Short running title: Silence in interactions

Acknowledgment

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TITLE: Silence or Words in Malaysian Interactions

ABSTRACT

This paper analysed the perceptions of engaging silence (say nothing) and the use of words (talk) as a tool of communication in Malaysian interactions. Types of topics and situations being discussed were explored in order to detect when silence or words were likely to be used by Malaysian participants during interactions, and to whom would these two feature prominently. Self administered questionnaire was distributed to more than 1000 undergraduates and postgraduates and staff who were of the three dominant ethnic groups of the country. Of the 656 samples which were suitable about 50% were Chinese, 33% were Malays and 15% were Indians and they were predominantly 199 males and 456 females. SPSS analysis was used for analysis and it was found that silence was more significantly related to issues related to money and personal affairs. The use of words was more significantly related to issues regarding infidelity. The findings of this study would be beneficial to researchers who are doing cross cultural studies and in particular silence as they can uncover what topics and situations are most likely to trigger the observation of silence or words.

Keywords: Malaysians, communication, words, silence, cultural differences
1.0 INTRODUCTION

Silence, in the Asian contexts, is often eluded and is better exemplified in Japanese interactions which seem to lay their expectations on the person to whom they are talking to and the person is expected to somehow know what is on the other party’s mind (Wong, 2010). After putting all the essential information except the ‘decisive part’ across to the other party, waiting becomes a part of the game where the parties concerned figure out what had been said and then decide what to say/do next. This moment of waiting is served by a complete inactivity of silence as a reaction from the interlocutor is awaited. Seen as an ambiguous moment, that moment of silence is also open for interpretations. Correct decoding can contribute to the continuation of the interaction while an incorrect one can severe the interaction to a complete halt. From this context, it can be said that precise interpretations of verbal and non-verbal messages encoded in another culture is largely dependent upon one’s proficiency in social interactions and worldly experiences which have been gained from exposure to a wide scope of intercultural communications.

As cultural attitude plays a marked role in decoding and assessing what has been said or left unsaid, the misjudging of someone’s use of silence can take place in many contexts and on many levels. By understanding people’s behaviour and perception towards silence across cultures, the ability to decode and predict the respective behaviours in various situations with precision is increased, simultaneously, decreasing the likelihood of misunderstanding. This would be beneficial to mankind.

1.1 Aim
This study asked participants from the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia who are of different cultural backgrounds to report their reactions in various situations so as to gain an insight into how, when and to whom would silence or words be used when interacting among themselves.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The perceived responses of 656 Malaysians who were given hypothetical contexts to define whether silence or words (talk) would be used in communicating certain responses were extracted from a self administered questionnaire which was adapted from Wong’s (2005)’s model which focussed on the use of silence between British and Japanese participants. Malaysians aged between 19 to 60 years served as volunteers but the majority of them were students and staff of three public universities in the Klang valley. A total of 25 questions with some consisting of sub-questions were developed and responses were guided by the Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, mildly disagree and strongly disagree). Open-ended questions were also included in order to gauge the explanation of respondents on why such an answer is chosen in the related situations. On average, each questionnaire would require 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were administered in stages over approximately three months. The volunteers were predominantly 49.8% Chinese, 34.8% Malays and 15.4% Indians. SPSS version 18 was used to quantify our findings. The volunteers were informed of the purpose of the survey and that results would be shared once published. Responses to five specific questions were extracted, tabulated and quantified. Analysis was presented in histograms and percentages were derived from the frequency of the choices made by the respondents.

2.1 Justification
The responses of 656 questionnaires can serve as good indicators to show the tendency of what majority of Malaysians think they would do in responding to particular contexts. Our response rates adhere to the recommendation made by McCracken (1988) who indicates that a quantitative research provides information on how the general population think about and experience the world and that it would require a larger sample and particular type of questions which can be used to generalise a larger population.

