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Communication Accommodation Strategies in Malaysian Multiracial Family Interactions

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Abstract

In multiracial families, intergroup salience is an important parameter influencing their daily interpersonal communication dynamics; this is due to the relevance of issues related to heritage loyalty and sense of belonging. As such, there is an obvious need for multiracials to appropriately strategise and manage their communication with both paternal and maternal family members. Using the Communication Accommodation Theory, this preliminary study investigates the range of accommodation strategies employed by a multiracial individual interacting with her monoracial mother. Qualitative in nature, data was obtained from spontaneous interactions that were audio-taped over a period of eight weeks in the home setting. Out of the 12 total hours of transcribed interactions, seven episodes were deemed to contain features of intergroup context. Despite the limited number of interaction samples, findings revealed that the multiracial daughter managed her family relations by employing approximation, interpretability, discourse management and interpersonal control strategies.

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Keywords: communication accommodation strategies; multiracial; intergroup structures; family interaction; ethnic language.

1. Introduction

With the number of multiracial families on the rise (Wilt, 2011; Yancey and Lewis Jr., 2009), intergroup issues within these families appear to be a concern (Killian, 2001). This preliminary study attempts to investigate communication dynamics and experiences of multiracial families in non-western context by addressing three limitations that have been identified from the existing literature.

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Firstly, as intergroup dynamics and conflicts are common features in multiracial families, there is a need to understand how intergroup relations are managed by their multiracial and monoracial members. To date, there is relatively little research on family communication with particular emphasis on how social group memberships influence family communication (Harwood, Soliz and Lin, 2006). Secondly, little is known on how multiracials manage their intergroup relations at the micro level within a non-western context, such as Malaysia. Existing research on multiracial people and their families in the Malaysian context have mainly focused on intergenerational language shift and maintenance (Kow, 2003) and language choice-domain link (David, 2008). Thirdly, there is a lack of studies on the role of communicative dynamics in multiracial families that utilize data from spontaneous interactions. Thus far, studies that have been conducted on multiracial people and their families have relied mainly on interview (Wilt, 2011) and self-reported data (Harwood, Soliz and Lin, 2006) where the findings could possibly be tainted by social desirability bias (Wilt, 2011). In order to address the aforementioned issues, this study focused on identifying:

1. What types of accommodation strategies are used by first-generation multiracial individuals when communicating with their monoracial family members in the home domain?
2. How do first-generation multiracial individuals use accommodation strategies to manage intergroup relations with their monoracial family members in the home domain?

It is hoped that the study would shed light on the initiatives of first-generation multiracials in employing communication accommodation strategies to manage intergroup relationships in their families and further contribute to the literature on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

The rationale for employing CAT as the framework in this study is its ability to explain how inter-personal adjustments are influenced by “broader social group memberships” (Harwood, Soliz and Lin, 2006, p. 22-23) and convey messages related to “group identifications and intergroup dynamics.” This theory posits that interlocutors’ communication behaviour can be categorised into convergent and divergent (Giles, 1973). Convergence is reflective of the speaker’s needs for social integration and approval from the other interlocutor so as to forge better relationship between them (Giles and Ogay, 2007). However, when speakers diverge, they accentuate their linguistic differences so as to emphasize differences in group membership as well as create distance between themselves (ibid). Over the years, CAT has been expanded by Coupland, Coupland, Giles and Henwood (1988) to include four “sociolinguistic encoding strategies”. They are approximation, interpretability, discourse management and interpersonal control strategies. These strategies have been applied to family communication studies by Harwood, Soliz and Lin (2006) and were employed in this study to analyse the accommodation strategies used by multiracial individuals to manage intergroup relations with their monoracial families in the home domain.

3. Methodology

The participants of this study were two members of a multiracial family consisting of a daughter and mother. The daughter is a first generation Indian-Thai-Malay multiracial. She is 40 years old and teaches in a secondary school. She lives with her family in a nearby town 20 minutes away from her parents. The mother is a Malay woman. She is a retired clerk in her early 70s. To facilitate understanding of the family background, the father of the participant is a first-generation multiracial of Indian-Thai heritage. He is a retired telecommunications engineer who is also in his early 70s. In this study, a first-generation multiracial is defined as a person whose parents marry across ethnic or racial lines and their background is made up of two or more ethnic or racial heritages that are linguistically and culturally different. The rationale for selecting first-generation multiracials is that they would be the group “most likely” (Yancey and Lewis Jr., 2009: 95) to be exposed to first-hand diverse ethnic or racial heritage experiences, thus able to “operate more effectively” in multiracial and multicultural contexts (ibid). Another term used in the discussion is monoracial which refers to people whose heritage originates from a single ethnic or racial group.

The main source of data for this study was derived from approximately 12 hours of spontaneous interaction between the multiracial daughter and her monoracial mother. This set of data was audio-taped over a period of eight weeks

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