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Australian and Chinese perceptions of (im)politeness in an intercultural apology

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the variables in perceptions of (im)politeness in an intercultural apology, focusing on discussion of the cultural and gender differences. Through the study’s instrument, a conversation between an Australian and a Taiwanese Chinese speaker, the study suggests that there are indeed some differences in perceptions of (im)politeness across different cultural groups, since the participants from these two backgrounds tend to use distinctive strategies to make apologies. The study’s findings indicate that the cultural factor is more influential in the perceptions of (im)politeness than the gender factor. The gender differences found in these perceptions require further investigation with a bigger sample. Regarding the cultural factor, a polite apology perceived by Australian speakers emphasises expressions of friendliness in the interaction, whereas a polite apology perceived by Taiwanese speakers focuses on showing chengyi ‘sincerity’ from the apologiser towards the recipient. Specifically, the study’s implication is that different perceptions of (im)politeness may result in communication breakdown or misunderstanding and thus may bring up the awareness of cultural differences in intercultural communication. Based on the empirical data from the native informants, the study concludes that the perception of (im)politeness is culturally determined, indicating the significance of the appreciation of cultural difference in order to avoid communication breakdown.

1. Introduction

Apologies are one of the many speech acts frequently used in human interaction. Numerous studies provide definitions of an apology as well as examining its functions. Olshtain and Cohen (1983: 20) claimed that “an apology is called for when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is real or potential”. In addition, Aijmer (1996: 81) also argued that:

What seems to be necessary is that the ‘apologiser’ has done something which is annoying or damaging to the person to whom the apology is addressed. The apologiser now regrets having done the act and takes responsibility for it by uttering an apology.

These definitions indicate that the intention of the apologiser is to produce an utterance in order to redress the offence. The functions of an apology have also been examined in studies to gain understanding of further functional aspects of
the speech act. Trosborg (1995), for example, claimed that the act of apologising requires an action or an utterance which is intended to ‘set things right’: the function of an apology is coincidental with the social goal of maintaining harmony between speaker and listener. Moreover, from a sociolinguistic perspective, Suszczynska (1999) argued that the act of apologising is to save the hearer’s face, but is a face-threatening act for the speaker (see also Brown and Levinson 1987). Therefore, apologising is a critical component of maintenance of the social and relational harmony because the speech act serves as a redressive act for the offence.

Since apologising is a crucial element of maintenance of social and relational harmony, an act of apologising thus enacts an important role in the social practice of politeness. According to Watts (2003:169), linguistic politeness may be realised by means of both formulaic and semi-formulaic utterances. Apologising is one of the commonly used linguistic and formulaic expressions which carry out indirect and appropriate speech acts on the “politic behaviour of a social situation”. The study by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) argued that apologetic language such as ‘I’m sorry’ or ‘I apologise’ is marked as an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID); these are characterised formulaic, routinised expressions. Thus, apologetic language is used to perform a polite act towards the listener through linguistic markers.

However, when judging an (im)polite apology, the speaker’s and recipient’s perceptions of the degree of the offence are decisive, so the recipient’s and speaker’s points of view, perceptions of the degree of offence, and the extent of the expected reprimand have to be taken into account (Trosborg 1987: 148). Other influential factors which have been examined through a few studies are the nature of offence, the familiarity of the individuals, the social status of the participants and so on (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Fraser 1981; Fukushima and Iwata 1985; Olshtain and Cohen 1983). Those factors may influence individuals making an apology, in terms of politeness as well as their strategies of apology. On the other hand, another influential factor began to appeal to researchers from the 1990s. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences are also vital factors influencing variation in speech acts (Félix-Brasdefer 2006; Huang 2004; Suh 1999; Trosborg 1995; Young 1994). In other words, different cultural backgrounds may lead to different productions of the speech act as well as different perceptions of the level (im)politeness. Therefore, the need for this study from a cross-cultural perspective is originally motivated by those arguments from previous studies, in order to examine the perceptions of (im)politeness of an intercultural apology across speakers of Australian English and Chinese.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Apology strategies

An apology is offered to express regrets for an offence in order to restore the social and relational harmony between the two participants. Trosborg (1995: 374) argues that the apology serves as a remedial act to facilitating face-saving for the apologiser and recipient. This face-saving act has two roles: protective orientation towards the apologiser and defensive orientation towards the recipient (Goffman 1972: 325). As such, in order to have the recipient accept the apology, the apologiser has to apply different strategies to cover the offence, depending on the severity of the damage to the perception of self. The study by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) argues that apologies can be performed by any one of the following strategies, or any combination or sequence of them: IFID, taking responsibility, promise of forbearance, expression of embarrassment, explanation or account, offer of repair, distracting from the offence.

a. IFIDs are formulaic, routinised expressions in which the speaker’s apology is made explicitly, e.g. ‘I am sorry’ or ‘I apologise’.

b. Taking responsibility is used by the speaker to express responsibility for the offence which created the need to apologise, in an attempt to placate the hearer, e.g. ‘I missed the bus…My mistake’.

c. Promise of forbearance is used by the speaker whenever the of guilt is strong enough: he or she feels the need to promise that the offensive act will never occur again, e.g. ‘I’ll make sure that I am here on time…’

d. Expression of embarrassment, e.g. ‘I feel awful about it…’

e. Explanation or Account is used by the speaker to give reasons to the hearer, e.g. ‘and there’s a terrible traffic jam…’

f. Offer of repair is uttered by the speaker to make up for the offence if the inconvenience or the damage which affected the hearer can be compensated for, e.g. ‘Let’s make another appointment…’

g. Distracting from the offence can be generally divided into two strategies, query precondition and future remark, e.g. ‘I am late? Let’s go to work then…”

The above strategies are presented in the order people use them in normal circumstances. The strategies used reflect the apologiser’s perception of the offence and what now needs to be enacted to satisfy the recipient, using different combination of strategies.
2.2 Cultural considerations

As suggested earlier, according to previous studies the application of the apology strategies may vary across many influential factors, such as social status, familiarity of the participants, gender, age or cultural background. In this study, the factors of cultural difference and gender difference are taken into consideration to examine whether there is any difference between how the Australian and Taiwanese participants perceive an intercultural apology in terms of politeness. With regard to cultural differences, (im)politeness has to be discussed prior to exploring the issue of perceptions across cultures.

Politeness in English is personified by “someone who is polite, has good manners and behaves in a way that is socially correct and not rude to other people” (Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners 2001: 1186). The studies by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), which propose a universal model of politeness theory, have been advocated by numerous studies in Anglo-Saxon societies for decades. The notion of face, which is derived from Goffman’s (1967) seminal work, is regarded as the ‘kernel element’ underlying politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1978: 63). Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) argue that the concept of face is “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. This public self-image comprises two desires: one is positive face, which encompasses the desire to be approved of and appreciated by others; the other is negative face, which encompasses the desire to be unimpeded by others. Thus, politeness theory, which draws from the concept of face, claims that negative politeness and positive politeness are used to maintain or save every individual’s negative and positive face. Positive politeness is a “social behaviour conveying friendliness or expressing admiration for the addresses”, whereas negative politeness is a “behaviour that avoids impeding or imposing on others” (Holmes 2006: 686). A further assumption is that the conceptualisation of face is shared across cultures, and indeed how people maintain this social necessity in interactions is something that can be applied as universal language usage (Brown and Levinson 1978: 67). Since face is the core of interactional concern in terms of politeness, politeness arises from reducing ‘face-threat’ by applying positive and negative politeness strategies.

Politeness theory has also seen extensive debate in intercultural studies (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Gu 1990; Haugh 2006; Mao 1994; Matsumoto 1988; Watts 2003). The dimension of politeness being considered can differ across cultures. Both ancient teachings – the Record of Ritual (Liji) – and Gu’s more recent definition of politeness in Chinese (1990: 238) include being humble about oneself and showing respect towards others. However, regarding politeness in modern Chinese (Mandarin) or limao, Haugh (2006:20) suggests that the notion of keqi ‘restraint’ and chengyi ‘sincerity’ are more prominent than the traditional definition in earlier society due to shift away from an emphasis on hierarchical relations. Limao involves “showing restraint both in the form of a reluctance to
indicate what the individual wants, acknowledging one’s ability or competence (keqi), and sincerity in terms of what one says and does (chengyi)” (Haugh 2006: 20). In other words, it is important to show restraint and sincerity during interactions in Chinese culture in order to be ‘polite’ (limao).

According to the variables in terms of perception of politeness, the speech act apology may be realised in different patterns, may be used distinctively across various factors or may carry specific cultural values. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate the perceptions in an intercultural apology between Australian English and Taiwanese speakers. The aim is to explore whether cross-cultural and gender factors influence the participants’ use of apology strategies and their perception of an apology in terms of (im)politeness. The research questions are as follows:

1. Are there differences in the perceptions of (im)politeness in an intercultural apology between Australian English and Chinese speakers?
2. Are there differences in the perceptions of (im)politeness in an intercultural apology across genders?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of the quantitative questionnaire included 20 Australian and 20 Taiwanese Chinese speakers. Each cultural group was divided into two groups: ten females and ten males. Most were university students, but participants also included a QIBT student, a TAFE student, and two workers. All of the participants were born in their respective countries and were native speakers. The Australian participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 32 years, and that of the Taiwanese participants from 20 to 31 years. For the qualitative interviews, informants were randomly selected from the participants of the qualitative questionnaire. There were six informants from each cultural group, three females and three males.

3.2 Instrument

The intercultural conversation used as the instrument for this study was a conversation between an Australian and a Taiwanese Chinese involving making an apology for not showing up for dinner with others at a restaurant. All the participants were given both a transcription and a sound recording of this conversation and were asked to rate the level of politeness according to their perceptions of making an apology (see Appendices 1 and 2). This intercultural apology was provided in the study in order to examine how the native speakers of these two cultures perceived the apology in terms of (im)politeness.
3.3 Procedure

Most of the participants were randomly selected at university, where the student researcher was able to explain the purpose of the study to the participants face-to-face. However, for some of the Taiwanese Chinese participants, the student researcher had to send out the questionnaires to Taiwan through email, as there was difficulty in accessing a sufficient number of Taiwanese university students in Australia. For the quantitative questionnaires, the participants were asked to complete a survey after listening to the conversation recording. The Taiwanese participants were also provided with a simplified conversation transcript while listening to the conversation in order to avoid difficulty in understanding the content. After the questionnaire, 12 participants were selected as informants for the ethnographic interviews: six Australian and six Taiwanese informants, with three females and three males in each cultural group. The interview questions were specifically focused on discovering the native speakers’ perceptions of apology in terms of (im)politeness and were designed to elicit the distinctive perspectives across intercultural communication. The questions, open-ended to allow the participants to discuss the topics flexibly, would provide this study with emic perspectives on (im)politeness of apology; as well, the responses would serve as a sociocognitive construct to support the discussion of the quantitative data later on.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Significant differences between Australian and Taiwanese Chinese perceptions

From the result of the questionnaires shown in Table 1 below, it appears that the Australian and Taiwanese participants have different perceptions of the degree of (im)politeness in the given context of the apology.
Table 1: Perceptions of (im)politeness by Australian and Taiwanese participants

From these results, it appears that the intercultural apology is accepted more by the Australian participants than by the Taiwanese participants in terms of politeness, although no one from any group rated the speech act as very polite. The perceptions of this particular apology can be further collapsed into the two key categories of appropriate and not appropriate. People who perceive the apology to be from very impolite to impolite are categorised in the ‘inappropriate’ group, whereas people who perceive the apology to be in the range of neither polite nor impolite to polite are categorised in the ‘appropriate’ group. From the results, the percentage of Australian participants who perceived the apology to be in the very impolite to impolite range is about 35%, with about 65% perceiving it to be in the range from neither impolite nor polite to polite. On the other hand, the percentage of Taiwanese participants who rated the apology to be in the very impolite to impolite range is about 75%, with about 25% in the range of neither impolite nor polite through to polite. This indicates that the Taiwanese participants expect more apologetic language for it be considered polite; however, Australian participants consider the apology to be more acceptable in terms of politeness. This difference is statistically significant ($X^2 = 6.465, p=0.011, df=1$). Thus, the results indicate there is a significant discrepancy in perception of the apology between members of the two cultures.

At the end of the questionnaire, all participants were asked to produce an apology as if they were in the situation. The results in Table 2 below display the percentage of usage for each strategy, based on the categorisation of strategies by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). The percentage shows the frequency of usage of certain strategies by the participants from each cultural group. The participants in this section of the quantitative questionnaire are asked to demonstrate how they would perform the apology in the situation, and they are asked to produce utterances as genuinely as if they encounter the real circumstance.
Table 2: Apology strategies used by Australian and Taiwanese participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian</th>
<th>Taiwanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Repetitive IFID: “I am really sorry...I am sorry”.</td>
<td>1. Repetitive IFID: “I am really really sorry...I would like to apologise”...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explanation: “I didn’t make it the other day because we got lost”...</td>
<td>2. Expression of concern: “hopefully this doesn’t bother you at all”, “express sorry to your family for me”, “I hope you don’t mind”...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Promise of compensation: “I would like to buy you a dinner next time”...</td>
<td>4. Repair: “Let’s make it another day”...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Promise of compensation: “let me pay the cost”, “I will shout you a dinner”, “I would like to ask you to be my guest next time”...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 does not provide the IFID across the two groups since every participant performs an IFID in their apology, e.g. ‘I am sorry’ or ‘I apologise’. In other words, the results indicate differences in making an apology across the members of the two cultures. From these results, we can see that the participants share the same percentage of 30% for making repetitive IFID in utterances. Repetitive IFID suggest that 30% of the participants in both groups tend to perform apologetic language repetitively. Approximately 20% of the Taiwanese participants performed their apologies before giving explanations or reasons by showing their concern for the recipient. This strategy is not found in the strategies used by Australian participants. The percentage of expression of explanation across the two groups is fairly close: 25% of the Australians; 30% of the Taiwanese.

Regarding the strategy of repair and promise of compensation, there are disparities in the figures of the two groups: Taiwanese participants appear to use those two strategies more than the Australians.