Pliner et al. (1979) also mention that self report methods provide data on people’s inner states which cannot be obtained by other means. Their argument was based on the assumption that every individual has a personal theory of reality and that the theory is not developed with conscious intent but had arisen, unwittingly, in the course of living. Since this theory is not an explicit theory, it would be best to infer it from behaviour, particularly emotional reactions. Table 1 provides the component of the three ethnic groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Groups</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>326 (49.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>228 (34.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>101 (15.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>199 (30.4%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>456 (69.4%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>661 (5 missing values = 656)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study takes on the theoretical framework of social constructionism which considers all forms of communication including silence as being socially constructed and historically and culturally situated (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Taking the process of communication as the means where members of a society share and create meanings for themselves, social constructionism thus considers that how something is said can determine how the message
will be conceived and interpreted. It also posits that truth and ideas are constructed as a result of the social process of interacting with each other. Craig describes this as “…an ongoing process that symbolically forms and re-forms our personal identities” (Craig, 2001, p. 125). Social constructionism suggests that “…in human life, information does not behave simply as bits in an electronic stream, information flow is far more like an electric current running from one landmine to another” (Lanham, 2003, p. 7). It is more realistic because it concerns real people interacting among themselves, sharing their thoughts and ideas freely. Likewise, Chandler (1994, p. 2) mentions that “humans do not communicate simply as computers or robots”. Instead, they take facts and data by acquiring meanings through the process of communication or through interaction with others.

As a multiethnic and multicultural society, the identities of Malaysians are constructed through social consensus and self-reflection via the help of language (Gergen, 1994). The use of language and its effects, whether verbal or non-verbal, are vital ingredients to social constructionism. From the linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives it can be said that all forms of communication including silence can depict pragmatic meanings (Jaworski (1993) and silence can be an extremely powerful communicative tool as it can account for as many meanings in communication as those of words.

3.0 COMMUNICATION

Human communication is primarily a means of survival (Maslow, 1954) as it is a process where human beings interact among themselves for the purpose of exchanging meanings and information. Information is given and exchanged but its interpretation is dependent on the participants who come from different backgrounds and have different upbringing, values, beliefs, and attitudes, thus, the structure of a society cannot be divorced from how people
communicate among themselves. The Universal Law of Communication indicates that all human beings communicate through a number of ways and this encompasses movements, sounds, reactions, physical changes, gestures, languages, breath, and others (Scudder, 1900).

Communication can be verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication involves the use of words to convey meanings while non-verbal communication depends on body movements, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication. Spoken words, in comparison to written words, are spontaneous and meanings can be easily conveyed and ambiguity can be easily rectified but Davidmann (1998, 2006) argues that the value of words in communication varies considerably in terms of its level of abstraction. He mentions that the greater the level of abstraction, the less meaningful the words are to the listener.

3.1 Silence

Silence may be non-verbal but it serves many functions (Jaworski, 1993; Lehtonen & Saravaaja, 1985; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985; Nakane, 2007; Wong, 2010). Its usage within a communication exchange depends very much on the interlocutors’ cultural background, socio-competence experience and their perception or understanding of what silence may mean in their respective culture or daily practices.

Silence is not a universal value (Tannen, 1985; Samovar & Porter, 2001) because cultures like the Jewish, Italian and Arabic observe very little silence in their conversations and North American (US) culture tends to find silence stressful (Giles et al., 1992). In contrast, it has been reported that eastern cultures like Japan, Korea and China (Kim, 1999) value and treat silence as a way of preserving harmony in social groups (Barnlund, 1989; Nakane, 2007).
Among the easterners, verbal expressions such as arguments are synonymous to “an activity of dubious value that can lead to anger and unreasonable behaviour” (Cheng & Tardy, 2009, p. 35). A quiet person is viewed more favourably than a loquacious person who is perceived to be insincere. There is more favour given to a taciturn person since meanings can be sensed through silence (Cheng & Tardy, 2009). This perceived silence is linked to the Japanese haragei (wordless communication), Korean noon chi and Chinese mo chi (tacit understanding). The tacit knowledge of the Chinese has been interpreted by Cheng and Tardy (2009) as a conduct of self restraint and self discipline where harmony is maintained by deliberate measures. By remaining silent, the face of the other party can be preserved. Chen (2002) concurs when he mentions that silence may be seen as a means to accomplish a certain goal. Nonetheless, these studies merely explain when silence is acknowledged by the participants. They do not tell us in what situations silence is observed.

