converts and partners) understand what conversion is." [Bro Zam_CCDZ.SUN8; Bro Sahid_CCDS.SUN15].

During job interviews, for example, close-ended questions are considered to be inappropriate and weak strategy if an interviewer is interested to gather a thorough account or a quantity of information from the interviewee (e.g. Arthur, 2006; Bunting, 2005). However, Yeschke (1987) argues that close-ended questions, if properly controlled, could be a strategy to yield quick answers without appearing to be intimidating or accusing. In Excerpt 4, through using the close-ended questions, within a few minutes of the interview and in a subtle way Brother Zam has managed to collect some specific information about Jez and her partner (e.g. lines 34, 36-37, 39). The use of close-ended questions seemed not to intimidate Jez as she responded to Brother Zam in a free and relaxed manner. To ask Jez directly whether her partner was helpful in going through the conversion process with her might put Jez off. Putting a potential convert in an uncomfortable position would not have helped in achieving the purposes of the Conversion to Islam ceremony interview, in general, and specifically the purpose of the opening of the interview. Thus, the use of close-ended or yes/no questions could be said to not only serve as an economical and effective strategy to confirm specific issues, but also served as a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In order to avoid intimidation or discomfort on the respondent, *daees* employed a more indirect way of confirming issues that they think may be sensitive to the potential converts.

CONCLUSION

The main reasons why the Conversion to Islam Ceremony interview is conducted is to find out whether the potential converts are really willing and ready to convert and to briefly *da'wah* to the potential converts. Based on the analyses of interview excerpts of two *daees* who opted to achieve their spoken language use/discourse purposes when interacting with the potential converts subtly, a *daee* i.e. the Master of Ceremony of conversion ceremony needs to know how to conduct an interview and *da'wah* at the same time.

As an interviewer, a *daee* needs to know how to open an interview in such a way that the potential convert would feel comfortable and at ease to interact. Most potential converts would not even realize that the interview was an interview. As explained earlier, the potential converts were informed that the *daees* "will talk a bit" with them before proceeding to *shahadah*, but the details of the "talk" were not discussed. Therefore, during the interview, in order to encourage the potential converts to talk it was essential for the *daees* to convey friendliness from the beginning.

At the beginning of the interview, it was important for the *daees* to try to establish rapport and bridge the gap between them and the potential converts by making sure that they get the potential converts' details right. For example, making sure that they call the potential converts using the appropriate

names (e.g. Excerpt 1) or knowing their country of origin (e.g. Excerpt 3) were vital as they were signs of respect and positive politeness towards the potential convert (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In addition to getting the right details, it was also important for the *daees* to break the ice. Based on the analysis, the *daees* forwarded three types of general questions (e.g. questions regarding past, present and future activities) to break the ice or warm up the interview. Interview experts claim that starting interviews with general questions could aid rapport building with interviewees/respondents (e.g. Fry, 2009; McNamara, 2006). Thus, breaking the ice with more general questions could be viewed as a positive politeness strategy to create a more amicable atmosphere of interaction.

As demonstrated by the excerpts (e.g. Excerpts 1, 2, 3, 4), the *daees* tended to ask close-ended and/or yes/no questions to keep the conversation going. Besides using the close-ended and/or yes/no questions to enact and maintain their gate keeping role during the interview, the questions were also used as a tool to confirm and/or gather information without wasting much time. In Excerpt 4, for example, the *daee* managed to confirm the degree of involvement of a potential convert's Muslim partner in her conversion to Islam economically (Bunting, 2005). In cases such as Excerpt 4, gathering the specific information during the opening of an interview that is considered crucial to making the decision to encourage immediate conversion or not was a priority. However, as much as it was a priority to confirm/gather some specific information, the *daees* would at the same time try to maintain politeness with the potential converts. The use of close-ended and/or yes/no questions to camouflage direct questioning of sensitive/controversial information thus served as a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

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