It was found that Australian and Taiwanese participants view an apology differently, reflecting different perspectives on the definition of a polite apology. The Australian participants’ comments in the interviews suggest there are three prominent components to being to making a polite apology:
1. Taking responsibility
   “Usually sorry would be involved, making it’s more like your fault…humbling yourself.” [Interview excerpt 1]

2. Explanation
   “You should always explain to someone what happened if something like that. If they really have a good excuse, stuck in the traffic or something came up, I had really a horrible day. Cos I know I’ve been done that.” [Interview excerpt 2]
   “We don’t want to make excuses, you wanta give a reason if you can, cos the person wants to hear it. I mean a normal interaction you can have a bit of reason…” [Interview excerpt 3]

3. Establishing good relationship
   “He tried to smooth it all over, but he is trying to maintain you know leave it open. You know you can still be friends or something…. that’s a strategy anyway that people tend to use. I try to make you forget about what the call is about, how you are all these stuff. But that’s not what you rang about. Just discuss about your family.” [Interview excerpt 4]

Australian participants’ perceptions of a polite apology suggest that Australians make an apology as a face-saving act to show politeness towards the recipient by employing these three main strategies. Regarding the act of establishing a good relationship, the participants who rate the intercultural apology as polite also noted on the questionnaires some similar perceptions of what a polite apology should be:

   “Because he not only re-apologises but also asks about M’s well-being, family.”
   “Because he let Melody know the reason, friendly to each other and considerate.”

Therefore, establishing good relationships and showing friendliness are vital components in the Australian apology; this is not found in the data of the Taiwanese participants. In line with Haugh’s (2006) claim, the results suggest that showing friendliness is an important factor underlying perceptions of politeness in Australian English. Thus, Australian participants tend to establish good relationships through making a polite apology in order to avoid damaging relationships between those involved after the offence.

On the other hand, the criteria for making a polite apology that appear in the Taiwanese participants’ comments are quite different from those in the Australian ones:
A. Detailed explanation, even if telling a lie is necessary
   “A polite apology needs an explanation. The apologiser has to make
   sure the date for the next time in order to show sincerity of the regrets.”
   [Interview excerpt 5]
   “I think you need to give a reason. Even if you don’t want to give a
detailed reason, you still need to generally explain why you were not
able to be there.” [Interview excerpt 6]
   “I think you would need detailed explanations and also a repair of the
offence afterwards. I would try my best to explain everything about the
offence I made, even if I need to tell a lie. I think a good reason is
extremely important.” [Interview excerpt 7]

B. Expression of embarrassment
   “If I can feel that the apologiser feels very embarrassed, then I will
accept it.” [Interview excerpt 8]

C. Showing concern about the recipient’s feeling
   “I would try to care about the feeling of the person whom I cause the
offence.” [Interview excerpt 9]

D. Promise of compensation
   “I would buy a gift or make it another day, for example: I may say I’ll
shout next time to firstly indicate my regrets. So I think showing
sincerity is to say something concrete rather than uttering something
unpractical.” [Interview excerpt 10]

E. Keeping apologising and explaining until receiving forgiveness
   “A polite apology is to keep saying sorry, apologising and explaining
why I cause the trouble. I would also hope to be forgiven by the person.
If I didn’t get any forgiveness from the person, then I would keep
apologising. I wouldn’t stop saying sorry until he makes me feel he is
appropriate.” [Interview excerpt 11]

F. Repair
   “I judge the impolite or polite apology depends on who arranges the
next date. I think the apologiser wouldn’t do so if he has no sincerity…it
can be a polite apology if the apologiser actively arranges the date for
the next time.” [Interview excerpt 12]
   “The apologiser has to make sure the date for the next time in order to
show sincerity of regrets.” [Interview excerpt 13]

There are thus three outstanding criteria in making a polite apology according to
the Taiwanese participants’ comments. Firstly, the Taiwanese respondents
tended to keep apologising and explaining until the recipient indicates
forgiveness. From the informants’ perspective, continuing to use apologetic
language is to show one’s sincerity towards the offence and also to seek
forgiveness from the recipient. Secondly, using more embarrassment expressions
is important for achieving a polite apology. This corresponds to the result of
using the apology strategy of the Taiwanese participants: an embarrassment expression from the apologiser is one of the criteria for making a polite apology. Since the ethnographic interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the culturally-loaded term of embarrassment, *buhaoyisi* (lit., ‘not good meaning’) appeared quite a few times in the interviews. To say one feels *buhaoyisi* (or ‘I feel embarrassed’) implies feeling guilty for the offence and sorry for what the speaker has done to the recipient. Thirdly, the Taiwanese respondents tend to try to show sincerity through the apology. When asking about what a polite apology should be, *chenyi* ‘sincerity’ also appeared many times in the interviews. Most of the participants commented about how to show *chenyi* when making an apology, and this appears from the Taiwanese participants’ perspectives to be an essential criterion in making a polite apology. Interview excerpt 14, for instance, indicates that the participant seeks not only the sincerity of the regrets from the apology but also the compensation of the offence: “I judge the impolite or polite apology depends on who says to make the date next time. I think the apologiser wouldn’t say anything if he has no sincerity.”

### 4.2 Perception of (im)politeness of the intercultural apology across gender

There was only a slight difference in the perception of (im)politeness of the intercultural apology across genders, and this difference was not statistically significant ($X^2 = 0.404, p=0.525, df=1$). This indicates that across the two cultural groups there are no discernible differences in perceptions of (im)politeness.

![Graph showing perception of (im)politeness across gender](image)

*Table 3: Participant evaluations of (im)politeness of apology across gender*

Table 3 displays the results from the participants across, and shows that the percentages of the perceptions of (im)politeness are fairly close according to the category of appropriate and inappropriate groups. The percentage of males who said the apology was ‘inappropriate’ (either very impolite or impolite) was about...
50%, whereas that of females was about 60%. On the other hand, the percentage of males who said the apology was ‘appropriate’ (neither polite nor impolite, polite, or very polite) was 50%, whereas that of females was 40%.

In order to investigate whether the influence of gender on perceptions of (im)politeness is somehow mitigated by the strong influence of cultural background, the two gender categories were further subdivided according to cultural background.

Table 4 displays the participants divided into four subgroups: Australian female, Australian male, Taiwanese female and Taiwanese male. Taiwanese female and male subgroups appear to have a similar trend, that is, more towards perceiving the apology from very impolite to impolite, whereas the Australian female and male subgroups have a similar trend towards the category of perceiving the apology as ranging from neither impolite nor polite through to polite. For Taiwanese, there was no statistically significant difference between male and female perceptions of impoliteness, according to the chi-square test (). For Australians, there was also no statistically significant difference ($X^2 = 0.22$, $p=0.639$, df=1). This indicates that even within the same cultural group there is no discernible influence of gender on perceptions of (im)politeness in this context.

5. Conclusion

The present study explores the variables in perception of (im)politeness of an intercultural apology, with emphasis on cultural and gender differences. The result of the study indicate that there are significant differences in the perceptions of an (im)polite apology across cultures, and thus provides further
evidence that cultural factors can be influential in the individual’s perceptions of (im)politeness. The study indicated that there are distinctions in the perceptions of (im)politeness between Australian English and Taiwanese Chinese speakers, not only from the results of the questionnaire, but also from comments in the interviews. However, with regards to gender differences, there is no strong evidence to demonstrate that gender is a prominent factor influencing the perceptions in this study. According to the statistical analysis, the present study indicates that only the cultural factor is influential in the perceptions of (im)politeness, while the gender factor is not statistically significant.

The lack of influence of gender may seem at first glance to be counter intuitive in light of the large body of studies indicating that there are differences in politeness between males and females. However, this study has focused on perceptions of (im)politeness rather than on the production of politeness. Therefore, according to previous studies, while we might expect females to have produced a more polite apology in this context, there is no particular reason to assume that females will perceive this apology from a male as more impolite than males would. If females do indeed generally produce more polite apologies than males, then it would not be surprising for both male and female respondents to be intuitively aware of this when making their evaluations of (im)politeness. However, in light of the trend for females to produce more polite apologies, it might be interesting to investigate whether there would have been differences in the perception of (im)politeness of this particular apology if it had been attributed to a female rather than to a male.

There are also some limitations in this study about which researchers need to be aware in further investigations. According to the perceptions of Taiwanese participants, the length of staying overseas of those participants needs to be taken into account since cultural exposure can be another variable influencing the participants’ pragmatic competence. Moreover, while the results indicate that gender is not an important factor in perceptions of (im)politeness in this case, a larger sample across more contexts is needed in order to have a more detailed analysis of the factors and also to have greater confidence in the findings.

*Author notes*
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References

**Appendix 1: Transcription of the conversation**

1. W: hello
3. W: hi, Melody, how ya going?
4. M: ohm, Is it too late to call?
5. W: No, it’s fine.
6. M: yeh, hmm, sorry to call you so late. I’ve got your message, but haven’t got time to reply.
7. W: yeah, ahm, no, it’s fine. It’s just, a, really apologise not getting back to you the other day we couldn’t make it.
8. M: oh, that’s okay. yeah, yeah. I just thought probably you were busy with something and forgot it.
9. W: no, it’s fine. It’s just, a, really apologise not getting back to you the other day we couldn’t make it.
10. M: oh, that’s okay. yeah, yeah. I just thought probably you were busy with something and forgot it.
11. W: yeah, ahm, no, it’s fine. It’s just, a, really apologise not getting back to you the other day we couldn’t make it.
12. M: oh, okay, yeah, yeah, that’s fine. I just want to call and tell you that’s okay.
13. W: yeah, I will give you a ring in a later day and I will give you a time and day when we coming down again.
14. M: Sure, yeah, maybe just uh can make another time when you come down to Brisbane.
15. W: That will be nice actually. Nice to catch up.
17. W: Have you been good?
18. M: uh yes (laugh) Yes, good good.
20. M: yeh yeh, just want to call you that I got your message and yeh thank you for for uh telling me that yeh.
21. W: so is your mum alright?
22. M: yeh, she’s okay, just uhm need to look after my uhm my grandmum. So yeah
23. W: [okay]
25. W: Is everything okay back in Taiwan?
26. M: uhm, for my grandmum actually not. She’s very sick now. So uhm (0.3) yeh I don’t know my mum just need to look after her and yes.
27. W: Ah, right, okay, is she gonna make it okay?
29. W: hmm, good.
30. M: yeh (laugh) hmm hmm yeh, yeh hopefully. Hopefully everything will be fine.
Weilin Chang: Perceptions of (im)politeness of an intercultural apology

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Appendix 2: The questionnaire and interview questions

A. The questionnaire
1. How would you rate this interaction?
   very impolite   neither polite   polite   very impolite
   impolite        nor impolite    polite

2. Why do you think so?

3. What would you say if you were Wayne?

B. The interview
1. What is a polite apology?
2. Have you had any experience making an apology or accepting apologies from others?
“Ah, excuse me...I like your shirt”: An examination of compliment responses across gender by Australians

BRIALLEN DAVIS*

Abstract

This paper examines compliment response across gender within Australia and also the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious. Compliment response was gathered by approaching strangers under the premise of needing directions and then concluding the exchanges with a compliment on appearance. Participants were soon re-approached by a second person who asked them to fill out a brief survey which included four 7-point Likert-type scales, one specifically pertaining to the ‘innocence’ or ‘flirty-ness’ of the compliment. Australian speakers of English were found to use acceptance tokens in all cases when responding to the non-intimate compliment. The majority of men surveyed were also found to perceive the compliment as neither ‘flirtatious’ nor ‘innocent.’ However, this may indicate the men were simply reluctant to rate the compliment as ‘flirtatious’ given the negative connotations associated with the adjective in certain contexts.

1. Introduction

As Parisi and Wogan (2006) suggest, there is a growing field of research pertaining to compliment behaviour and its relation to both status and gender. Similarly, investigations regarding the male tendency to view situations in a more ‘sexualised’ manner than females (Abbey 1987) have also grown popular, most recently as an attempt to explain the motivations behind sexual harassment (Johnson, Stockdale and Saal 1991). This paper examines both issues, investigating compliment responses across gender within Australia, and also the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious.

Studying a corpus of 1,062 compliment responses collected over a three-year period at the State University of New York, Herbert (1986) argued that despite being socially conditioned to respond to a compliment by using ones’ manners and saying ‘thank you’, American speakers are almost twice as likely “to respond with some response other than agreement” (p.80). Although occasionally overgeneralising in his categorisation of compliment responses (into Acceptance or Non-agreement/Non-acceptance), Herbert draws important attention to the ‘ethnography of speaking’ when contrasting his findings with similar studies conducted in other English-speaking countries. Finding in preliminary research that English and South African speakers are more likely to accept a compliment than their American counterparts, Herbert cites Sherzer’s (1977) basic concepts of ‘speech ethnography’ to explain this discrepancy stating, “[firstly,] that the patterned use of language is culturally variable and [secondly, that] these
patterns may be linked to such larger aspects of sociocultural organisation as religion, politics and ecology” (p. 82).

Holmes (1988) conducted a similar study using a New Zealand sample focusing specifically on the function of compliments across gender, be they positively affective speech acts or potentially face threatening acts. Using a corpus of 484 compliment exchanges recorded by linguistics students, Holmes (1988: 449) examined the frequency of compliments between genders, finding 23.1% of compliments occur from males to females in comparison to 16.5% from females to males. Her results also show the most popular compliment topic is that of ‘appearance’ with female–female interactions complimenting on appearance 61% of the time, male–female 47%, female–male 40% and male–male, a surprising 36% (p.455). She draws from Wolfson’s comments (1983) to note that such a high percentage amongst males would generally not occur amongst American men (Holmes 1988: 456). She furthers her study by categorising the compliments into syntactic patterns and investigating the influence of status on compliment behaviour and the motivations behind compliment response. According to Holmes (1988: 460), New Zealanders rarely overtly reject compliments; such a trend is evident in her results, which show 62% of females and 64% of males use an acceptance token.

Parisi and Wogan’s (2006) study provides an updated look at compliment topics and gender in America. Again using linguistic students to record compliment exchanges, the corpus is analysed and a significantly higher proportion of compliments on appearance is found to occur from males to females (60.53%) than females to males (29.27%) (Parisi and Wogan 2006: 21). Where previous studies have focused primarily on corpus analysis and quantitative results (Herbert 1986; Holmes 1988), Parisi and Wogan (2006) incorporated interviews into their methodology to provide further contextual information and so gain insight into compliment motivation. Through such qualitative methods, they discovered a shared trait amongst the females: namely, that they feel uncomfortable complimenting males on appearance for fear of the compliment being misinterpreted as a ‘come-on’. Like compliment behaviour itself, this ambiguity between genders as to what constitutes ‘flirtation’ has received attention (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson et al. 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988).

