

## MASTER'S THESIS

# Exploring intercultural miscommunication language contact and conflict in a Hong Kong office

Ho, Shun Chi Clara

*Date of Award:*  
1996

[Link to publication](#)

### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

**EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION  
LANGUAGE CONTACT AND CONFLICT  
IN A HONG KONG OFFICE**

**HO SHUN CHI, CLARA  
STUDENT NO. 94401829**

**A Dissertation Submitted In Partial Fulfilment Of The**

**MASTER OF ARTS IN LANGUAGE STUDIES**

**HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY**

**AUGUST 1996**

## Abstract

It is commonly assumed that successful intercultural communication depends on a good mastery of a foreign language, or that a lingua franca can alternatively be used for the sake of all participants. However, this view seems to have neglected the relation between language and culture. People of different sociocultural backgrounds have different ways of speaking. These differences reflect culture-specific norms of communication and values. Their role should therefore be stressed so as to understand and explain why intercultural communication sometimes fails.

The present study intends to explore the role of cultural differences in discourse and verbal communication routines in cross-cultural interactions. The focus is on the differences in communication patterns audio-recorded between Cantonese-English bilingual speakers, and native English speakers, who were mostly monolingual, in an editors' office in Hong Kong. These differences, as the present study shows, may not be merely grammatical but can also be found at sociocultural and pragmatic levels. The data analysis attempts to reveal various types of miscommunication and their possible sources. How these communication problems were noted and the participants' subsequent strategies to manage them are also explored.

## 探索跨文化溝通產生的問題 一個香港工作間語言傳達的分析

### 論文提要

有一個普遍的假設：成功的跨文化溝通要依賴良好的外語能力，或者利用一種共同語言作為溝通的工具，可是，這種看法似乎忽略了語言跟文化之間的微妙關係。不同文化背景的人皆有其獨特的說話方式，這正反映他們自成一格的溝通模式和特有的價值觀念，因此這些說話方式提供了很重要的線索，讓我們了解，甚至解釋跨文化溝通時呈現的種種問題。

本論文旨在發掘文化差異在跨文化對話中所扮演的角色。筆者以一群雙語(廣東話、英語)及以英語為母語的編輯為研究對象，探索他們以英語為主的對話中，由文化差異產生的溝通難題，本論文亦嘗試分析各種不同類型的溝通難題及其因由，而有關講者如何意識到這些問題以及他們所用的解決方法，亦是本論文一項重要課題。

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter</b>		<b>Page</b>
<b>ONE</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Introductory Remarks	1
1.2	Problem Formulation	2
1.3	Classification of Intercultural Miscommunication	3
1.4	The Purpose and Significance of the Study	5
1.5	Delimitation of the Study	5
1.6	Limitation of the Study	6
1.7	Hypotheses	6
1.8	Organisation of the Study	7
<b>TWO</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1	Definition of Miscommunication	10
2.2	Literature on Intercultural Communication	13
2.2.1	Gumperz's "Discourse Strategies"	13
2.2.2	Culture and Style of Communication	17
2.2.3	Cultural Variation in Discourse	20
2.2.4	Relationship Between Language and Discrimination	25
2.2.5	Contact Linguistics	30
2.2.6	Incipient Miscommunication as a Resource in Intercultural Negotiation	35
<b>THREE</b>	<b>THE RESEARCH SITE AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION</b>	<b>39</b>
3.1	Criteria for Identifying and Selecting the Research Site and Informants	39
3.2	Background Information of the Research Site and Informants	41

3.2.1	The Research Site	41
3.2.2	The Informants	41
3.2.3	Linguistic Choices in the Office	42
3.3	Methods of Data Collection	44
3.3.1	Participant Observation	44
3.3.2	Audio-recording and its Limitations	45
3.3.3	Follow-up Interviews	47
3.4	Nature of the Data	48
3.5	Method of Transcription	48

#### **FOUR FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION 50**

4.1	Method and Unit of Analysis	51
4.2	Classification of Miscommunication	53
4.2.1	Linguistic Miscommunication	53
4.2.2	Sociocultural Miscommunication	59
4.2.3	The Need to Distinguish Linguistic Miscommunication From Sociocultural Miscommunication	64
4.3	Analysis of the Intercultural Communication — an Ethnolinguistic Approach	68
4.3.1	Linking Ethnographic and Linguistic Data	68
4.3.2	'Secret codes'	70
4.4	Different Cultural Values Systems as Explanation to Communication Problems	72
4.4.1	The Concept of Harmony	73
4.4.2	The Respect for Authority	74

#### **FIVE MANAGEMENT OF MISCOMMUNICATION 78**

5.1	Identifying Communication Strategies — an Overview of Selected Relevant Research	78
-----	--	----

5.1.1	Reduction Strategies vs. Achievement Strategies	78
5.1.2	Taxonomies of Communication Strategies	80
5.2	Management of Miscommunication	82
5.2.1	Modification of Speech Style	82
5.2.2	The Use of Verbal Checks	92
5.2.3	Avoidance of Communication	94
5.2.4	Cultural Assumptions and Corresponding Realignments of Cultural-specific Frames	96
5.2.5	Using Non-verbal Communication	99
<b>SIX</b>	<b>SOME IMPLICATIONS</b>	<b>102</b>
6.1	Implications in the Multicultural Workplace	102
6.2	Educational Implications	107
6.2.1	Native-like Competence: a Case of 'to be or not to be'	107
6.2.2	Teachers and Learners as Co-researchers	112
6.3	Raising Awareness of Native Speakers in Intercultural Communication	116
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>119</b>
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>121</b>