3.2 Positive and Negative Values of Silence

Silence can also convey positive and negative values. Silence may be perceived as a good behavior and also as a rude or impolite gesture Sifianou (1997), as a sign of active learning and concentration or as a sign of laziness or ignorance in the educational setting (Jaworski, 1999) and in organizational contexts, silence may imply weak followers who lack motivation (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), thus be perceived as a symptom of stress and isolation (Jenkins, 2000). Silence could be viewed as a failure of language (Tannen, 1985; cited in Jaworski, 2000) or as a chance for self-exploration (Allen, 1978). It nevertheless conveys different values depending on cultures. Wong (2010) claims that silence may be employed in an eclectic sense since it can also be taken as a moment of thoughtfulness or contemplation defined by a mental inactivity with others. In some situations, silence may be used to demonstrate anger, disgust or uncertainty while in other contexts, participants interacting
among themselves may remain silent because they need to ponder over a statement made by another party. People may remain silent as they contemplate on their next move. When people withdraw from participating, silence may also ensue. Thus, it seems obvious that silence in human interactions may bear contrasting values such as bonding or dividing people, healing emotional wounds, revealing or hiding information or show assent and favor or dissent and disfavour (Jensen, 1973).

3.3 Close and distant relationships

People behave differently in different situations to suit the atmosphere of their conversations. For instance, some may refrain from articulating what they want to say if they think that what they are going to say will spoil the harmony of the interaction. Those who declare their emotions freely say what they want to say regardless of situations but they may be perceived as people who lack social common sense, particularly in public when many are strangers or in situations when those in the same situation are of distant relationships (e.g. acquaintance, colleague, bosses). Culture can affect the display and recognition of emotion by specifying how, when, in what social context and by whom emotion is being displayed and recognized (Porter and Samovar, 1998). Nonetheless, through a process of socialization people also learn to communicate their emotions either through expressing or inhibiting them. As is a common phenomenon in interactions, the display of emotions is more allowable with someone who is in close relationships (e.g. family members or spouse) Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Andersen and Guerrero (1998) explain that some emotional expressions which are manifested in public situations do not necessarily present themselves in private situations and such kinds of emotional expressions indicate that they function as forms of interpersonal communication rather than as expressions of internal feelings only. Andersen and Guerrero
(1998) coined the word “channeling” to indicate a process of selective displays of certain emotions in particular situations or contexts. For instance, the British people perceive display of emotion in public as distasteful because they believe that people with higher education are rational and better in dealing with emotions. Thus, a reserved attitude in public is quite common among the British when emotion becomes the issue. However, there are more rooms for emotional expression and open disagreement among family members and close friends (Wong, 2010). This is to say that they use spoken words more when they are with someone in close relationship. This characteristic of the British is contrary to Japanese marriage couples who need less spoken words in conveying their needs and messages because telepathic communication works effectively for them. Encoding and decoding messages through non-verbal and silence is possible between them. Even in the case of a suspicion of adultery, the wife prefers to wait until her husband is ready to confess the truth before she confronts the husband directly (Wong, 2005).

4.0 COMMUNICATION/styles of Malaysians

Malaysians have been described by most studies to be indirect people but it should be mentioned that the description is more relevant to the Malays (David & Kuang, 1999, 2005; Jamaliah, M. A., 2000; Thilagavathi, 2003). Part of the Malay conduct also involves being non-confrontational (Asrul, Z. 2003) and *herbudi-bahasa* or courteous (Asmah, H. O., 1992, 1993; Kamisah A. and Norazlan A., 2003; Azrul, 2003). Malaysians are generally group-oriented people and are collectivistic in nature (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, A. 1992) but they should also have some distinctive differences in how they behave since they are different in terms of culture, religion, beliefs, values as well as upbringing.
Littlejohn (2002) mentions that human beings respond to various contexts in different ways and individuals are more or less governed by their cultural backgrounds when dealing with certain aspects of communication. In that regard, even though Malaysians are group oriented people, it is possible that their behavior patterns could have been influenced by certain underlying values which were acquired from upbringing (Littlejohn, 2002) and from exposure to other values. Nonetheless, some common values preserved are respect for elders, preservation of face, respect for authority and hierarchy and values of harmony (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, A., 1992) Indirectness is a common feature of the Malays (Asmah H. O., 1992, 1993; 2000; David, Kuang, & Zuraidah, 2002; Thilagavathi, 2003) who also prefer to avoid conflicts and confrontations (Asrul, 2003). Part of the Malay culture (Asmah H.O, 1992; Jamaliah, M.A., 1999)) is about good upbringing which is demonstrated through courteousness (berbudi bahasa), a value that is synonymous to being polite. However, no matter how traditional people used to be, behaviours can also change as they adapt to technological and economical changes. Lailawati (2007) found that some Malays have moved from being collectivistic to being more individualistic.