Hypothesising that men would misperceive a female’s friendly behaviour as sexual interest, Abbey (1982) instructed cross-gender pairs to converse for five minutes while a hidden cross-gender pair observed the interaction. Both dyads were then asked to rate the interaction using 7-point Likert-type scales containing the key traits ‘flirtatious’, ‘seductive’ and ‘promiscuous’. The results showed that male actors and observers rated the female actor as being more ‘promiscuous’ and ‘seductive’ than the female actors and observers rated the same female. Males were also found to be more attracted to the opposite sex actor than were females, and to view the male actor in a more sexualised fashion than did the
female observers. Such results led Abbey (1982: 836) to suggest that men perceive the world in more sexual terms than do women.

Shotland and Craig (1988) built on Abbey’s study in an effort to investigate whether males or females can in fact differentiate between friendly and sexually-interested behaviour. Replicating Abbey’s procedure, but this time instructing the role-players to intentionally act either ‘sexually-interested’ or ‘friendly’, the interactions were taped and then shown to a sample of psychology students. The students then rated the interactions using similar Likert-type scales and the ‘sexually related adjectives’: flirtatious, seductive and promiscuous. Shotland and Craig (1988: 71) conclude that both sexes can differentiate between sexually-interested and friendly behaviour, although males perceive other people and situations more sexually than do females. This conclusion is shared with a similar study conducted by Johnson et al. (1991), who investigated gender-based differences in the perception of sexual harassment in various scenarios.

Shotland and Craig (1988: 71) hypothesise that the difference in perception is caused by a difference between the thresholds of sexual-intent across gender. In other words, women will probably misjudge interested behaviour as friendly behaviour because they share a high threshold for sexual-intent; similarly, men will misjudge friendly behaviour as interested behaviour because they share a low threshold for sexual-intent. In light of such results it is no surprise then that the women in Parisi and Wogan’s (2006: 23) study expressed such reservations in complimenting males on appearance. What is interesting is that each of their female participants could pinpoint the exact reason why they felt a level of ‘guardedness’ without reading any studies on males’ misperceptions of friendly behaviour. Given the sparsity of appearance compliments from females to males in this study, however, how can we be certain males’ misperceptions continue in such situations?

As Holmes’ (1988) study shows, appearance compliments across gender in New Zealand occur at a much closer rate: male–female 47%, female–male 40% (p.455). Does this mean that male and female speakers of New Zealand English share similar thresholds for sexual-intent and are therefore less likely to misjudge interested and friendly behaviours? Or are speakers of New Zealand English simply less concerned than American speakers about the possibility of being misinterpreted?

Research into the field of compliment behaviour and the perceptions of ‘sexual-intent’ across gender indeed raises a number of questions. Previous studies have conceded that more needs to be done to expand the fields. For example, Herbert (1986: 81) questions whether compliment response in other English speaking countries behaves in a similar way to his American sample and if indeed a student sample can adequately represent the broader society. Similarly, studying compliments from informal interactions (between friends and intimates), Holmes (1988: 456) calls for the investigation of compliment behaviour in different settings to clarify the patterns found in her corpus. Abbey
(1987:193) encourages research into cross-gender perceptions of sexual-intent in an effort to educate men and women on what types of cues are most likely to be misperceived and in turn, how to send and receive cues with less ambiguity.

Building on previous research, this paper investigates non-intimate compliment response across gender amongst Australian English speakers, and the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious. Compliments were gathered in the public sphere (away from university) to better represent broader society.

2. Research hypotheses

As past research suggests (Herbert 1986; Holmes 1988; Shotland and Craig 1988), compliments and compliment response differ across cultures, including gender. Herbert (1986:82) suggests that the similar pattern of compliment response found within British and South African varieties of English could be explained through the traditional role of Standard British in South African English. Given Australia’s colonisation at the hands of the British Empire, and also its proximity to New Zealand, it is hypothesised that Australian response traits will approximate those of the aforementioned English varieties. Hypothesis one is therefore:

1. In response to compliments, non-intimate Australians will use acceptance tokens with more frequency than other compliment responses

In light of research conducted on cross-gender perceptions of ‘sexual-intent’ (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson et al. 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988), it becomes apparent that males frequently view interactions in a more sexual manner than do females. Therefore, hypothesis two proposes that:

2. Males will perceive the compliment to be more flirtatious than innocent

3. Method

Information was gathered by two female linguistics students in an open-air public shopping mall over a period of ten hours. Both students were casually dressed and in their early twenties. ‘Target’ participants were chosen on three basic criteria: age, ethnicity and absence of bystanders. Specifically, participants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 30; born and raised in Australia (Caucasian appearance was therefore typically favoured) and finally, on their own.

In order to gather non-intimate compliment response, a strategy needed to be developed to enable a confederate to approach a stranger and compliment them without appearing unnatural or suspicious. A study on tactile contact and spontaneous help (Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou 2003) involved a similar public sample and therefore provided a useful process on which to base the current methodology.
In the study conducted by Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou (2003), a researcher approached people under the premise of needing directions; after the exchange of information, the researcher thanked the person and moved off in the direction indicated. An observer located not far from the interaction recorded the behaviour which followed.

Similarly, this study utilised two people; the first located a potential participant and approached them under the premise of needing directions to a particular area of the mall. After the exchange, person one thanked the stranger, added a predetermined compliment regarding appearance (refer to Appendix 1) and moved off in the direction indicated. Person two (who had been observing the interaction from a distance) then quickly approached the same participant and briefly explained the research being conducted, asking politely if they would participate by filling out a brief survey. Person one stopped and wrote down the compliment response once out of range. As it is the male perception of ‘sexual-intent’ being investigated in this study, only male participants were asked to complete all four scales in the survey.

Many of the studies conducted to investigate gender differences in the perception of sexually interested behaviour have used methods which involve participants rating people or interactions using the adjectives ‘flirtatious’, ‘seductive’ and ‘promiscuous’ (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson et al. 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988). Such adjectives all share sexual connotations but the degree of sexual strength associated with such words depends, very likely, on the perspective of the individual. If an individual is to provide their most honest perception it would seem only fair to offer them the opportunity to rank the person or situation as being simply ‘friendly’ or indeed ‘innocent.’

With this in mind, the survey used in this study (refer to Appendix 2) included four 7-point Likert-type scales of polar opposites, one specifically designed to elicit the ‘sexual-intent’ perceived by male participants by asking them to rate the compliment as either ‘innocent’ or ‘flirtatious.’ The other scales were designed to elicit whether the compliment had in fact been perceived as spontaneous.

4. Results

4.1 Compliment Response

A total of 20 strangers were approached, ten males and ten females. As hypothesised, acceptance tokens were the response of choice with a full 100% of participants using a variety of “thanks,” “thank you” or “cheers.” Such a result provides support for the suggestion that compliments between strangers are

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1 This initial question also proved beneficial in determining the ethnicity of the participant by providing a sample of the participant’s speech, i.e., did they have an Australian accent?
perceived as offers of solidarity as they are frequently accepted by non-intimates, those who do not share solidarity (Herbert 1986: 82). This however contrasts with the suggestions made by Holmes (1988) pertaining to gender differences in compliment behaviour, issues that will be discussed below. What was surprising was that 40% of female participants offered the purchase history of the complimented article after their expression of thanks. Considering the only thing the first person had asked for was directions, it appears that, for some women, a compliment pertaining to an item of clothing and a request for information about the specified item have the same function. No males responded with similar explanations of purchase history.

As Holmes (1988) suggests, this difference across genders could be due to the more positive attitude women have towards compliments, viewing them as signals of solidarity and therefore nominating further information to establish rapport. Men in comparison are said to perceive compliments as face-threatening acts (FTA)\(^2\), and therefore tend to view them as a less positive means for establishing solidarity (Holmes 1988). However, considering that 40% of the females immediately offered the purchase history, it is possible that they too could have perceived the compliment as an expression of desire. However, if that was the case, surely such explanations of history would not have been offered so freely or sincerely. Clearly more detailed research into the perlocutionary force of compliments across gender is needed to explain these occurrences.

4.2 Cross gender compliments: ‘innocent’ or ‘flirtatious?’

Close inspection of the surveys revealed an interesting pattern in the distribution of marks on the Likert-type scales. Given the bi-polar traits used in all of the scales, it was decided that any mark to the left or right of 4 (halfway) would be considered an affirmative for the applicable adjective (refer to Table 1).

\(^2\) For example, expressions of desire for the complimented article (see Brown and Levinson 1978).
As Figure 1 below illustrates, the majority of participants mark consistently at the positive extremities of each scale except when asked about the ‘flirtatiousness’ of the compliment.

Scale 2, across all participants, showed a significant drop in marking the extremities on the scale and focused on the mid-point, 4. Sixty per cent of participants rated the compliment as lying between innocent and flirtatious on this scale, with 20% of participants rating the compliment as tending towards innocent and an equal 20% rating the compliment as tending towards flirtatious. Such an equal distribution on both sides of the scale makes interpretation of the data very difficult.
In literal terms, it appears that the compliment was in fact not viewed as particularly flirtatious but simply neutral. However, as neutral ratings of such magnitude do not appear in any of the other scales, an alternative interpretation may be that such a significant drop in rating could possibly be due to the self-conscious embarrassment of being surveyed on perceptions pertaining to sexual-intent. Given the negative connotations associated with the term ‘flirtatious’ in certain contexts, males may not want to be regarded as having perceived sexual-intent, and therefore reduce the extremity of their mark.

Such ambiguous results cannot offer concrete support for hypothesis two, but considering previous research conducted in the field suggesting that men view interactions in a more sexual manner than do females (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson *et al.* 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988), it would be hasty to disregard the hypothesis entirely.

Fortunately, as illustrated in Table 1, the majority of participants found the compliment both ‘natural’ and ‘sincere’, which is very important considering the compliments had to occur in a public sphere between non-intimates. These two criteria had not been tested before (to the knowledge of the author of this study at the time). No patterns regarding age or civil status were discovered in the analysis of the data.

5. Discussion

This study was designed to build on past research conducted in the fields of compliment behaviour and cross-gender misperception of sexual-intent. It specifically examined compliment response across gender within the Australian English speaking culture and the likelihood of men to perceive a compliment as flirtatious.

Appearance compliments between non-intimates were found to elicit acceptance tokens 100% of the time, with some women also offering further information about the complimented item without any provocation. These results suggest that when it comes to compliment response, Australian speakers of English are indeed more similar to their New Zealand neighbours and British and South African counterparts than to the American samples cited in past research. However, as past studies analysed compliments collected amongst friends and intimates, a true comparison between previous results and the results of this study cannot be made. The overwhelming acceptance of non-intimate compliments in these results, however, suggests that non-intimates perceive compliments to be offers of solidarity, although more further study of gender-specific perceptions of the illocutionary force of compliments across gender is required to validate such a conclusion.

With regards to cross-gender perceptions of sexual-intent, this study has provided evidence to suggest males perceive a compliment from a non-intimate woman as neither particularly flirtatious nor strictly friendly, but rather, neutral.
Such ambiguous results may suggest that outside forces (such as an individuals’ embarrassment at being surveyed on perceptions pertaining to sexual-intent) may affect their ratings and therefore a method to reduce such anxiety should be encouraged to improve results.

Future research to explore the perceptions of men as the compliment grew more and more intimate and personal would be useful; for example, moving from a compliment of ones’ shirt to the colour of ones’ eyes. Similarly, would a man between the ages of 45 and 60 perceive the same level of flirtation as younger men (when complimented by a young woman), or would the age gap cause them to subconsciously dismiss the possibility of flirtation altogether?

As the person who approached the participants complimented the men strictly for research purposes, it is highly unlikely that any sexual cues were knowingly conveyed on her part. However, as she was unable to replicate the same body language or intonation for every interaction, it is possible that some non-verbal cues may have influenced the results. With this in mind, the use of audio and visual equipment to record the compliment exchange as it takes place would be beneficial in eliminating any occasions in which there is a discrepancy in non-verbal behaviour. Such attention to non-verbal cues could also reveal subtle signs in the participant to suggest they perceived the interaction as ‘flirtatious.’

There was significant difficulty in gathering participants for this investigation as the interactions had to occur between non-intimates and appear as spontaneous as possible; no participants were then actually aware they were participants until person two approached them with the survey. This caused a number of difficulties; firstly, the participants assumed confederate one was simply after directions and so quite often directed person one while still moving which made it very difficult for the compliment to occur with time for the participant to correctly hear it and reply. Secondly, the stigma associated with public surveys also made the participants immediately wary as soon as they were approached by person two.

Most interestingly, the greatest problem associated with gathering the sample was not the lack of available ‘targets’ but the approachability of them. Within the Australian culture (as became evident), it is very rare to find young men (18–30 years) in public, by themselves, who are not talking on their mobile phones or listening to music through headphones. The ability of young men to utilise their surroundings and possessions to isolate themselves from the public and decrease their level of approachability is truly astounding. Although compliment responses and perceptions of sexual-intent were the focus of this research, it appears a great deal of research could be done with regards to this ‘approachability phenomenon.’
6. Conclusion

Although the sample size of this study is small, trends, though tentative, can be deduced. The results of this study have supported the first hypothesis, but provided only limited data for the second. It appears that in response to compliments, non-intimate Australians do use acceptance tokens with more frequency than other compliment responses, but whether males perceive compliments to be more flirtatious than innocent remains uncertain. Future research is strongly encouraged to establish a methodology which reduces participant anxiety in order to eliminate the effect on opinions of potential embarrassment. The examination of a broader sample is also encouraged to establish more concrete trends and, in turn, to provide a more detailed study of which female cues are most likely to be misperceived by men in a cross-gender compliment exchange, and therefore reduce the ambiguity of ‘sexually interested’ and ‘friendly’ cues across genders.

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References


Appendix 1: Compliment Structure

In both Parisi and Wogan (2006) and Holmes (1988) studies, ‘appearance’ is the most common compliment topic. Appearance is also the most visible of the topics and for these reasons was chosen as the topic for compliment exchange in this investigation. However, as the compliment was to occur between strangers in a very brief exchange, choosing to compliment the participant’s hair or eyes would very possibly have led to suspicion, as such compliments are typically reserved for intimate exchanges. For this reason it was decided to use a possession compliment pertaining to an item of clothing which made up the total appearance of the participant. Obviously choosing to comment on the participants’ eyes or hair would have elicited a different response and should therefore be considered as an area of study in future investigations.

As explained in Holmes (1988), there exists a number of frequently occurring syntactic patterns within compliment behaviour. One such example is:

\[ \text{PRO BE a (INT) ADJ NP} \]

E.g. That’s a very nice coat.

To reduce syntactic influence on the results, this pattern was used for all interactions throughout the collection of data. One alteration was made, and that was the addition of the ‘tag’, by the way, at the end of the compliment. The ‘tag’ was added to convey the compliment in the most spontaneous light as possible. The noun phrase of the compliment varied only slightly between genders, as can be seen below:

**Males**

That’s a great *shirt*, by the way.

