ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATING EMBARRASSING INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated ethnicity as a variable that determines communication strategies among Malaysian university students. One hundred four university students of Malay and Chinese ethnicities completed a survey in which they wrote their possible verbal and/or non-verbal reaction to an embarrassing situation the addressee is in. The data was analyzed based on the semantic meaning of the responses written by the students in the survey. Results suggested that ethnicity could be a variable in communicating embarrassing information to the addressee. Variations included the strategies employed by the students in communicating embarrassing information. This study suggests that ethnicity might need to be considered in cross-cultural communication in English.

Key words: *Ethnicity and language use.*

Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country. As each ethnic group has its unique cultural practices, such uniqueness could have influenced their language usage. Hence, despite of living in the same country, a Malaysian's language usage could be shaped by his ethnic background. This assumption determined the aim of this study, which was to investigate how status influences language use among Malaysian university students.

Ethnicity could be a variable in interactions. Tannen (1982) suggests the following on the role of ethnicity in interactions:

> Conversational style is both a consequence and indicator of ethnicity. Conversational style includes both how meaning is expressed, as seen in patterns of indirectness, and what meaning is expressed, as in how much enthusiasm is expected.
>
> (Tannen, 1982: 230)

In her study of communication strategy among Greek, American and Greek-American respondents, Tannen (1982) found that Greek and Greek-American respondents tend to take indirect interpretations of message compared to American respondents. It is interesting to note that the descendants of Greek immigrants in America, like the Greeks, applied indirectness in their communication.

Methodology

This study utilised the discourse-completion test from Beebe and Takahashi (1989) and Dogancay and Aktuna (1997). One hundred and four Chinese and Malay students at the University of Malaya completed the test, which required them to write their strategies – possible verbal and/or non-verbal responses – to an addressee who was in a socially embarrassing situation. The data were then categorized as follows:

1. verbal cues
2. verbal cues and physical actions
3. physical action only
4. no actions taken

The verbal cues were further categorized based on its semantic meanings, such as apologizing or informing directly. Finally, the strategies utilized by the Chinese and Malay respondents were compared for similarities and differences.

Findings

The strategies used by the respondents in the hypothetical situation are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Strategies used by Malay and Chinese Respondents

Category	Ethnicity	
	Malay	**Chinese**
A. Verbal Cues Only	To apologise and to inform directly	To apologise and to inform directly
	To apologise and to offer assistance	NIL
	To apologise and to use euphemism	NIL
	To apologise, to inform directly and to give order	NIL
	To apologise, to inform directly and to give suggestion	To apologise, to inform directly and to give suggestion
	To apologise, to inform directly and to offer assistance	To apologise, to inform directly and to offer assistance
	To apologise, to inform directly and to suggest	NIL
	NIL	To apologise, to inform directly and to ask question
	To apologise, to inform directly, to give suggestion and to rationalise	NIL
	NIL	To ask 3rd party person
	To ask question	NIL
	To ask question and to give suggestion	NIL
	To ask question and to inform directly	To ask question and to inform directly
	To ask question and to suggest	NIL
	To ask question, to give order and to inform directly	NIL
	NIL	To ask question, to inform directly

		and to ask question
	To give order	To give order
	NIL	To give order and to rationalise
	To give suggestion	To give suggestion
	To greet and to inform directly	NIL
	NIL	To greet, to offer assistance and to inform directly
	To inform directly	To inform directly
	To inform directly and to apologise	To inform directly and to apologise
	To inform directly and to ask question	To inform directly and to ask question
	To inform directly and to give order	To inform directly and to give order
	To inform directly and to give suggestion	To inform directly and to give suggestion
	To inform directly and to offer assistance	To inform directly and to offer assistance
	To inform directly and to suggest	To inform directly and to suggest
	To inform directly and to use non-verbal cues	NIL
	To inform directly or to take no action	NIL
	To inform directly or to use non-verbal cues	To inform directly or to use non-verbal cues
	To inform directly, to give suggestion and to rationalise	NIL
	To inform directly, to rationalise and to give order	NIL
	NIL	To inform directly and to rationalise
	NIL	To inform directly and to use sarcasm
	NIL	To inform directly, to ask question and to suggest
	To use euphemism	To use euphemism
	To use euphemism and to give suggestion	To use euphemism and to give suggestion
	To use euphemism and to offer assistance	NIL
	To use euphemism and to suggest	NIL
	To use sarcasm	To use sarcasm
B. Verbal Cues and Physical Actions	To inform and to use non-verbal cues	NIL
C. Physical Action Only	To use non-verbal cues	To use non-verbal cues
	To act	NIL-
D. No Actions Taken	To take no action	To take no action
TOTAL	**37**	**27**

Table 1 summarises the strategies utilised by Malay and Chinese respondents in conveying embarrassing information. There are similarities and differences in the strategies used by both

groups. Both groups utilised the following strategies: informing directly, using euphemism, using sarcasm, giving order and apologising. However, there are also differences in the strategies used by both groups. For example, one Chinese respondent chose to use an intermediary to convey the embarrassing information, but no Malay respondent chose this strategy. Malay females also would brush off dandruff from her female friends' shoulder, but no Chinese female used this strategy. Malay respondents produced longer utterance (maximum 4 speech acts) compared to Chinese (maximum 3 speech acts). Malay respondents produced longer list of strategies (37 strategies) compared to Chinese (27 strategies). No Chinese respondent started his/her utterance with greeting compared to the Malays in the study.

These differences could be attributed to the different values that each ethnic group hold. For example, the effort by the Malay respondent in brushing off the dandruff from her female friend's shoulder could be attributed the Malay value of cooperation and/ or caring (Asma Abdullah; cited in JamaliahMohd. Ali: 2000). Formality is also a value hold by the Malays. Thus, Malay respondents started their utterance with greetings (Good morning). Similarly, Chinese respondents could use an intermediary to convey the embarrassing fact to an addressee as a way to maintain harmony by not threatening the addressee's face.

Conclusion

To conclude, ethnicity is also a factor that can influence the communication processes in the Malaysian ethnicity. This suggests that to generalise the Malaysian society is too simplistic as each ethnic group holds to specific values which could be different from others.

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