Malaysian Chinese, in comparison, are descendants of the migrants of the 17th and 19th century. Early Chinese migrants often withdraw from interacting with the locals for various reasons one of which was to avoid trouble (Ling, 1995) but the current generation of Malaysian Chinese lead a different lifestyle. Many are nuclear family oriented and they do not live with extended families like before. In addition, many have also become more prosperous, gained education both locally and abroad and are more open and unlike their ancestors. Thus, their lifestyles and attitudes would be markedly different from those of their ancestors. These differences are manifested in the way they interact, behave and socialise. However, certain traditional values such as filial piety and deference for elders acquired from Confucian teachings (Ling, 1995) are still widely practised. Historically, Chinese people
place a lot of value on “face” (Chan, 2006; Shi et al., 2010). Any happenings within the family which can be considered as bearing shame and embarrassment are often not discussed in public.

In addition, Malaysian Chinese people have been described as direct and upfront (David & Kuang, 1999, 2005; Kuang, 2007; Kuang and David, 2009) but in the business environment, Lim and Syed (1997) found that their Chinese respondents had a higher need for affiliation than their Malay colleagues while handling intracultural and interpersonal conflicts. This finding is interpreted as a desire for wanting to retain the group’s norm than to remain individuals. The Chinese managers in the study wanted to maintain harmony instead of alienating themselves in a conflict. From these results, we see variations in how the Malaysian Chinese may react in particular situations.

Malaysian Indians are the smallest ethnic group of the country but they are made up of Tamils, Telugus, Malayalams, Punjabis and other smaller sub-groups. There are very few reports about the communication styles of Indians in this country but some studies (Jamaliah, M. A., 2000; Suraiya, M. A., 2002) show that younger generation of Indians in universities were generally polite and indirect. Nonetheless, their communication style may depend on their social status and professional backgrounds (David & Kuang, 1999, 2005) as some were found to be very direct. To date, no studies have shown them to be more voluble or more taciturn and no study has focussed on silence as a part of the three dominant groups’ communication styles or features. Thus, the finding of this study will help to fill a literature gap.

5.0 ANALYSIS OF DATA
The development of the discussion is based on five questions selected from the main study. The responses to these five questions will highlight in what situations silence or words may be used. Figure 1 illustrates the statistics of the three ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian who claim to observe silence. Question 1 asks: “What topics being discussed (e.g., matters related to money) are likely to create silence as a response?” Discussion is provided under the subsequent heading.

![Figure 1: Topics that can trigger an observation of silence](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other (educations, current affairs)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar subjects, unsure, not interested</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive issues (religion, race, politics)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal affairs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossips, other affairs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship, love, family/friend (63)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial, money</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Topics that can trigger an observation of silence

### 5.1 Topics that can Trigger Silence

This question focuses on the results of the three highly rated topics. Statistics show that in issues pertaining to “financial issue/money” 27% Malay respondents, 23% Chinese respondents and 21% Indian respondents would observe silence. Their behaviour could have been induced by their cultural background which avoids confrontational topics involving “financial” and “relationship” issues. It is also possible that silence is used as a non-
confrontational strategy since Malaysians do not prefer discussing such issues. It is also possible that these issues involved a lot of “face threats” (Kim, 1999; Cheng & Tardy, 2009) which, if not handled amicably, can damage the relationship, thus keeping silent helps.