**Females**

That’s a great *top/dress/skirt*, by the way.
Appendix 2: Survey

In the previous interaction involving you and the girl who asked for directions, you received a compliment.

Please rate that compliment exchange using the following scales:
(I.e. Did you find the compliment...)

1) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Suspicous Sincere

2) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Innocent Flirtatious

3) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Threatening/Confronting Friendly

4) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Embarrassing/Uncomfortable Natural

Please place a tick in the appropriate boxes:

Country of birth: Australia Other (if other, please specify)

Nationality: Australian Other (if other, please specify)

Gender: Male Female

Age: 18-21 22-25 26-30

Civil status: Single Married Girl/Boy-Friend Other
Humour in British Print Advertisements

GWENAËLLE ANNE GAËLLE ROUX*

Abstract

This study explores a research model concerning humour in British print advertisements. The findings of this study suggest that humour is a relevant means used by industries to achieve commercial effectiveness. It is argued that humour can be depicted as a challenge framework, specific to a particular culture. The paper also tries to demonstrate the importance and outcomes of humour response in the British audience. To do so, the paper reviews different types of humour mechanisms and the enabling factors used to decode the humour mirth. The aim of this study is to comprehend to which extent mechanisms are used to trigger the humorous challenge in British print advertisements. Finally, the paper analyses the primary type of humour that is recurrent in British print advertisements. It is hoped that this study will draw further attention to the importance of the British audience’s judgment as well as provide a contrasting analysis between British citizens and other citizens from the Commonwealth.

1. Introduction

Advertising strategies account for an important part of the marketing activity of an industry. Humour is a relevant element frequently used by companies to sell products (Spotts, Weinberg and Parsons 1997: 18; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). Nevertheless, humour is not used in direct combination with the products themselves but rather is related to specific clients (Newman 2004: 88; Weiner 2006). In spite of the ongoing process of globalisation which has led to an increasing homogenization of advertising practices, it seems undeniable that the advertising process of a country entails specific inferences in regards to its national characteristics (Tungate 2007). Thus it is important to appreciate that different countries, like different people, find different things funny, which explains why national campaigns are usually better at humour than global campaigns (Newman 2004: 85; Lee and Johnson 2005: 29–30). Tungate (2007), for instance, argues that “a clever sense of humor is a typically British characteristic”. He claims that the United Kingdom is regarded as one of the most audacious markets in terms of advertisements (Tungate 2007). This study analyses the ways in which British print advertisements achieve humour. It also provides an understanding of the importance and the outcomes of humour response in the British audience.

At this point, it is crucial to mention that although research has been conducted for the past few years, no proper theory of humour has emerged yet (Spotts et al.
1997: 17–18). Thus, humour can broadly be identified as a form of communication in which a created stimulus may act to provide pleasure for an audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 95). Generally, humour is suggested as being a term applied to all literature and to all informal speech or writing in which the object is to amuse or arouse laughter in the reader or hearer (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 21–22).

Humour is a phenomenon that always requires a high level of motivation from the viewer, who is then more likely to remember it (Newman 2004: 88; Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 57). Indeed, if the intended audience does not understand the wit or is annoyed by it or is even offended in some ways, the advertisers will not have reached their primarily goal: “It is hard enough to raise people’s attention as regards advertising; if you annoy them, you are making a hard task even more difficult” (Viveiros 2003, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 63). This statement highlights that humour is efficient only when the advertiser knows the target audience and its response to humour. Humour is subjective and is particular to a societal culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Integrating humour: a challenge framework

We can analyse humour within the challenge framework, specific to a particular culture, as outlined in Gulas and Weinberg (2006). In this model, the challenge is triggered by one or more of three humour mechanisms, namely incongruity, arousal/safety, and superiority. It is put into action through the use of different enabling factors, including play signals, familiarity receptivity, surprise, and arousal, which in turn help the reader in decoding the humour response (mirth). These phenomena have a major impact on the viewer’s state of mind, resulting in both cognitive and affective reactions (Gulas and Weinberg 2006: 137).

2.2 Humour mechanisms: What exactly is it about a situation that makes it laughable?

Although there is no general acceptance in classifying humour, a conceptual starting point can be established by asserting that humour is triggered by particular mechanisms (Spotts 1987). These can be grouped into three main categories; namely the cognitive theory, the superiority theory, and the relief theory (Spotts et al. 1997: 20; Norrick 2003: 1333).

First of all, cognitive mechanisms are related to the structure of the message (Spotts et al. 1997: 20–21). According to Stern (1990, cited in Spotts et al. 1997: 19), incongruity is the most prevalent characteristic in cognitive devices. Based on the
work conducted by the pioneers in the field, Kant and Schopenhauer, Morreal (1983, cited in Spotts et al. 1997: 19) claims that humour can be achieved by mere surprise or incongruity. Indeed, research has revealed that the pleasure derived from incongruity is the divergence between the conceptions that listeners or viewers hold in their minds, and what happens to upset their expectations in a playful context of confusion and contrasts (Newman 2004: 91; Norrick 2004: 1334–1335). However, incongruity becomes stronger only when it follows a resolution process and is understood and accepted by its audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 23-26). Through the use of incongruity, jokes produce a mirthful response based on structural contrasts (Raskin 1985).

Originated by Plato, the superiority theory – also called the disparagement theory – concentrates on the social function of humour (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 26; Spotts et al. 1997: 19). Hobbes (1840: 1909, cited in Norrick 2003: 1333) defines humour as “the sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others”. This illustration can be explained by Gruner (1997, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006:26), who suggests that the superiority theory can be clarified in terms of superiority, aggression, hostility, ridicule or even degradation. Superiority seems to be present even in humour that appears to be harmless.

Last but not least, the arousal (relief/psychodynamic) theory implies that there is a psychological release in that humour helps vent tension. It is suggested that people joke about things that make them feel unsure and/or uncomfortable as a way of releasing feelings of tensions (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 28). According to Freud (1905: 1960, cited in Spotts et al. 1997:19), humour is a safety value which allows the relief of forbidden feelings.

2.3 Types of Humour

It is interesting to note that Freud (cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 98–99) believed that the pleasure obtained from wit comes about either tendentiously or non-tendentiously. Tendentious wit refers to the execution of a message through the use of aggression or sexual forces. On the other hand, non-tendentious wit relies on a more playful means using absurdity and nonsense.

Kelly and Salomon (1975, cited in Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 100) propose five main categories of enabling factors which help to achieve humour: “(1) puns – the humorous use of a word or phrase in a way that suggest two interpretations, (2) an understatement representing something as less than the case, (3) joke-speaking or action without seriousness, (4) something ludicrous – that which is laughable or ridiculous, (5) satire-sarcasm used to expose vice or folly”. Audrieth (1998), drawing
from the literature, proposes a more extended list of the ludicrous type of humour which is required, in this research study, to analyse more carefully the collected British advertisements.

3. Method

In this research project, only British advertisements that were judged as making an attempt at humour were selected to form the core corpus for analysis (Sinclair 2004: 4). The advertisements were selected from two published books: Saunders (1997) and Cronin (2004).

A corpus of forty-six British print advertisements was analysed in this study. To simplify the analysis, the advertisements were classified into six main categories (Appendix 1). For each category, one or more advertisements were evaluated, representing the characteristics of British humour for each type. Related theories introduced in the literature review were applied to in analyzing the corpus, to understand the challenge process that follows British print advertisements.

The aim of this study was to comprehend what mechanisms are used to trigger the humorous challenge in British print advertisements. Furthermore, it is relevant to analyse the enabling factors used to achieve the humorous process and the extent to which the humour is developed by tendentious or non-tendentious wit. The research concludes by analysing the influence of humour perception in British print advertisements (which is achieved by humour resolution).

4. Results: Enabling elements used in British advertisements

One of the “Law of Humour principles” in advertising mentions that when an advertiser is searching for the shortest and sharpest way to express a thought, the solution is often found in the use of different factors, which in turn elicit humour (Newman 2004: 86). The stimuli analysed, based on the proposed corpus, are not claimed to be universal however, as they refer strictly to the use and perception of humour in British English.

4.1 Category 1: “Funny ha ha”

Advertisement 1

First of all, humour is triggered in this advertisement by the use of the incongruity mechanism. Viewers finds themselves in a contrasting context where their expectations on how to illustrate the message about this campaign category are disturbed by what is portrayed in the print advertisement. Additionally, the
advertising campaign uses irony as it touches a sensitive problem by not referring to the actual issue. In that case, the arousal theory is also applied and humour becomes a healthy way of adaptive behaviour (Spotts et al. 1997: 19). People laugh about things that make them feel uncomfortable as a means of releasing feelings of tension. Superiority theory can also be used to analyse this advertisement, as it induces the ‘proper behaviour’ for the audience to adopt. Mirth is then the result of the sudden conception of some eminency in the viewer who already adopts the proper behavior, by comparison with the infirmity of others. This advertisement uses a particular measure of persuasion where a humorous appeal seems to be more persuasive than a fear appeal. The advertisement does not use any explicit adviser but draws a relationship between the overall implicit message and the image, such as the missing piece of the puzzle which corresponds to the inappropriate behavior to adopt. A non tendentious method is applied to deal with a sensitive issue and strongly rely on the cognitive performance of its viewer.

Advertisement 2
This advertisement mostly displays a playful context of confusion and contrast which is resolved through the acknowledgement of mirth. Sarcasm is important in this advertisement as it is straightforwardly mocking its viewer. This is done through a non‐tendentious comparison between the monkey and the human being, as well as by the ability of the play on the word ‘scratching’. The text beside the illustration takes the form of an adviser and develops humour by creating an opposition between the text and the reader. Humour is then achieved through the use of an overall epigram on the hedge of black humour: “The Mandrill has a good nose for scratching records, which led to a big contrast in the music business. As you are not similarly equipped, you’d better sign up for a training course”. Finally, this advertising campaign plays on the ludicrous and uses non‐tendentious wit.

4.2 Category 2: Explicit sexual insinuations

Advertisement 3
Humour is mainly triggered through incongruity and relies on confusion until the viewer reads the text at the bottom. The message is achieved through the use of irony which enables the promotion of the beer without making any explicit reference to it (this is also related to advertising regulations about alcohol in the United Kingdom; see category 6). Nevertheless, by specifically targeting the male audience and leaving aside the female audience, humour can be seen as triggered by the use of black humour as the advertisement may be offensive to some viewers. There is also a play on words which emphasises opposition in the headline. It seems
undeniable that the advertiser uses exaggeration in the adviser “Give up Sex for Life”, putting forward the potential characteristics of this particular beer. Humour is also created by the epigram factor which deals with the “follies” of mankind through the caricature of the Church principles. Thus, the pleasure obtained from wit in this advertisement is achieved by tendentious means.

4.3 Category 3: Branding

Advertisement 4
As beer promotion has to follow strict regulations, advertisers need to find different ways to advertise their brands. In this advertisement, humour is generated by the incongruity mechanism where the viewer is exposed to a contrast in the situational advertisement. Humour is created through a situational/practical joke which puts forward exaggeration regarding the “Gold of the beer and its creamy feature”. Humour comes here from non-tendentious wit.

Advertisement 5
In this advertisement, humour is achieved by the use of the incongruity as well as the superiority mechanism. The irony of the pictorial situation makes the viewer feel some superiority and comfort regarding the product. It is obviously based on exaggeration (hyperbole), putting forward features of a product that are likely not to be true but that will attract the viewers’ attention. The wisecrack ‘Aphreaudisiac’ takes the form of an implicit adviser in regards to the quality of the product. So the epigram makes a special reference to the product and triggers the humour mechanism. This is particular to the British population, where seductive references value tendentious wit.

4.4 Category 4: Puns and games

Advertisement 6
In this advertisement, arousal theory primarily triggers the challenge leading to a humorous situation. Humour is achieved through an anecdote which intends to portray an adviser under the shape of relief: “Life begins at 40D”. This epigram entails a bonehead in the linguistic form. The play on word “40D” draws a parallel between women’s age and breast size. The advertisers use irony to focus on an issue that probably makes its target market feel uncomfortable. Humour is achieved by non-tendentious wit.
Advertiment 7

Humour in this advertisement primarily arises through the anecdote “Eugene inherited his Uncle Clancy’s estate, but like the Murphy’s he wasn’t bitter”. The wordplay on “bitter” creates ambiguity as it can have two meanings: (1) pretense due to money (2) taste of the beer. This is a situational joke where bitter means unpleasant, sharp and disagreeable, the complete opposite of the Murphy’s. Humour is also achieved by the use of exaggeration in the caricatured graphic proportions, the man’s head and beer which underlies the context in which the joke occurs. This beer leaves a taste of superiority, and incongruity is important in the eccentricity of the contrasts. Non-tendentious humour is displayed in this advertisement.

Advertiment 8

Incongruity triggers the humour challenge through surprise. Nevertheless, it can be argued that humour is also triggered by the disparagement theory in terms of ridicule and superiority. Moreover, the humour applied in this advertisement is also a way to vent tension. A combination of these three mechanisms is used to appeal to a specific British target market. The advertisement starts off with an anecdote which underlies a specific situation with an illustrative point. In addition to this, it plays on the resemblance of the name of an astrology sign, Virgo, to the sign’s root word – virgin – in its text: “So he said are you a virgin? And I said no, a Scorpio”. The play on word is also enabled, thanks to the use of antonyms. Black humour is based on irony aroused from a fool’s query which adds nonsense to the situation, in turn creating a humorous situation. This slogan is using a relevant wisecrack which creates humour through tendentious wit.

4.5 Category 5: Cruel humour

Advertiment 9

This advertisement is clearly built on incongruity as there is a perfect contrast between the product advertised and the way it is promoted. Although the incongruity is resolved, the advertisement still relies on confusion and contrasts which make the print material even funnier. Humour seems to be based upon eccentricity as it refers to an unusual behaviour. It is also linked with the exaggeration of the situation, close to the hyperbole process as we assist to an extreme exaggeration: would you really feed your partner with dog food? This particular humour is also achieved through nonsense as it includes some level of absurdity. Here is an illustration of some degree of cruel humor. Last but not least, humour is attained through the linguistic content: “The Micra. Ask before you
borrow it”. It is a witticism shaped by a kind of humorous adviser. Based on this, humour can also be depicted through the use of epigram, which puts forward a clever and short saying about a general group. It can be translated as a satire of mankind, expanding on situational humour based on previous experience.

