BRIDGING THE GAP OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Bridging the Gap of Cross-Cultural Communication

This book explores the various issues surrounding cross-cultural communication. It consists of a compilation of recent studies conducted by multiple researchers in various fields of expertise, but with a common theme: cross-cultural communication.

The book is divided into 3 broad themes: communicative strategies and speech acts, cross-cultural challenges and media power.

1. Communicative strategies

The first chapter by Elham Shahban and Maya Khemlani David is concerned with the types of communicative strategies that Arab and Iranian students use in order to communicate with each other in English. Their study investigates the type and frequency of the communication strategies used by Arab and Iranian students with differing mother tongues (Arabic and Persian) when speaking in English with each other. To achieve the objective of their study, twelve Arab and Iranian subjects were selected and divided into three groups (high-high, high-low and low-low proficiency in English). Each group included 4 subjects whose conversations were audio-recorded for 6 hours in real time interaction in an informal setting. The research will help educators understand the nature and type of communication strategies used by students with differing target language proficiency.

In the next chapter, Mohsen Shahrokhi and Jariah Mohd Jan investigate the speech act of requests. In order for a request to be fulfilled successfully, it has to be realised appropriately so as to obtain an addressee’s cooperation. The data was collected from Persian male speakers through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of various situations. It was found that appropriateness of this speech act can be obtained by employing appropriate external modifications so as to reduce the face-threatening nature of requests.

Kuang Ching Hei in Chapter 3 focuses on the various forms of address used by Malaysian Chinese over time. Factors like age, gender, and profession are seen as possible determining factors that affect address forms used. The forms of address are categorised as traditional and non-traditional types. Kuang finds that only thirty-two of the thirty-six traditional forms of address listed are actively used within the home domain. Kuang also finds that the
Malaysian Chinese also use address forms which have been influenced by the Malay community.

The following chapter by Richard Powell touches on how despite the perception of joking as a key area of sociopragmatic competence in authentic L1 speech and has a capacity to motivate learners, it is not well represented in teaching materials. Therefore, Powell devised a limited sample of material based on a university entrance examination genre. He also reviews the importance of joking in both linguistic debate and everyday speech, and provides some background for the type of material chosen for his study. Powell suggests some pedagogical uses for the target material in this study and discusses theoretical questions about the value of joking as a subject for pragmatics.

In the final chapter in this first section Ngeow Yeok Meng and Maya Khemlani David explore the discourse of Members of Parliament (MPs) in Malaysia. They explain that parliamentary debates often consist of spontaneous, spoken language that reveals the thoughts of the speaker. The speaker’s choice of words often reveals his or her attitude towards the interlocutor, in particular, their political rivals. Their study examines the act of name calling that can be associated with stereotype, prejudice, bias, and discrimination. The findings reveal that MPs by being impolite in how they address or refer to others have created a conflicting and chaotic environment in the Malaysian Parliament.

2. Cross-cultural challenges

The second issue that this book focuses on is the challenges faced when different cultures meet. Francisco Perlas Dumanig investigates the occurrence of miscommunication in interactions between Filipinos and Malaysians who speak different varieties of Southeast Asian Englishes: Philippine English and Malaysian English. He examines the lexical, syntactic, phonological and pragmatic features in intercultural communication between Filipino and Malaysian interlocutors by examining twenty conversations between Filipinos and Malaysians.

The next chapter shifts its focus to the challenges faced by international postgraduates when learning English as a foreign language. Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan explains that English is taught by non-native speakers of English in multilingual and multicultural Malaysia to a range of multilingual and multicultural postgraduates. This raises the question of whether it is necessary to discuss aspects of multiculturalism in the hope of getting students to understand their reactions towards each other. The respondents in her study are mainly Iranians with a few Iraqis and the spirit and
sentiments of ethnocentrism is strongly prevalent in their discussions. Her case study traces the journey of multicultural and multilingual postgraduates as they struggle to assimilate into a target culture in their pursuit of academic achievement.