![Figure 2: Situations resulting in silence](image)

Figure 2: Situations resulting in silence

### 5.2 Situations that can Trigger Silence

Figure 2 provides nine hypothetical situations which could trigger silence. Although the percentage of our respondents observing silence is small, it nevertheless shows that silence is a useful tool in these situations. Our findings suggest that the cultural upbringing and values instilled in Malaysians through upbringing (Asma, 1992; Lim & Syed, 1997) could be the main reason why all the three ethnic groups tended to observe silence in similar situations. Malaysians seem to be using silence when they feel “inferior” so as to save their own face.

The data revealed that ‘face’ is not only important to the Chinese but to all the three ethnic
groups in Malaysia. Malaysians may seek silence as a refuge to avoid a dead-end discussion as in when “situations seem meaningless” or when “the other party is emotionally unstable”.

Silence was observed by Malays, a non-confrontational and indirect community to avoid confrontations and to show respect to others. Additionally, silence was observed to withdraw from talking when they found that the interlocutor is emotionally unstable. This could be interpreted as the Malays’ ability to tolerate and avoid conflicts (Asrul, Z., 2003).

For the Chinese, silence probably served as a way to reflect their self restraint and self discipline (Kim, 1999; Cheng & Tardy, 2009) since silence helps to alleviate the need to talk. It is also possible that the Chinese observed silence because they wanted to remain ‘aloof’ like a junzi (Yu, 2009) which says that a great man is one who is fast of action and slow of words. Since “face” is still an important issue to the Chinese, keeping silent was probably one way to maintain self-dignity, thereby alleviating shame and embarrassment. Such silence was interpreted as the Chinese display of self-restraint. Keeping silent in situations where talk is meaningless is another way of saying that the Chinese are practical, preferring to save time by not talking.

The Indian respondents’ preference of keeping silent when caught in the situation of inferior and sensitive issues was probably due to their inability to respond appropriately since not many of us are trained to deal with the negative impact of such situations. It is also possible that silence was observed as an act of humility, an important aspect of the Indian culture. In this regard, silence was used as a tool which reflects harmony.

5.3 When words are used
Data for this section were derived from three questions asked in the questionnaire. The first question asked “Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work/or in your studies?” The findings are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Whom do you talk first when encountering problems at work or studies?

The responses therefore illustrate when words would be used and with whom. Statistics indicate that Malaysians have a range of support. When faced with problems, many claim to talk (words) to “friends” before going to “family members” and finally “partners”. The data show that all the three ethnic groups do not vary very much in their reliance for support. “Friends” came first to all three groups when having problems at work or studies,. Among the Chinese and Malays, “partners” were second choice and “family members” came last. In contrast, Indians prefer to talk with their “family members” more and their “partners” would be their last choice. From this result, it was deduced that the Chinese and Malays approach their “partners” for support and this in return, alleviates the need to burden their problem on family members. It appears that Indians trusted their family members more when encountering problems at work/in studies, thus reducing their burden on “partners”.

Figure 3: Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work or studies?
The next question asks: “Whom do you talk to first when you are emotionally depressed?” Figure 4 illustrates the findings.

![Figure 4: Whom do you talk first when emotionally depressed?](image)

In such hypothetical situations, the responses of Malaysians varied showing a significant difference among the three ethnic groups ($\chi^2(10) = 30.0, p < 0.001$).

At this stage of analysis, it appears that more Chinese respondents would “say nothing” (27%) when compared to the Malays and Indians. Earlier, it was reported that the Chinese were more inclined towards confiding in “friends” and “partners” when encountering problems at work/studies. However, in situations where they are emotionally depressed, the percentage of talking to “friends” dropped by almost half (from 30% to 19%) although the percentage of talking to “partners” remained unchanged (30%). With regard to such hypothetical situations, it would imply that silence (saying nothing) has become their preferred choice when they have emotional problems. Likewise, the Malays showed the same tendency in resorting to silence when they are emotionally depressed. The only distinction between the Malays and Chinese is that Malays talked to their “friends” more than their “partners” in this particular situation. The Indians talked more to their “partners” when they
are emotionally depressed (moving from 22% to 29%) and a slight increment moving from 4% to 7% can be found in the category of “say nothing” for the Indians as well. On the whole, it can be deduced that the tendency for Malaysians to resort to silence increases when they are emotionally depressed as compared to when they encounter problems at work/studies.

The next question attempts to detect what Malaysians think they may do in another hypothetical situation, “What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?” Figure 5 illustrates the findings.