4.6 Category 6: The unexpected

Some of the advertisements under this rubric are promoting tobacco. It is crucial to know that the first restriction for the advertising of tobacco in the United Kingdom came in 1962, as the Royal College of Physicians highlighted the health problems caused by tobacco (Cronin 2004: 39). Following on from this, an agreement was signed in 1971 between the British government and the tobacco industry for the inclusion of health warning on packages and also on printed advertisings (Cronin 2004: 39). In addition, advertisers were prevented from creating campaigns showing any individuals smoking. Thus, the tobacco advertisement campaign industry saw an increase in more indirect and abstract campaigns, as we can see in the corpus and, more particularly, in the two advertisements analysed below.

Advertisement 10
Incongruity is found in the display of this advertisement. The contrastive situational wit focuses on making a reference to the prestige of the brand, and to its long-time history and loyalty in providing the best tobacco. Exaggeration is certainly used to encourage humour and attract the target market. Humour arose from non-tendentious means.

Advertisement 11
This advertisement mainly draws upon inconsistency and puts forward a contrastive situation as well as ambiguity and intrigue to generate humour. Indeed, the body part of the chameleon on the pack of cigarettes is yellow while the rest is dark green/brown. Yellow reflects the colour of the pack, and is in reference to the cigarettes but also the “enlightenment” one feels when smoking this specific kind of cigarettes. Humour is also portrayed by the arousal theory, where irony is used to bypass the regulations on advertising tobacco. Once again, this campaign uses non-tendentious wit through ludicrous humour.

Advertisement 12
Advertisers in the United Kingdom must respect regulations imposed by the Advertising Standards Authority. One such regulation is that campaigns should not link the consumption of alcohol with social or sexual success, or with the perception
of physical attractiveness (Cronin 2004: 40–41). From that we understand the context in which advertisers need to create non-tendentious advertisements to promote alcoholic drinks. In the case of this Smirnoff advertisement, humour is depicted through the use of incongruity as well as the relief mechanism. Incongruity obviously plays a major part in this advertisement as a contrast is created because of regulations. Humour is also created through the use of the personification and parody of emblematic figures, leading to contradiction (angel versus bikie gang member). In addition to this, relief triggers the humour as it implies that Smirnoff can free its target market from all the social regulations and duties, enabling the other personality side constrained by social status to show. Smirnoff transforms and revitalises. This is underlined by the wisecrack, “Smirnoff – The other side”. It can also be supposed that superiority is played with, as this ad aims at activating psychological challenge.

Exaggeration is an important enabling factor in this ad in overstating the features of the product. It can be seen as a kind of practical joke, in that wit is put into action: a viewer sees the printed ad and feels the practical joke. The trick is played on another person and the humour comes from what happens in switching. Non-tendentious wit is applied to create humour.

5. Discussion

As can be seen from this analysis of a corpus of British print advertisements, British advertising agencies seem to encourage soft sell through the ludicrous so as to attract their customers’ attention as well as influence their state of mind. Although hard sell technique is used to give information about the product advertised, soft sell techniques seem to reoccur throughout the advertising corpus, and so relies mainly on emotional appeal (Lee and Johnson 2005: 175). This technique is supported by humorous appeals which help create a favourable customer response, historically of high ratings to humorous advertising campaigns.

Spotts et al. (1997: 20) claim humour is related to the message type. They categorise it in two main types: (1) humour dominance or (2) message dominance. Accordingly, it can be shown that the British advertisements analysed are mainly humour dominant. This means that the product messages are presented within a humorous context that shapes the overall experience of the ad. If the humour is removed, the advertisement no longer makes sense. Nevertheless, a few advertisements can be categorised as message dominant where humour is semantic – mainly the wordplay advertisements. Last but not least, whether the ad is humour dominant or message dominant, it seems that image-focused humour is of great importance in understanding the advertisements (Spotts et al. 1997).
In short, the challenge framework that represents humour in British print advertisements is mainly triggered by a combination of the three mechanisms. Additionally, enabling factors (usually more than one) are used to create humour. Most importantly, an advertisement in the British community is perceived as humorous through the use of combinations and relationships among incongruity, surprise, perceived humour and attitude toward the ad (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 120). The humorous challenge is then achieved.

Undeniably, humour is very subjective on both a national and an international level and endangers a promotional campaign if it is not well interpreted by its audience (Newman 2004: 87). The primary aim of an advertiser, in using humour, is to build a bridge between customers and a specific brand (Newman 2004: 88). Indeed the recognition of humour in an advertisement is a “physical responding to the message” (Newman 2004: 86; Lee and Johnson 2005: 217–218). As a result, the impact that humour has on advertisement effectiveness is of major importance, as British surveys have revealed that humour in British advertisement stimulates four main factors (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 112–113). Firstly, it has been shown that the British population, having already consumed a product, is more likely to be sensitive to humour which alters or reinforces associations and recollections of the specific product experience. In that sense, humour has a cognitive function, as it serves as a means of affective reaction – helps the customers to decide whether or not the ad is worthy of further processing. Additionally, a boring advertisement is likely to lead to failure 76% of the time (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 107). Thus, humour has been found to be an effective way to gain customers’ attention. In turn, humour is potentially efficient in enhancing comprehension and recognition of a brand (Newman 2004: 89; Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 113). These phenomena, resulting from the distraction effect of humour, will finally have a successful influence on persuasion (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 115).

6. Conclusion

Understanding humour in a given target market – in this project, the British audience – is of great relevance, as while it is apparent that numerous advertisements are offensive, the intention of promoting a product or service through humorous techniques is commonly used as a defense for their offensiveness. The “weapons of mass distraction” advertisement for Easyjet is a good illustration of this phenomenon (see advertisement 13, Appendix 2). Indeed, ranked as the second most complained about poster in the United Kingdom in 2002, the advertisement has been defended by a spokesperson of the company as “the latest in a series designed to be ‘topical, humorous and irrelevant’” (Gulas and
Weinberger 2006:187–188). The ‘humour defense’ is interesting, given that it is likely that many of those offended by a given ad recognise that the message exposed is an attempt at humour, even though an offensive one.

To sum up, British advertisement culture encourages intimacy with the targeted audience achieved through humour. British humour in print advertisement has three characteristics being ironic, laid-back and despite few regulations, liberated to sexual inferences. Understanding an advertisement is not only a matter of understanding the wit played out in the ad, but also being familiar with broader British culture. Thus, it is important to understand the regulations surrounding this area, to see the subtle forces shaping the work of advertising agencies.

Nevertheless, one limitation of this study arose from the established generalisations that stem from a limited corpus of advertisements. For further research, it would be necessary to focus on a wider corpus and also to emphasise the importance of the views that British customers have on the humour depicted in British print advertisements. Moreover, it might be relevant to contrast opinions and analysis between British viewers and people from other cultural backgrounds.

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References


Appendix 1: Corpus of British print advertisements

Category 1: “Funny ha ha” advertisements

Advertisement 1:

Advertisement 2:
*Central Office of Information* (A) GGT, London (AD) Erik Kessies (CW) Joham Kramer (P) Simon Larbalestier
Category 2: Explicit sexual insinuation

Advertisement 3:
Abbot Ale (A) Dianey Fletcher Bozell, London (AD) David Adamson (CW) Richard Prentice (P) Mark Polyblank

Category 3: Branding

Advertisement 4:
Whitbread/Boddingtons (A) Bartle Bogle Hegarty, London (CD) John Hegarty (AD) Graham Watson (CW) Bruce Crouch (P) Tif Hunter
Advertisement 5:  
Perrier Vittel UK (A) Publicis, London (AD) Rick Ward (CW) Noel Sharman (P) Adrian Burke.

Category 4: Puns and games  
Advertisement 6:  
Triumph International (A) Delaney Fletcher Bozell, London (CDs) Greg Delaney/Brian Stewart (AD) Brian Stewart (CW) Greg Delaney (P) Pamela Hanson, represented by Fiona Cowan/ Hamiltons Photographers Ltd
Advertisement 7:
Whitbread/Murphy’s (A) Bartle Bogle Hegarty, London (CD) John Hegarty (AD)
Graham Watson (CW) Bruce Crouch (P) Mike Parsons (Illustrator) Sara Hodge

Advertisement 8:
Lambrini, London.
Category 5: Cruel humour

Advertisement 9:
Nissan Micra (A) TBWA, London (AD) Chris Hodgkiss (CW) Pip Bishop (P) John Claridge

Category 6: The unexpected

Advertisement 10:
Gallaher/Benson & Hedges (A) Collett Dickenson Pearce, London (AD) Tina Morgan (P) John Hammond.
Advertisement 11:
Gallaher/Benson & Hedges (A) Colett Dickinson Pearce, London (AD) Nigel Rose (P) Max Forsythe

Advertisement 12:
Smirnoff (A) Lowe Howard-Spink, London (AD) David Christensen (CW) Simon Carbery (P) David Scheinman

Advertisement 13:
Easyjet “weapons of mass destruction” ad, viewed 7 October 2007 at <http://www.brandrepublic.com/login/News/186573/>
What is multiculturalism?

KIRSTY KNIGHT*

Abstract

Integration and immigration are currently extremely contentious issues in both the Australian political arena and the media. In line with these hot topics that flood the daily news, it makes sense to throw more limelight on the term ‘multiculturalism’. The focal point of the issue is the question of what has happened to the term. Once the buzzword of the political world of the 1990s, multiculturalism seems to have lost its influence in Australia over the last few years, due to changes in policy and by the increasing focus on ‘integration’ by governments. To find out what everyday Anglo-Australians think about multiculturalism and the current issues that surround it, seven interviews were conducted. The results revealed that the participants had many beliefs, perceptions, presuppositions, values and norms relating to multiculturalism. Although multiculturalism is overtly inclusive, what came through the views expressed were traces of implicit exclusionary discourse.

1. Introduction

Integration and immigration are currently extremely contentious issues in both the Australian political arena and the media. In line with these hot topics that flood the daily news, it makes sense to throw more limelight on the term ‘multiculturalism’. The focal point of the issue is the question of what happened to the term. Once the buzz word of the political world of the 1990s, multiculturalism seems to have lost its influence in Australia over the last few years and has been replaced by the term ‘integration’. Riddled with political agendas, multiculturalism has been killed off by having its policies modernised and by the change of government focus to integration. Their goal was to move away from celebrating difference and move towards a shared destiny and a cohesive society (Becoming an Australian Citizen, 2007).

‘Multiculturalism’ is a term that was introduced into the political bureaucratic language decades ago, and has since become synonymous with diversity and tolerance in Australia. It was introduced in 1973 by the Labor government under Gough Whitlam and later resumed as a policy under the Fraser government, where refugees were welcomed from Lebanon and South-East Asia. Also in 1973, the government officially ended the White Australia policy by dropping all references to race in its immigration policy; immigrants were now to be chosen on merit and eligibility for various categories rather than on the basis of race, colour or religion.

Over the next two decades, ‘multiculturalism’ was established as the ‘buzz’ term and Prime Minister Bob Hawke set up an Office of Multicultural Affairs.
during the 1980s to devise multicultural policy. By this stage, Australia’s population was made up of 20 per cent of people who had been born overseas. The last Multicultural policy to exist ran from 2003 to 2006 and was called Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity (Australian Immigration Fact Sheet 6: 2007).

The beginning of 2007 saw the end of multicultural policies, when the Howard government sacked Amanda Vandstone, the Minister of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Symbolically, Howard renamed the department The Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which implies that he did not feel the current multiculturalism policies led to citizenship in Australia. “The Howard government defended the change saying that Australia believed that immigration should lead to citizenship” (End of multiculturalism 2007). What can be seen as a more tangible move by the Howard government (and retained by the Rudd government so far) is the creation of a Citizenship test which forces newcomers to adopt Australian Citizenship while simultaneously prescribing a set of Australian values to immigrants.

2. Literature Review

Multiculturalism is a concept that has represented Australia’s growing mix of different races over the past thirty to forty years, and this multiplicity of cultures has certainly played a large role in characterising Australia’s identity. Since identity is a heavily theorised academic concept, treatments of identity have moved in recent years, going from conceptualising it as an essentialist pre-existing construct that drives social interaction, to postmodern accounts which treat it as more of a fluid and hybrid construct that is constituted through discourse (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). What is rather interesting is how the notion of multiculturalism fails to be represented in modern and postmodern theories of identity.

Although the notion of multiculturalism hasn’t received a lot of attention through the lens of modern and postmodern views, some correlations can be made. Recent understandings of social and collective identity draw close to explaining the folk concept of multiculturalism in Australia as they emphasise “social/collective identity”, or self-definition through “membership of, or identification with a particular group or groups” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 24). The modern view of identity can be described as static, essential and pre-given, often evoking the idea that a person identifies with a certain culture because they are like that. These views somewhat influence the way people identify with a particular group or groups.

Contrary to the modern view of identity, the postmodern approach, which also assists in explicating the view of multiculturalism in Australia, speaks of fluidity, hybridity and fragmentation. The lay view of multiculturalism is somewhat indefinable and contradictory, so this treatment of identity as
fragment and fluid is rather fitting. The postmodern view has challenged ‘group’ identity as it emphasises concepts such as ‘fluidity’, ‘migration’, ‘diaspora’, ‘crossing’ and ‘decentring’ (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). The term diaspora, once synonymous with ethnic or homeland identity, has come to refer to a dynamic and heterogeneous notion of community (Brooker 1999). “Diaspora represents the identities of those moving between cultures ‘unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of the other” (Hall 1995: 48). The term hybridity is used to describe a fusion of cultural identities (1995: 28) and attempts to “destabilise traditional binaries and myths of cultural homogeneity” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 28). Crossing is a sociolinguistic term that defines the “interethnic adoption of styles or codes of talk of an outgroup” (ibid.: 28).

Though the poststructuralist approach has challenged essentialist notions of identity, the membership of a specific, named collectivity may be a marked and politically motivated strategy to make oneself and one’s interests ‘visible’ and ‘included’ (Spivak 1990). The most fitting approach for explaining the position of the Indigenous Australians is the poststructuralist view of identity politics, which “in its liberal, leftist form, is most associated with marginal, oppressed groups, whose historically marked and ‘othered’ status led to a concept of historical group subjectivity” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 28).

Even though the field of psychology and sociolinguistics has challenged the notion of internally located, group or collective identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), “there has been little in the way of the development of a clear ‘postmodern research methodology’, as such a development is fundamentally antithetical to a perspective that focuses on the breaking of distinctions” (Haugh 2008: 209).

