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## When different “codes” meet: Communication styles and conflict in intercultural academic meetings

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on conflict situations in bilingual academic meetings to investigate the communication styles used by Chinese and American university faculty. The ethnographic participant observation used as the main method was cross-checked with post-meeting interview data. The findings revealed that, due to the conflicting priorities in meeting protocol and behaviors in Taiwanese and American cultures, tension is experienced by faculty members of both cultures. What it means to have a meeting and how members address various issues does vary from culture to culture. It is suggested that conflict situations be ameliorated by more cross-cultural understanding of meeting codes, especially by those in leadership positions.

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### 1. Introduction

Culture affects communication in subtle and profound ways. When people of more than one culture meet, the issues of politeness and impoliteness are crucial since face-threatening impoliteness may result in face-loss, misunderstanding or even a complete breakdown of verbal or non-verbal exchanges.

Business meetings have played an important role in studies that explore institutional discourse (e.g., [Miller, 1994](#); [Pan, 2000](#); [Yamada, 1992](#)). However, the institutional academic setting the present study investigates is different from that in the business world due to the variant ethos. In the business sectors, the diverse issues to be discussed in international meetings may include personnel management, new product development, market expansion, sales initiatives, and the acceptance or rejection of a proposal ([Samovar et al., 2007](#)). But the meetings in academic settings mainly attempt to settle educational problems, including teacher- and student-related affairs, curriculum design, and regulation establishment or amendment. As for decision-making and conflict styles in intercultural communication, most research in this field has also come from business sectors (e.g. [Beamer and Varner, 2001](#); [Scarborough, 1998](#); [Zinzius, 2004](#)), and few studies have given attention to communication in academic circles, especially the meeting setting. More generally, it is regrettable that there is a paucity of investigation on face/politeness, conflict styles and decision-making in intercultural meeting settings.

The ethnographic research site for this study was limited to the department faculty meetings in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) department attended by 27 faculty. The majority of the faculty was Chinese-speaking Taiwanese. There were six non-Taiwanese teachers, most of whom were from the United States, with one from Europe. They met and discussed issues together in the meetings usually conducted in English. The meeting setting granted them a chance to communicate and express their opinions. Any intercultural meeting in an academic circle is complex in that its members are composed of

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educated people from different cultural backgrounds, who have different beliefs, attitudes, and views on the issues raised in the meeting, and much is at stake, namely, the future of the students in their charge. The meetings provided a rich context to observe intercultural communication involving how people from different cultures express politeness, and how verbal and non-verbal behaviors reveal different conflict styles and decision-making. Although the faculty in the intercultural discourse community was usually using the same language, the English language, communication would sometimes reach a temporary hiatus. This was due to the fact that actually the participants were speaking different inner languages laden with varying cultural values. For this research, the researcher, a department secretary, assumed a participant-researcher stance to observe situations of conflict, and further to cross-check observations with post-meeting interview data. The study aimed to address the following research questions.

1. How are “face” and “politeness” framed by the community composed of Taiwanese and foreign participants in intercultural academic meetings?
2. How do communication styles used by local Taiwanese and teachers mainly from the United States vary in intercultural academic meeting conflict situations?
3. How are decisions reached in intercultural meetings in academic settings?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Politeness theory

Politeness is an important concept behind intercultural communication (Carroll, 2005; Garcia, 2010; Rogers and Lee-Wong, 2003). The notion of politeness was mainly based on Brown and Levinson (1987), who were interested in how politeness is used to redress the performance of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). Politeness falls into two categories: positive politeness and negative politeness. The former is “redress directed to the addressee’s positive face, his perennial desire that his wants ... should be thought of as desirable” (1987: 101). The latter is “redressive action addressed to the addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (1987: 129). In recent decades, politeness has come to be seen as an evaluative interpretation of situated behaviors (Eelen, 2001; Locher and Watts, 2005; Mills, 2003). More attention has since been placed on how native speakers themselves conceptualize (im)polite behavior.

Recent developments in politeness theory deem politeness as a form of language ideology (Dunn, 2013). Irvine defines it as ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships together with their loading of moral and political interests’ (1989: 255). The ideology of politeness may vary from culture to culture; however, politeness is a face-saving strategy aiming to preserve hearers’ face so that communication will proceed smoothly without causing one or both parties to lose face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In China, Gu Yueguo put forward some politeness features in 1990 based on the Chinese culture’s codes of politeness, including respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement (Gu, 1990: 239).

The notion of politeness is crucial to making intercultural communication smooth. Most research investigates how politeness is used in intercultural communication (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1996; Jansen and Janssen, 2010; Pilegaard, 1997; Yeung, 1997). As people from different cultural backgrounds hold different viewpoints or perceptions in the same discourse community, misunderstanding or communication breakdown may often occur if the ideology of politeness behind intercultural communication is not carefully dealt with. Although politeness in general has been found to be an important factor underlying institutional discourse, more attention needs to focus on expressive politeness<sup>1</sup> (politeness encoded in speech) (Eelen, 2001). Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate how community members express politeness in their discourse in an intercultural university meeting setting.

### 2.2. Face concerns and dimensions of cultural values

In workplaces people from all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in communication situations (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Face is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). The concept of face is about identity respect and other-identity issues within and beyond the actual encounter episode. For the sake of face, we attach importance to our own social self-worth and the social self-worth of others. Face can be threatened, enhanced, undermined, and bargained over on both an emotional reactive level and a cognitive appraisal level (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> Watts et al. (1992) divide the notion of politeness into two categories: Politeness1 and Politeness2. Politeness1 is characterized as how politeness is ‘perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups’ and Politeness 2 is conceived as constituted by ‘theoretical constructs.’ Based on this distinction, Eelen (2001) puts much emphasis on Politeness 1, which he further subdivides into three categories: expressive politeness (politeness encoded in speech), classificatory politeness (people’s evaluative judgments of other people’s speech as (im)polite), and metapragmatic politeness (talk about politeness).

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