In another study focusing on students, Wendy Yee Mei Tien and Maya Khemlani David identify their respondents' inter-cultural communication sensitivity, ethnocentrism, perception of self-identity and their preferences and perceptions towards other ethnic groups. A questionnaire was administered to 310 undergraduates. The results of the study indicated that there is indeed a certain level of ethnocentrism among the different ethnic groups. Although the majority of the respondents trusted friends from other ethnic groups they still believed that people from their own ethnic group are the kindest. In sharp contrast, when it came to work and extra-curricular activities, ethnic grouping was not deemed important. The undergraduates were willing to work with peers from other ethnicities. This study suggests that in redesigning a suitable pedagogy to improve inter-ethnic relations, it is necessary to allow more opportunity for students to work together in multiple ethnic group task-based activities.

The cross-cultural challenges include changes in languages as a result of language contact. Devikamani Menon examines how in Malaysian English there are instances of semantic transfer from the mother tongue and the emergence of local compound coinage. Semantic Transfer consists of English words and expressions that are a translation of idiomatic concepts from the Malay language to English. ‘Catching two fish with one hook’ is a translation-equivalent of the English proverb ‘Killing two birds with one stone’. The change in the expression may reflect an aspect of cross-cultural communication in Malaysian English whereby the English language has been used to translate Malay or local concepts into Malaysian English.

In another study focusing on language choice accommodation and assimilation Caesar Dealwis examines the various codes used by the younger generation of Bi-Jagoi Bidayuh in Sarawak. His study investigates the language choices of 77 Bi-Jagoi undergraduates in the home domain. Fishman’s (1972) domain concept was used to investigate their choices with different generations and Scotton’s (1993) Matrix Language Frame Model was utilised to analyse the conversations based on different categories of language used. To avoid communication breakdown, Bahasa Malaysia, English or even Sarawak Malay are used rather than stand-alone Bidayuh. This leads to a linguistic confluence in order to create closer rapport with family members. However, there are differences in the range of code choices of the urban Bi-Jagoi undergraduates as compared to those from the rural areas.
3. Media power

The power of the mass media cannot be dismissed as a mere tool to disseminate information. Lean Mei Li, Prasana Rosaline Fernandez and Jenny Wong Fei Mun illustrate how the new media has become an increasingly popular tool for many to post their views on various issues. Their study centres on the postings that discuss politics in blogs. Using an extension of Lazarsfeld’s Two-Step Flow Theory (1955), they analyse how the new media has moved to a different level the way how opinion leaders reach out to opinion followers. Opinion leaders here refer to politicians and people who are in a position to express political views. The opinion followers are those who choose to read about the views of these opinion leaders and leave a comment if desired. Their findings indicate that the weblogs of the three factions in Malaysia (i.e. Barisan Nasional [Ruling Party], Pakatan Rakyat [Opposition Party], and Public [members of the public]) show how cross-cultural communication occurs between the bloggers and viewers.

In a study on advertising in the media, Fauziah Taib explains that despite media becoming global, marketing literature advertising products in the local market can be assumed to be local in terms of form and content. Using the grammar of visual analysis by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), she analyses the visuals in Malaysian business-to-business (b2b) brochures to describe the represented participants in the images and investigates whether they are communicating across cultures. She discusses the interaction between the brochures and the viewers of the images and hopes that the information obtained would provide insights into the visual elements that make up Malaysian advertising materials used by local text designers for the local business market.

Another study on advertising in the media looks at how occurrence of code switching is used as a marketing strategy in multilingual Malaysia. Francisco Perlas Dumanig and Maya Khemlani David specifically examine the patterns of code switching and its impact on bilingual consumers. The data comes from 15 print advertisements collected in Malaysian English dailies; The Star and The Sun. Advertisements which use two or more languages are selected and analysed to depict how switching from one language to the other helps in marketing a product.

The final chapter looks at the media representation of a sensitive issue. Gan Kah Hui and Maya Khemlani David discuss how a controversial issue is reported by three local dailies in three languages. They explain that each community has different interests and this is normally depicted by how a particular news story is reported. The objective of their research is to examine how a particular topic, in this case the controversial issue of undergraduate
intake in a public university, the first Apex university in Malaysia, is discussed in Malay, English and Chinese language newspapers. Their findings confirm that the three dailies focus on different aspects of the issue to cater to the interest of their respective readers.

This collection of papers is diverse in its interest and should attract the attention of a wide array of people who share a common interest in cross-cultural issues. We hope that you will enjoy reading the various works on cross-cultural issues and have a better understanding on how these issues affect our everyday life in many ways.

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