3. Method: Participants and Procedure

Seven Anglo-Australians were interviewed in person and asked to respond to questions concerning their thoughts and attitudes towards multiculturalism. The interviews were semi-structured with some prepared questions; however these questions were not necessarily asked in a set order. The aim of the interviews was to focus on the beliefs, perceptions, presuppositions, values and normative understandings of the participants. The answers are treated in the analysis as joint, interactional products of the interviewer and the interviewee.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher/interviewer. The task was to identify key themes and trends that (re-)occurred in the data. Since there were only a small number of people interviewed, the results merely give insight into the way some Anglo-Australians perceive multiculturalism.
4. Results

4.1 Multiculturalism – A popular topic of conversation for Anglo-Australians?

After analysing the transcripts, there were seven major themes that could be identified from the data. During the first interview the participant was asked what kinds of things come to mind when hearing the term ‘multiculturalism’. The answer of ‘Well I don’t actually think about it’ made it evident that a better worded question would be ‘Do you ever think about the concept multiculturalism?’ The results represent Anglo-Australians’ views of multiculturalism and there were certainly some surprising views expressed in the interviews. The most dominant theme found was that Anglo-Australians do not think about the concept ‘multiculturalism’ on a daily basis unless prompted by the media.

Evidence of this can be seen by the following excerpts:

(1)
1 K: So Andrew (.) just wondering what your thoughts are on
2 multiculturalism and when you think about it what comes to mind
3 A: Right (.) umm well first off I don’t think about it really I mean not in the
4 course of doing what I do particularly (3.0) I suppose what comes to
5 mind with questions like that is umm (2.0) I don’t have any particular
6 (1.0) notion of what the multicultural would be except to say that maybe
7 it is useful to look at places where multiculturalism or multicultural gets
8 used as a descriptor as a term so it’s really maybe to do with how it gets
9 used and the jobs it does in different places and contexts yeah↓

In excerpt 1, the participant says in lines 3 to 6 that he does not think about multiculturalism in relation to what he does, and so does not have any particular notion of it. He then states that it might be useful to look at where the term is deployed.

(2)
1 K: I was just wondering if you ever think about multiculturalism?
2 B: Not↑ really not at all (.) until you mentioned it yourself (1.0) Yep it’s not
3 a thing you think↑ about unless you see something on TV↓ or hear it in
4 the media

In excerpt 2, in lines 2 to 4 it is revealed that the participant usually only thinks about multiculturalism when he hears someone else use the term on television, in the media or in private conversation.
4.2 Multiculturalism – What the?

What emerged from the views expressed in the interviews relating to multiculturalism were contradictions and uncertainties. It appears that in Australia there is a sense of underlying racism but, at the same time, people are trying to gain an understanding and acceptance of other cultures. Multiculturalism in Australia remains an unresolved issue and it seems that many people in this country are fairly ambivalent and confused when it comes to explaining what this term means to them.

The following excerpt reveals some contradictions in relation to multiculturalism:

(3)
1 K: So Terry I was just wondering, I just wanted to talk to you about
2 multiculturalism and the concept of it and I wanted to know if you
3 ever actually think↑ about multiculturalism as a concept
4 T: No not very much↑ (. ) no.
5 K: Say if you’re watching a media program or if you’re listening to some
6 political news that might engage in multicultural affairs or issues, what
7 kind of things come into mind when you hear↑ the term being bandied
8 around
9 T: (0.3) Well I think it’s umm (3.0) concerned with racial issues? Umm I
10 can remember it being talked about a fair bit after the riots at Cronulla
11 (. ) cause of the racial or what appeared to be racial problems there? (. )
12 umm
13 K: So do you think negatively about multiculturalism?
14 T: No? I think my idea of multiculturalism is that its’ ahh you know
15 different cultures living together tolerating each other.

In line 9 the participant expresses his view in saying that multiculturalism is concerned with racial issues. However, when queried about thinking negatively of multiculturalism, he answered ‘no’ immediately with uprising intonation. This answer gives the impression that he overtly denies the presupposition that the interviewer senses he thinks negatively about multiculturalism and may link this to racism. In line 14 and 15 the interviewee conveyed his idea that multiculturalism is different cultures living together and tolerating each other, which clearly contradicts his answer in line 9 when he associates multiculturalism with racial issues and the Cronulla riots.

Evidence revealed in the following excerpt points out ambivalent and contradictory views in relation to multiculturalism.

(4)
5 K: So when you do see it on TV or hear about it what kinds of things do you
6 think about
7 B: umm that it’s many different cultures↑ that hopefully↑ we can live in
harmony umm that people still get to look at their (.) and take into
consideration their own cultures, their language all that’s important that
they still (.) have that and it’s respected and that there is respect shown
to all these different cultures

K: Do you think that multiculturalism in Australia has actually been
successful?
B: Yes and no↑ I think (.) I don’t think you could ever say that anything
could be perfect↓ umm and of course it’s so different because you
know prior to that it was Australia white policy and then it all changed
after World War 2↑ when there were lots of changes with immigration
(.) and things like that, so I think in a way↑ it’s successful that we have
got so many different cultures↑ as part of our society today↓ but then
when you look at race relations and how people disregard each other
and whatever but doesn’t matter I suppose that still exists no matter if
you’re white or black whatever↑ (.) people are not going to (.) there’s not
going to be harmony

In line 6 and 7 the participant expresses hope that a diversity of races can coexist
in harmony. However, the participant’s responses in lines 21-23 contradict this,
indicating that the respondent is unsure of her stance on the issue. Once again,
the results suggest that some Anglo-Australians are undecided and uncertain of
their own beliefs and perceptions of multiculturalism.

The following excerpt further illustrates the state of confusion people have
when invited to express their thoughts on multiculturalism.

(5)
A: I don’t think people know what multiculturalism is↑ (.) we’re confused
you need to give me you know (.) a definition of what
multiculturalism is
K: Well that’s what I’m trying to find out by interviewing [people.
A: [That’s why I
think it’s so hard to define what it is because people don’t know what it
is they can’t give you a definitive answer to what multiculturalism is
because they just don’t know themselves.

The following extract (6) comes from a chat room called ActNow where the
subject was multiculturalism. This explanation reaffirms the complexities and
ambiguities multiculturalism evokes.

(6) Jacquie on 06 Aug 2007 expresses her opinion:
“I have noticed sometimes multiculturalism’s meanings get lost in translation
or even political correctness. It’s not a simple concept so it shouldn’t be
simplified”. 
5.3 Do Indigenous Australians fit the mould?

One extremely salient theme that became apparent when analysing the transcripts was that not all people actually think about indigenous Australians when they hear the term multiculturalism. When probed with questions resembling, ‘Do you think people think of Indigenous Australians when they hear the term multiculturalism?’ only two participants answered yes. The remaining participants instead made a correlation between multiculturalism and immigrants, rather than associating the term with the first inhabitants of this land.

Evidence of this view can be seen in the following extracts:

(7)
15 K: Do you ever consider indigenous Australians when you hear the term multiculturalism?
17 D: Ah not specifically but definitely umm to me anyway I identity ( ) multiculturalism with umm you know being a word or a term that’s applied to people from other countries as opposed to people from this country But umm in terms of the actual term itself and how its applied I don’t really put the two together?

(8)
29 K: When you hear the term multiculturalism what kinds of cultures actually do you think of.
31 B: umm what kind of cultures? [oh]
32 K: [the] most salient ones
33 B: Africans there are a lot of Africans here now in this area. You know you go around and see the tall Masai, I think they’re here a lot now I think of (0.1) Indian a lot of Indians Asians, I think yeah it’s ( ) Turkish there are lots of Turkish yeah I think more those (0.1) more so those than umm ( ) English you know British there’s still that but you think more of the other cultures yeah.
39 K: Now do ever you think many people ever consider indigenous Australians when they think about multiculturalism
41 B: no no I don’t No? because I think they’re such umm they’re ( ) Australians the original you know inhabitants of this land (0.2) It’s just they’ve always been there. Aboriginals have always been in our society

Contrary to expectations, the results revealed the term multiculturalism does not extend to include Indigenous Australians. This is an extremely surprising revelation, as the culture of Indigenous Australians is far removed from and in no way similar to that of European settlers in Australia. Even though only a small number of people were interviewed, the results give some indication that Indigenous Australians are not represented by the term multiculturalism and
that they seem culturally displaced in Australian society. It seems the case that Aboriginals are more represented as a homogenous out-group and appear to have an ambivalent position within the existing framework of Australian society. These results also suggest that the modern-day term multiculturalism is more related to immigration that has taken place over the last three or four decades, rather than being associated with the Aboriginals.

5.4 The Government’s role?

Throughout the interviews it seemed quite clear that Anglo-Australians believe the government does not necessarily define how multiculturalism impacts upon society. The way we live is not determined by the use of the term ‘multiculturalism’, even though the government in the past has enforced Multicultural Policies. For instance:

(9)
5 E: Umm (2.0) I’m not sure I don’t think we’re very open to multiculturalism
6 (. ) umm you know I think the government at the moment is really (1.0) I
7 don’t think they’re trying to nurture\† multiculturalism

One idea expressed was that the way the federal government has used the term is fairly problematic (see line 19 below).

(10)
18 A: I mean the ways in which it is used by the federal government\† or has\† 
19 been used by the federal government are fairly problematic as well I
20 suppose. So it’s no I don’t think there’s anything intrinsically excellent
21 in it as a term (. ) it depends on how you use it and how it gets taken up
22 like anything else\‡

Overall, what seemed to emerge from the topic of the government and its relationship with multiculturalism were rather negative thoughts and feelings.

5.5 Integration – New Buzz Term?

Within Australia, ‘integration’ is a notion that is somewhat exhorted in Immigration policy and this vision for Australia can be easily spotted in the new Citizenship Booklet (2007). The introduction of the booklet states: “It also helps to foster a cohesive and integrated society with a sense of shared destiny and, should the need arise, a shared sacrifice for the common good”.

To find out what the Australian people thought about integration and whether it is possible for migrants to assimilate straight away into Australian Society, the participants were queried on the topic of integration. When people think of integration they may think of the dominant culture that swamps the
emerging culture. However, some surprising results which emerged from the interviews were noticeably more positive. What seemed to surface from the interviews was the notion that migrants slowly integrate over time and that it is usually another generation before migrants fit properly into Australian society. It was also claimed that newcomers take time to adjust to new surroundings and that naturally people stick together in their own communities for some time. Besides this, it was thought that migrants bring unique elements of their culture to Australia, which in turn enriches the country. Even though we hear terms like separation and segregation alongside integration, the results suggest that Australians believe it is very important for immigrants to keep attachments to their forms of cultural identity.

The following excerpt reveals an optimistic view on integration in Australia.

(11)  
44 R: If you look at where we are now and how we view the world and our food (.) and you know everything to do with our day to day lives is so fundamentally different than it was in the fifties and that’s primarily the positive result of lots of immigration and lots of different people coming to Australia (0.5) integration is not a one way street if you like (.) we will change as a result and they will change as a result and harmony is maintained† hopefully.

Linking in well with the hot topic of Integration is the newly founded Citizenship test designed for migrants who wish to become Australian Citizens. As mentioned earlier, in this citizenship test, the Howard government has set out to force a set of Australian values on newcomers. Throughout the interviews, what came through from the views expressed was that this citizenship test wasn’t going to prove much, if anything. People more or less thought this new test was a joke.

Views on the citizenship test are shown in the following extract:

(12)  
44 K: They’ve just come up with this new immigration test [citizenship test†]  
45 A: [uh hmm]  
46 K: and there’s all these social values being exemplified you know in this [test so they’re trying to come up with one definition or identity for=  
48 A: [uh hmm]  
49 K: =everyone.  
50 A: I think that’s absolutely extraordinary it’s an extraordinary measure I mean I remember one of the I think (.) I’ve not been following it closely but one of the justifications that some of them were sort of advancing was that it exists as a practise of policy† in other places (1.0) I mean that (.) alone is a fairly peculiar argument to run but yeah† extraordinary this notion that you could (2.0) distil hhh some sort of sense hhh of identity national identity and then manifest it in this instrument which would be
a way of I mean what those things are ultimately about is an instrument
of exclusion and inclusion its about filtering persons from the country
denying them access I think that’s the way these things get used in
practices () tools yeah its just an extraordinary idea I think () personally
I think it’s fairly ludicrous.

In lines 55 to 61 the participant attributes an underlying racist agenda to the
government in arguing that the citizenship test is used as an instrument which is
used to filter and deny people access to the country.

5.6 Please Explain Australian Values

Australia is often recognised for its tradition of ‘mateship’ and giving everyone a
‘fair go’. The recent Citizenship booklet (2007) gives the following explanation
under the ‘Australian Values’ heading: “Australia has a strong tradition of
‘mateship’ – where people help and receive help from others voluntarily,
especially in times of adversity. A mate can be a spouse, partner, brother, sister,
daughter, son or a friend. A mate can also be a stranger”. This term ‘mateship’
forms part of Australia’s values but, according to some Anglo-Australians, they
themselves are not particularly sure of what these values comprise. Although the
Howard government has prescribed these traditional values to Australians and
potential citizens, people remain uncertain what these values are. One
participant retorted with a rhetoric question, “Who really determines or who is in
the position to determine what constitutes these famous ‘Australian values’”. In
the context of the interview this response reveals that there is animosity towards
the Federal Government’s attempts to prescribe definitions of ‘Australian values’.
The results suggest that there are basic premises for what an Australian is but no
one really can say. Generally speaking, ‘Australian values’ is an indefinable term
and very much lacking in a concrete definition for the Australian people.

Evidence of this is revealed in the following excerpt:

(13)
K: I guess the big question here is what do people actually integrate to (0.5)
recently a new citizenship test was created for new citizens of
Australia and in this test they (the government) really want these
newcomers to adapt and adjust to Australian ways and this mateship↑
concept () What do you think about that?
E: I think its crap↑ (0.3) I think as you said what is↑ this idea of mateship
what is↑ that what does it↑ mean (0.5) and there’s no substantiated way
of life you know that a lot of countries umm () you know if you’re
talking about mateship (1.0) like they’ve got great you know () they’ve
got great ways to teach us how to be in relationships with other people
and treat other people with respect and dignity.

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In lines 45-49, the interviewer is trying to push the participant in a certain way to talk about their views on integration and what values constitute Australian values. In line 50, the participant says “...as you said what is this idea of mateship...”, which in fact the interviewer never said. The interviewer simply said “...what do people integrate to...”. Perhaps by using the phrase, “this mateship concept”, containing the demonstrative ‘this’, the participant implied that the interviewer bandied the term ‘mateship’ about as though it was indefinable or perhaps even negative.