Figure 5: What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?

In this question, four alternatives were presented to the respondents:

(a) ask directly (thus being confrontational)
(b) use mediator (thus being indirect)
(c) hire detective (get indirect help to gather proof)
(d) do nothing and wait (thus use silence)

Statistics suggest that “others” in Figure 5 were quite highly rated. The result is probably due to the reason that approximately 70% of the respondents were still single. It appears that a hypothetical and difficult situation of this nature is more likely to provoke words than silence. Most respondents claim that they would confront their “partners/spouses”. Among the four
options provided, “talk” (words) or “say nothing” (silence) was highly rated by the Chinese respondents. This finding provides some evidence to suggest the trait of being self-restrained. 16% Chinese respondents claimed that they would “wait and see” as compared to only 9% Malays and 5% Indians.

5.4 Silence in Close Relationship

Although not every culture observes the sequence that the closer the relationship, the more people talk, it seems logical that those who are close in their relationships would want to share more stories/information with each other. The Japanese, for example, use more non-verbal gestures to communicate within close relationships (Saville-Troike, 1985) and westerners like North Americans prefer to fill in “air-time” (Lehtonen & Saravaaja, 1985). What Malaysians do in close relationships could be an intriguing topic of discussion. Statistics are illustrated in Figure 6.

![Figure 6: The closer you are, the quieter you become](image)

Figure 6: The closer you are, the quieter you become

A significant difference ($\chi^2(6) = 18.5, p < 0.005$) was found among the three ethnic groups in relation to the statement, “the closer you are, the quieter you become”. 


In this situation, it seems that more Chinese think that “when you know someone very well, lesser words are required” and this may be substantiated by the reason “because you understand each other” (see Kim, 1999; Cheng & Tardy, 2009). The findings of the Chinese respondents seem to confirm the trait of being self-restrained. We interpret this as their ability to think that “meanings can be sensed from the communication process” (Cheng & Tardy, 2009). In responding to this situation, it appears that the Malays opted for the talkative mode when their relationship with others becomes closer. Findings of the Indians do not show an obvious variation but the statistics indicate that spoken words were preferred as a means of conveying messages to others.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper provide some relevant answers to this study which aimed to uncover what type of topics and situations would trigger Malaysians to observe silence or use words. Other than when someone is emotionally depressed, matters that concerned money would be one topic that can ‘silence’ many Malaysians. This finding reveals that money may be an issue which is sensitive to Malaysians as it involves some instances of threatening one’s ‘face’, and if the respondents were unable to say the right thing, it could also spoil a’ good relationship’ thus to deal with such a situation, care has to be applied. In this instance, silence may help. The findings of this study also revealed that words (talk) were used in difficult situations such as when Malaysians have problems at work or studies, or when they suspect their partner/spouse’s infidelity. However, the choices between silence and words may be dependent on the ethnic groups and their cultural norms, the closeness of their relationship with others and the situations arising from their interactions.
In this paper, we could conclude that in the Malaysian context, more words are needed for the Malays and the Indians so as to indicate close relationship, to find solutions when having problems at work/studies or when in the critical moment of suspecting infidelity. Of the three ethnic groups, it appears that words were used the most by the Indians as a tool of communication. Silence is probably used as a veil to inhibit personal emotions and a sign of close relationship that is relatively common to the Malaysian Chinese. This is in tandem with the Japanese notion where silence was used as a marker of close relationships - “the closer they are, the quieter they become” (Wong, 2010). The Chinese respondents levelled this preference higher than the other two ethnic groups. Such an unusual nature of the Malaysian Chinese was attributed to their easterner characteristic (Kim, 1999) where mutual understanding could have been gained through their ability to sense meanings rather than verbalise them. We hope to verify this claim in our future work based on interviews.
REFERENCES


FIGURE AND TABLE LEGENDS

**Figure 1.** Topic that can trigger an observation of silence

**Figure 2.** Situations resulting in silence

**Figure 3.** Whom do you talk first when encountering problems at work or studies?

**Figure 4.** Whom do you talk first when emotionally depressed?

**Figure 5.** What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?

**Figure 6.** The closer you are, the quieter you become.

**Table 1.** Component of the three ethnic groups of respondents