"Well, I'm a *Gaijin*": Constructing identity through English and humor in the international workplace

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Abstract

As globalization increases linguistic and cultural diversity in local business settings, workers from different backgrounds are faced with the challenge of negotiating a variety of social identities throughout daily workplace interaction. This study employs an interactional sociolinguistics approach to analyze discourse data from a two-day observation of an American in a Japanese company. In the data, English and humor are used by the intern and his coworkers to co-construct a *gaijin* 'foreigner' identity in a manner that yields positive interactional and social effects. This discursive manifestation of an outsider identity effectively facilitates interaction, providing a non-intrusive strategy for interruption and opportunities for language play, socialization, and laughter. Results shed light on how diverse backgrounds can be used as a strategy for communicating and building relationships across linguistic and social barriers.
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1. Internships in international contexts

Internationalization brings many changing demands to individual workplaces as advances in technology and communication blur boundaries between local and global, increase contact between languages and cultures, and create diverse, multilingual environments (Gunnarsson, 2012; Heller, 2003; Meyer and Apfelbaum, 2007; Roberts, 2007). Pressures from international competition drive companies to portray themselves as 'international' in order to appeal to modern, globally engaged consumers and investors (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Wyatt-Walter, 1995). At the same time, individual workers must learn to navigate a workplace where daily contact with other languages and cultures is becoming the rule, not the exception (Feely and Harzing, 2003; Gunnarsson, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; Roberts, 2010; Vaara et al., 2005; Welch et al., 2005).

In order to prepare workers for these growing challenges, research on business communication has pointed to positive benefits from international internships for developing not only linguistic skills, but also understanding appropriate sociocultural behaviors (Bush and Bush, 1999; Nohara et al., 2008; Prestwich and Ho-Kim, 2009; Webb et al., 1999). In a survey conducted by Webb et al. (1999), international executives ranked the ability to manage cross-cultural communication as the most important quality of successful workers, implying that workers in today's multinational corporations must have the ability to connect to other societies, cultures, and people (Bousquet, 2010; Paulsell, 1991). These claims may be supported by language-focused research which suggests that the socio-pragmatic development of foreign workers transitioning from the classroom to the workplace effectively integrate the benefits of formal study with real-world interactions (Holmes and Riddiford, 2011; Riddiford and Joe, 2010).

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Thus the workplace is becoming a rich environment for communicative interaction in which people from diverse backgrounds navigate challenges of establishing their social positions and identities. The present study specifically investigates how an American intern and his co-workers in a Japanese company use English and humor to discursively construct the intern's outsider identity and how these interactions may interface with macro-level stereotypes to achieve positive effects through joking and light-heartedness, all while simultaneously accomplishing work-related goals. As humor is an important tool for building workplace relationships (Holmes, 2006, 2007), this study contributes by considering the role of situated presentations of a particular foreigner's identity in achieving these effects and discusses at how such interactions may strengthen cross-cultural communication and relationship-building.

2. Strategies for managing linguistic and cultural differences

Though participants in international workplaces face the challenges of cross-cultural communication, they also have access to larger sets of resources unique to their culturally and linguistically diverse environment. This situation even appears in local settings which, although not international, are nevertheless linguistically diverse. For example, Higgins (2009) analyzes English use among Swahili workers in a Tanzanian newspaper office, arguing that English accesses both a macro-level, associating the speaker with elite social groups, and a micro-level, by acting as greetings, mitigating requests, and creating humor. In her analysis, English is a contextual cue indexing a light-hearted atmosphere and allowing workers to relieve stress and forge personal connections. When people do not share similar backgrounds, this may allow them to create positive shared experiences that would be impossible otherwise (Bell, 2002, 2007; Cashman, 2005; Chiaro, 2009; Holmes, 2000).

2.1. Humor and mocking

Humor is important in workplaces because it is a powerful resource for building relationships, establishing a collegial atmosphere, fostering creativity, and diffusing interpersonal tensions (Duncan et al., 1990; Higgins, 2007; Holmes, 2000, 2006, 2007; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Murata and Hori, 2007). Humor also interfaces with social identity. For example, Holmes' (2006) work on gender shows that women are more likely to engage in ''supportive humor'' which strengthens or confirm prior statements, while men utilize a competitive style of humor, contradicting statements made by others. Similar patterns of gender differences in interactional style have been found generally (Eckert, 1990; Tannen, 1993), suggesting that broad social identities can be made relevant in both content and context of discourse in order to achieve particular interactional effects, such as humor. Importantly, it is not the pre-existing social identities themselves, but rather the manner in which those identities are asserted during an unfolding discourse that achieves the effect.

Somewhat related to humor is the notion of mockery. Although mocking typically involves making a negative value judgment of the subject being mocked, it can also act as a performance which frames discourse in a playful manner. This is suggested by Chun (2004, 2009) who describes how students in a diverse high school blur lines between mockery and accommodation of immigrants who face language barriers. In her study, mocking is a caricature of others which, depending on the framing, may be derisive, but may also make language more accessible to non-native speakers. In this sense, imitating the interactional style of those from different backgrounds can achieve positive results, depending on how it is contextualized.

2.2. Code choice

One particular way to contextualize discourse is through conversational code-switching (Higgins, 2009). Two perspectives offer different explanations for this. In what Cameron (1990) and Gafaranga (2005) call the 'language-reflects-society' perspective, pre-existing identities are ''brought-along'' meaning that codes are indexical of rights and obligations associated with certain social groups and which operate outside of the local setting (Myers-Scotton, 1995). In contrast, others argue that code choice is first a locally achieved process involving the creation and negotiation of identities in situated contexts (Auer, 1998, 2005; Cashman, 2005). Identity thus emerges, or is ''brought-about'' through interactive means. This suggests we must initially explore what language users do with a code before we can accurately uncover any identity claims being made. It is the interplay between context and codes that make specific identities relevant in the moment.

The present study adopts the later perspective. I argue that while it is possible aspects of an international intern's ''foreign'' identity pre-exist based on macro-level stereotypes of Americans held by Japanese workers, what is most relevant is the discursive construction and co-construction of that identity. Paying particular attention to the use of English, I explore (1) how this presentation of identity is realized, (2) analyze the potentially humorous situation it creates and (3) discuss how these routines can be leveraged as an interactional tool.

The intern in this study strategically uses code-choice to foreground his foreigner position in a way that allows him to mitigate imposition when soliciting help from others. This interactional style is well-received by his Japanese co-workers