The following excerpt reveals further views on integration and what constitutes Australian values:

(14)

13  A:  See the interesting thing there↓ is should they adapt to our values↑ what
14                     is Australian values↑ (0.5) what are Australian values
15  K:  Good question I’m not sure myself.
16  A:  because if you look at the history of Australia↑ it’s based on immigration
17                     (0.5) like Immigrants set up the country founded the country there was
18  indigenous people already here↓ did the immigrants ↓ were
19  they tolerant to the, you know (2.0) everybody is different you know and
20  that’s multiculturalism, everyone’s different but can still get along with
21  each other. It’s not trying to force one set of ideals on to one person (1.0)
22  it’s not saying you can come but you can’t come

5.7 Australia’s Social Identity – Does multiculturalism play a part?

When asked if multiculturalism plays an important role in Australia’s Social Identity, some interesting answers emerged. According to some of the participants, multiculturalism definitely forms part of Australian identity and also helps Australians describe who they are. Responses that contained the words ‘different food’ seemed to pop up occasionally in the interviews so it seems that the diverse ethnic foods available in Australia at present play a considerable part in representing multiculturalism in Australia. Apart from the continuous correlation with different foods and multiculturalism, diversity was a term bandied around positively. The consensus was that diversity makes Australia a more interesting and exciting place to live and that it has also aided and enriched Australia’s growth.

Evidence for this can be seen in the following excerpts:

(15)

62  K:  Just one last question for you (.) ah do you think that multiculturalism
63  plays a really big part in our identity in Australia our social identity (.)
64  even though the term is not used very often anymore↑ (.) do you think it
65  is still important in portraying what our social identity is all about↑
66  T:  oh yeah I think it is yeah because it brings a lot of diversity↑ (3.0)
yeah different cultures bring (1.0) bring ah different things and make it a more exciting place to live and (1.0) make it a more interesting place↑ and people with different ideas↑ I think it has helped Australia grow.

(16)

K: Do you think that multiculturalism plays a big part in our social identity as Australians
E: (4.0) umm I’m not sure (1.0) I don’t think we’re very open↑ to multiculturalism umm (0.5) you know I think the government at the moment is really (0.5) I don’t think they’re trying to nurture multi ( ) I can’t even say it hhh but umm yeah I don’t think we’re necessarily influenced by it I think we sort of might try and umm (1.0) although restaurants and all that sort of food and you know ( ) definitely I think we’re really open to different foods and umm and you know different people↑ and I think we’re getting better as a country umm we’re including people from different countries into ours.

In excerpt 16, lines 58 and 59 illustrate the ambivalence and uncertainties the participant has when asked if multiculturalism plays a big part in Australia’s social identity. In lines 59-61, some negative views about the government are expressed where it could be implied the government has an underlying racist agenda because it are not trying to nurture multiculturalism.

6. Discussion

The study of Anglo-Australians’ views of multiculturalism revealed several surprises after many insightful opinions, perceptions, presuppositions, beliefs and contradictions were expressed. Unexpectedly, a large number of participants never actually thought about multiculturalism unless the topic was invoked by the media. What became clear was that even though people did not think of multiculturalism as part of their everyday lives, many admitted to having some deep seeded views on the topic. Although there were only seven people interviewed, the results gave some insight into Anglo-Australians thoughts and beliefs on multiculturalism. Overall, the responses given seemed to suggest that this topic is a matter of opinion and perspective.

In particular, the concern of ‘Australian values’ brought many ardent opinions and standpoints to the surface. Even though the government has sought to ascribe particular values to both the Australian people and its potential citizens, an ambiguity continues to surround these relatively coerced values. The findings suggest that some people have only a basic idea of what these values comprise, but in the end, no one can really give a definitive answer.

A stand-out result was the fact that a large number of participants did not think of Indigenous Australians when the term multiculturalism arose. It is not always important to look just at what people do say: what they don’t say can
mean a lot as well. When asked what cultures came to mind when thinking of multiculturalism, most participants pointed out many immigrant groups and failed to include Indigenous Australians, which partly implies that they may not really have a clear place within the Australian identity.

Since multiculturalism has not been a hugely focal topic or received a lot of attention from the perspective of modern or postmodern theories of identity, these theories fall short of definitively matching the findings and reflecting how people conceptualise multiculturalism in Australian society. However, to some extent, elements of both theories relate to the folk idea of multiculturalism, where modern views evoke a collectivist and static notion, and postmodern views speak of fluidity, fragmentation and hybridity.

In order to further our understanding of the role multiculturalism plays in Australian identity, supplementary research needs to be undertaken. A more in-depth exploration of Australian views on multiculturalism, focusing on a larger number of participants from a wider range of cultures other than Anglo-Australians, would help to give further insight into the topic of multiculturalism. More research on this topic would also provide an important extension to the theories of identity. Moreover, it could be interesting to conduct a comparison of New Zealand’s concept of ‘biculturalism’, which comprises the Maori and Pakeha population, with Australia’s notion of ‘multiculturalism’, whereby several immigrant groups and white Australians coexist.

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Exploring the acculturation of Taiwanese students in an Australian University: English self-confidence, wellbeing and friendships

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Abstract

Within the expanding international tertiary sector in Australia, the main objective of University policies is the successful acculturation and integration of international students. However, studies have shown that there is a lack or a very low level of interaction between students of South and East Asian background and local students. This paper discusses the problem of acculturation of Taiwanese students in Australian Universities, focusing upon the areas of psychological adjustment and social networking. Moreover, the study explores the connections between perceived English fluency, self-esteem, disempowerment, wellbeing, and friendships between international students and local students, as well as amongst international students. In total, 21 Taiwanese participants completed a questionnaire. The results have confirmed the validity of the identified area of psychological adjustment as being salient in the process of acculturation and social cohesion of Taiwanese students. Analysis of the data also shows that the levels of English self-assessment, self-esteem and friendships are lower for Taiwanese students in their interactions with local students as opposed to their interactions with non-native speaker students. However, there was a strong tendency revealed among the participants to form more meaningful friendships with Australians.

“Cada lengua es una visión del mundo, cada civilización es un mundo. El sol que canta el poema azteca es distinto al sol del himno egipcio, aunque el astro sea el mismo.”

Every language is a vision of the world, each civilization is a world. The sun that sings the Aztec poem is different to the sun of the Egyptian hymn, although the star remains the same. (Paz 1973 in Denis & Matas Pla 2002: 7; translation by author)

1. Introduction

The realm of the academic spheres is becoming increasingly characterised by multiculturalism, involving people from diverse cultures of origin and speaking different languages living, studying and interacting in university environments (Kashima and Low 2006). The international sector of educational systems of Britain,
the United States (US) and Australia has gained more and more prominence in recent years as an important part of the economy and as a lucrative business (Yang, Noels and Saumure 2006) – called “a hot global commodity” by Pandit (2007). The main objectives of the Australian Education International organisation are to work with universities to attract large numbers of students, in particular from South East Asia and, originating from a business rationale, to be competitive in the global international education market. That means meeting the expectations of students from different cultural backgrounds and addressing their wellbeing (Pandit 2007; Kashima and Loh 2006; Poyrazli and Grahame 2006). Based upon that, the policies implemented by universities are dominated by a strong focus upon acculturation, with programs pursuing internationalisation of campuses, integration of international students (IS) in the local culture and society, developing the skills that would allow IS to successfully and efficiently function in inter-cultural settings, and fostering social cohesion and intercultural mixing (Volet and Ang 1998; Pandit 2007).

The aim of this paper is to introduce and discuss the problem of acculturation of Taiwanese students in Australian universities. More specifically, the paper focuses on the area of psychological adjustment identified within acculturation as impacting upon social networking, seeking to explore the interconnections between English self-assessment, self-esteem and the development of personal relationships between Taiwanese students and Australian students in two kinds of lingua franca interactions: between native and non-native speakers (NS-NNS) and between non-native speakers (NNS-NNS).

Firstly, the paper will present a perspective on acculturation, social interaction and wellbeing as related to Taiwanese students, outlining the context of the current study. Secondly, the dimensions of English proficiency, self-evaluations and friendship will be discussed within the broader framework of the acculturation process. Thirdly, the research design will be described and the results of the study analysed. Finally, the paper will conclude that despite a number of limitations, the study conducted indicated that the issue of English self-assessment plays an important part in the overall adjustment process of Taiwanese students, influencing how they perceive themselves and their relationships, and how they view those around them.

2. Acculturation, social networking and wellbeing

Kashima and Loh (2006) in their study of acculturation of Asian students in Australian universities distinguish five aspects of acculturation: psychological adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, acquisition of cultural knowledge, heritage cultural identity and Australian university identity. Psychological adjustment was
found to entail the main effects of the social ties and networks the student experiences, making it integral to social cohesion. Furthermore, Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Fujihara and Minami (1997) describe four components of the psychological adjustment, all of which involve an interactional element: general adjustment (stress), self-control adjustment (self-esteem), affiliative adjustment (sound interpersonal relationships) and dependant adjustment (coping with stress with the help of others).

Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006), Myles and Cheng (2003) and Volet and Ang (1998), who all looked at inter-cultural group interactions, stress that inter-cultural contact, social networking and friendships positively influence acculturation in general and are thus paramount for all levels of psychological adjustment and wellbeing of IS, particularly for students from Chinese (and most likely other East Asian) backgrounds, for whom guanxi, the dynamics of inter-personal relationships, is a vital part of life (Luo 2007:1–2). Moreover, Trice (2004), in her study of 497 South-East Asian IS in the US, and Olivas and Li (2006) found that friendships with local students, encapsulating affiliative adjustment, had a positive effect on academic success by diminished the levels of anxiety and alienation. Therefore, the research indicates strong relationships between social networking on a personal level in NS-NNS interactions and the quality of life of an IS in his/her Australian university identity, as well as with the willingness to acquire cultural knowledge.

Theoretically, the view of relationships as social capital and key to access of social resources, is supported by the Social Capital Theory (Stanton-Salazar 1997 in Trice 2004). The research conducted in the area identifies certain factors recognised as significant in fostering successful intercultural social networking and in adjustment of IS. These factors can be divided into group or environment based or individual, including gender, race, age, education level, academic progress, self-esteem, English language proficiency (Rosenthal et al. 2006; Volet and Ang 1998; Trice 2004), and psychological stress factors such as loneliness, homesickness, powerlessness and depression (Poyrazli and Graham 2006).

However, studies show that there is a lack of, or low, interaction between local and Asian students (Volet and Ang 1998), with Rosenthal et al. (2006) citing specifically a lack of friendships on an Australian campus. With regards to the underlying reasons for this, the views in the literature are mixed. Rosenthal et al. (2006) in their study found that IS want more interaction, but that this does not occur, whilst Myles and Cheng (2003), in their study of a campus in Canada, found that IS did not make an intentional effort to contact NS. Both of these observations reveal the importance of the student, as an individual, as a participant in social networking, and of the more subtle layers of his/her psychological business.
The problem of social connectedness has been shown by universities to be difficult to address (Rosenthal et al. 2006). Some of the proposed and implemented activities on campuses that aim to foster interpersonal relations are social events, picnics (Pandit 2007), buddy schemes, faculty-based activities and study group schemes (Rosenthal et al. 2006). By and large, these activities are putting the IS in the intercultural situation, not preparing them for it, potentially impacting their effectiveness. Olivas and Li (2006) therefore call for more research regarding the psychological adjustment of IS in order to assist counsellors with their work. Communication problems are being reported even in the interactions between IS and counsellors themselves, the majority of counsellors being NS.

Therefore, a gap in the research can be observed in terms of the institutional goals, salient factors identified and institutional practices and reality. Moreover, despite individual-related issues being present in the objectives of universities and individual-related factors being researched, a specific focus on individual development in university programs is lacking, particularly in regard to research of the personal psychological adjustment process and the relevant variables that relate to the Asian population. Thus, this study focused on two main issues: a) perceived English fluency and English self-confidence and their impact on self-esteem, as a part of self-control psychological adjustment and the position of power; and b) the impact of these on the development of the affiliative and dependant aspects of adjustment manifested through friendships between Taiwanese and Australian students.

3. English proficiency and self-evaluations

Bolitho et al. (2003), within the framework of English teaching as a foreign/second language, describe awareness of linguistic performance as an emotive issue that affects the way the students view themselves. Similarly, Dao, Lee and Chang (2007) show a correlation between depression and low perceived English fluency in Taiwanese students. In the case of East Asian students, perceived English fluency and English self-confidence can produce a particularly serious impact on social networking. Moreover, a link has been established between the interdependent self-construal of East Asian culture, which entails placing high value on social acceptance, emotional interdependence, high need for cognitive closure in intercultural situations, and low English self-confidence, communication problems, poor psychological adjustment and view of self (Yang et al. 2006; Kashima and Low 2006). In terms of self-esteem cognitive evaluations in East Asian students, Kernis (2005) states that over reliance on evaluations by others and controlling family environments, recognised in East Asian contexts, both impact upon self-esteem. A
study comparing East Asian and American students has shown that the East Asian students score lower on self-report measures of global self-esteem and that their cultural value of modesty is stronger than in their American counterparts, which leads to low levels of self-esteem on cognitive evaluations and appraisal of self (Cai, Brown, Deng and Oakes 2007). Coupled with the stressful factors of acculturation, Kernis (2005) indicates that lower self-esteem measures bring about depressive symptoms and fragile self-esteem, leading to overgeneralisations of failure in interactions and making the students more likely to look upon communicative events in a more negative light. Therefore, a vicious circle affecting the development of friendships is formed.

The concept of friendship among Taiwanese students, on the other hand, was shown to be determined by the degrees of the following dialectical tensions which influence the status of a relationship: instrumentality and affection, openness and closeness, autonomy and connection, judgement and acceptance, and impartiality and favouritism (Chen, Drzewiecka and Sias 2001); this translated into significant differentiation being made among descriptions of ‘acquaintances’, ‘just friends’ and ‘good friends’ (Chen et al. 2001).

4. Research Questions

From the theorised network of associations among the discussed variables the following research questions were generated (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran 2001: 40):

1. Is there a connection between self-assessment of English proficiency, self-esteem and disempowerment in Taiwanese students?
2. If a relationship is established between the above-mentioned variables, is it an impeding factor preventing Taiwanese students from forming friendships, and/or personal relationships with Australian students?
3. What is the significance of these variables for the development of personal relationships between Taiwanese students and Australian students?

5. Research Design

5.1 Participants

In total, 21 Taiwanese people currently living in Australia took part in the study. Of those, 15 were female (71.4%) and 6 were male (28.6%). On average, 62% of the participants were aged between 18 and 24, 33.3% were from 24 to 30, and 4.7% were aged 31 to 35. The average length of stay in Australia was 5.6 years across the
participants: for females an average of 4.7 years, and for males 7.9 years. The minimum length of stay was 0.5 years and the maximum 16 years.

5.2 Method

The method of investigation chosen was the use of questionnaires followed by a qualitative, descriptive analysis of the gathered data. The questionnaires were chosen because they are the most productive way to gather a larger sample, the anonymity of a questionnaire allowed for more ‘honest’ answers, and all respondents could receive standardised questions. The information collected included facts and opinions of the respondents (Denscombe, 2006: 145–146). Furthermore, the survey was conducted in one single session and contained two sets of questions: one set related to interactions with Australian native speakers of English, and the other set related to those with non-native speakers of English. The questions, which aimed at contrasting the results for the two social groups, were structured in such a way to allow the participants to consider the reoccurring question afresh. There were 26 questions in total, a mix of open and closed questions, with a Likert scale being used for some. The questionnaire incorporated insights from Rosenberg’s self-esteem scale (Kernis 2005, Cai et al. 2007), the critical discourse analysis framework (Van Dijk, 1993: 277; Van Dijk, 2003: 354) and Rybak and McAndrew’s (2006) friendship indicators. The paired indicator questions, targeting the comparison of responses relating to NNS-NNS and NNS-NS respectively, were as follows: 5-16; 6-17; 7-18; 8-19; 9-20; 10-21; 11-22; 12-23; 13-24; 14-25; 15-26 (Appendix 1). The open-ended questions were: 14-25; 15-26 and spaces for commentaries were included in the pair 7-18. The first three questions were warm-up questions. The study was conducted by e-mail and questionnaires were codified.

6. Results and discussion

RQ 1: Is there a connection between self-assessment of English proficiency, self-esteem and disempowerment in Taiwanese students?

Firstly, the respondents were asked to self-assess their English proficiency level. The overall response average was 2.7, representing the description “I feel fairly confident about my English in non stressful situations” (Q4, Appendix 1). Taking into consideration the average length of stay, this result indicates a rather low level of self-assessment. Also, an interesting observation was that for males the average was 3 and for females it was 2.6, coming closer to “I can communicate, but it is still a foreign language”, despite the sample size differences in favour of females. The only female who marked a level 4 for English had stayed in Australia for 7 years. This
may be indicative of a difference in self-assessment of English between females and males.

In assessing the English proficiency level whilst talking to Australian and non-native speakers of English (Q5, Q16), the response average was 2.7, signifying “sometimes” for the description “pleased with myself”, followed by “proud” in the case of NS–NNS interactions, and 2.9 for “pleased with myself”, followed by “proud” on 2.4 in NNS–NNS interactions. It is perhaps surprising that, on average, the respondents reflected that they felt quite good about their English while talking to Australians. In regards to rating the weighting of the opinions of others in assessing their English proficiency, the results showed 3.2 points for importance in the case of Australians and 3.0 for non-native speakers on the Likert scale 1–5. As readings of 1 and 2 were very rarely marked on the scale, this indicated that there might be a level of preoccupation about what others think of their English in Taiwanese students, and that that level is slightly higher in the case of Australian speakers.

In an attempt to gain a perspective on how the participants feel during conversation and the perceived position that they occupy in interactions, the question set 7/18 was used (Appendix 1). Participants scored equally highly for the statements “I feel as an equal to him or to her, I feel confident” and “I feel the native speaker dominates the conversation most of the time”: 3.7 on the Likert scale 1–5, followed by “I feel more of a listener and less of a speaker” at 3.5. That result suggests that the students might feel they are equals in certain situations when talking to Australians, but at the same time in numerous situations they feel dominated. Furthermore a possible trend emerged when comparing female and male results. Females scored 4.0 for the question on dominance, as opposed to 2.8 by males, and regarded themselves as more of a listener at 3.6, compared with 3.3 for males. Overall, the scores showed a downward trend for the same indicators for NNS-related responses; most salient drops were detected for “I feel I am more of a listener and less of a speaker” and “I feel the speaker dominated the conversation most of the time”. Therefore, possibly the participants did feel more comfortable in conversations with NNS.

Regarding the link between the position of power in the conversation and self-esteem, two statements were formulated in Q13/24 (Appendix 1). In the case of the first statement, relating to self-esteem and wanting to make Australian friends, there were 12 selections of neutral, 6 of strong agreement, 3 of agreement and 1 of disagreement (male), which is an indicator that self-esteem has an important role in interactions for Taiwanese students. In the case of the second statement, involving the effect of feeling good about one’s English on friendships, the results were more mixed: 9 neutral, 2 strongly agreed, 6 agreed and 4 disagreed. The situation was very
similar in the case of NNS–NNS, indicating that self-esteem is important in interactions with them too. However, with the second statement, there was considerable disagreement, with 7 respondents strongly disagreeing with the statement that English is a factor in forming NNS–NNS speaker friendships. This highlights the trend that English proficiency worries seem to be more valid in NS–NNS conversational interactions.

Therefore, even though it was indicated that, on average, the respondents think they feel quite good about themselves when talking to Australian speakers, it is very important to them what Australians think of their English, more so than with NNS. Their self-assessment of English is rather low; when they are talking to Australians the indicators for dominance and passive roles in conversation are considerably higher compared with NNS. In addition, while there is an indication that self-esteem is important in both NNS–NS and NNS–NNS interactions, when analysed in relation to English proficiency and self-assessment, its importance decreases somewhat.

The following commentaries were also added: questionnaire 8 (F, 9 years length of stay): “Sometimes I don’t even know what they are talking about so don’t know what to say”; questionnaire 9 (M, 6 year length of stay): “It’s usually the case that I cannot articulate myself well enough”, reflecting the connections between the variables of English proficiency self-assessment, self-esteem and position in social interactions.

RQ 2: If a relationship is established between the above-mentioned variables, is it an impeding factor preventing Taiwanese students from forming friendships, personal relationships with Australian students?

Based on the collected data, Taiwanese students’ friendships leaned towards NNS of English: 57% of the respondents stated that they “rarely” did things socially with Australians, whilst on the other hand 52% said that they “often” socialised with NNS. Respondents also indicated that they felt more supported by NNS speakers than by NS; the level of support was 3 for 42% of participants in the case of NS and rose to 4 for NNS. The best relationship with an Australian translated into an almost 50/50 split between “good friends” and “just friends” with a striking uniformity; relationships in general were described mostly as “just friends” (57.1%) and “acquaintances” (23.8%). The same question for NNS friendships yielded an almost 50/50 split, but this time between “good friends” and “best friends” for the best relationship, and the rest of the relationships were characterised as “good friends” (57.1), “just friends” (23.8%) and “best friends” (19%). Also, when asked if they would want to have more good Australian friends, 38% replied with “very much”; however, 61.9% said the same about international students.
The findings provide support for the fact that the indicators for friendship levels of NS–NNS interactions are lower than for NNS–NNS interactions. However another trend observed was that the relationship between Taiwanese students and NNS is not as clear as previously thought: a number of questionnaires contained low scores for support, social activity and willingness to increase social cohesion with other international students. That trend further surfaced in the open-ended questions. In addition, there was an inclination shown towards making more NS friends, especially in the open-ended questions.

RQ 3: What is the significance of these variables on development of personal relationships between Taiwanese students and Australian students?

The open-ended pair questions 14/24 and 15/24 (Appendix 1) were formulated with the purposes of collecting opinions about the important factors for developing friendships and also to get an insight into the participants’ personal assessments of their own feelings during conversations with other people, NS and NNS:

14. In your opinion, what are the factors that are important to you in developing, or not developing close, long lasting friendships with Australian students?
15. In general, how do you feel when communicating with Australians? Is the way you feel impacting on your relationships with them?

In the case of NS–NNS interactions, the following factors were identified as salient for friendships: culture differences; differences in interests/beliefs/thoughts; different perceptions of socialising; amount of time spent socialising with NS; lack of acceptance by NS; low friendliness levels (e.g., “Australians don’t want to make NNS friends”). Furthermore, NS were referred to as “locals”, “westerners”, “they” as opposed to “us”, the international students, who have to be “accepted” and “included” into the NS group. NS, however, “don’t ask you actively about your daily life” and “are not interested in making friends”. Respondents mentioned that friendships were not long-lasting and “just friendships”, not anything more. The fact that communicative situations are charged with emotions and feelings and leave a deep impact becomes very clear from reading the opinions about language, namely English and everything related to it. English proficiency was often cited as a factor alongside personal confidence and talking without hesitation, the need to be active or lose opportunity to speak while talking to Australians and not to be afraid to make mistakes. Thus, evidence suggests that the impact of how the respondents felt about their relationships appeared to be quite significant, and possibly resulted in the mainly negative perceptions of communicative experiences being described. The impact is even more obvious in the following comments from the questionnaires:
“my relationship with local students can’t go any further”; “we can’t have any closer relationship”.

In the case of NNS–NNS situations, the following factors were observed: different cultures and languages as advantages; helping other NNS as important for friendships; personality; friendliness as a positive factor and understanding each other’s feelings; “good” communication with NNS seen as opportunity to practice; NNS-like use of English, and not having to worry about good/bad English and mistakes, talking, socialising more; and the fact that NNS show concern for one’s feelings. The participants stated that it was easy to get along with NNS, easy to make friends and feel good whilst talking; “I always feel more comfortable when talking to other international students”, “I have more to say than with Westerns [sic]” and “feeling more confident and expressing your feelings”.

Finally, in the analysis of the data, a strong emotional reaction element was picked up as salient in the two questionnaires, and could be observed in the discrepancies between self-assessment of English, friendship indicators and open-ended questions. Therefore, the statements, made by the respondents in these cases, potentially revealed that the variables described in this paper do play important roles in the lives of students and care needs to be taken in raising these issues.

7. Limitations and recommendations

Despite the detailed construction of the survey, the role of the interpreter is paramount and can have impact on the findings; therefore, this area needs to be further addressed and controlled. The sample was unequal in terms of gender and length of stay. In addition, an ethnocentric bias was present in the study. Therefore, the inclusion of NS perspectives will be beneficial in future studies. The responses should also be analysed using appropriate statistical tools, although this requires a larger sample and so such statistical analyses were not carried out here in this paper. The relationships between the independent variable (IV) of age and length of stay and DP of English self-assessment, for instance, could be measured that way. The data processing design could be twofold including appropriate statistical testing for significant differences, and an analytical qualitative method. From the qualitative perspective, in order to further examine the research questions the relations between responses in questionnaires can be analysed for within subject trends. This would mean examining carefully the responses for the relationships between answers to questions for each subject and comparing the findings, allowing for the potential influence of the emotional reaction element.

Although the questionnaires used in this study proved to be suitable for determining possible trends, the actual process of conducting research using
questionnaires is limiting in terms of the amount of the data received from the participants. Therefore, the information received from the questionnaires has to be further processed and integrated into a refined interview design, allowing exploration and follow-up interviews in which trends could be further explored. This could be especially productive in the case of issues proved to be as personal as those presented by this research.

8. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, the process of the research and the results have confirmed that the identified area of psychological adjustment is in need of further investigation, as it is demonstrably pertinent to the overall situation of Taiwanese students in Australian universities. Moreover, the oversimplified view of the highly prioritised university policy issue of social networking, which considers a phenomenon such as lack of NS/NNS social cohesion as an isolated occurrence, or as originating solely from the unwillingness on behalf of NNS, is inaccurate and bound to lead to a limited understanding of the situation. Thus, by focusing on analysing English self-confidence within the dimension of self-esteem and incorporating these two in the dynamics of the communicative interactions that Taiwanese students engage in, this paper has attempted to present a more detailed picture of the issue of friendship, what it means to the group in question and how they feel about it. The data has shown that, although the level of English self-assessment is quite low for Taiwanese students, the respondents displayed a positive outlook upon their proficiency when thinking about NS–NNS interactions. In addition, the data indicated the importance of self-esteem in both kinds of interactions. However a higher level of tension seemed to have been experienced by students when talking to Australians, and a possible trend was observed in terms of gender differences in the areas of cognitive self-evaluations of English proficiency and the dynamics of communicative interactions. Finally, although the level of friendships with Australians did seem to be lower if compared with NNS-NNS ones, that result has to be analysed with awareness of the view of the complex relationships between IS with other IS and the presence of a strong desire to communicate more with Australians.

In conclusion, the area of psychological adjustment needs to be examined in more depth in order to gain a better understanding of what is it like to be a Taiwanese student in Australia, what the benefits and the problems they encounter are, and how these change the perceptions and intentions of an individual. In this way, we can gain a better understanding of what adjustments need to be made to
university policies to better address the individual needs of NNS students in
Australia.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. How long have you been studying in Australia?

2. Are you male or female?

3. How old are you? Please underline the age group.
   18-24   25-30   31-35   36+

4. When thinking about your English proficiency, what best describes you on the scale from 1-5 (please underline the number)?
   1   English is very different to me
   2   I can communicate, but it is still a foreign language
   3   I feel fairly confident about my English in non-stressful situations
   4   I feel very good about my English proficiency
   5   English is like my first language

5. How do you feel about your level of English while talking to an Australian speaker?
   (1-not at all; 2-rarely; 3-sometimes; 4-oftenly; 5-very much)
   Ashamed   1  2  3  4  5
   Humiliated 1  2  3  4  5
   Proud      1  2  3  4  5
   Pleased with myself  1  2  3  4  5

6. Is it important to you what Australian speakers think of your English?
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not Important  Very Important
7. When talking to a native Australian speaker of English, do you feel....
(1-not at all; 2-rarely; 3-sometimes; 4-oftenly; 5-very much)

As an equal to him or to her, I feel confident 1 2 3 4 5
I participate in conversation, but don’t always say what I want to 1 2 3 4 5
I feel I am more of a listener and less of a speaker 1 2 3 4 5
I feel the native speaker dominates the conversation most of the time 1 2 3 4 5
I feel disadvantaged, I can never say what I want to say 1 2 3 4 5

Any other comments about your experiences:

8. How often do you do things socially with Australian students (that includes: going to movies, parties, meeting on campus, going to each other’s place)?
Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

9. Do you feel supported by Australian students? 1 2 3 4 5
(on a scale from 1-5: 1-not at all; 5-very much)

10. The best relationship you’ve had with an Australian student is best described as:
Acquaintance Just friend Good friend Best friend

11. Most relationships between you and Australian students can be described as:
Acquaintance Just friend Good friend Best friend

12. Would you like to make more good Australian friends? 1 2 3 4 5
(on a scale from 1-5: 1-not at all; 5-very much)

13. While you are talking to Australians:

Feeling good or bad about myself in a conversation is an important factor for wanting to make Australian friends.
Feeling good and confident about my English is an important factor for wanting to make Australian friends.

14. In your opinion, what are the factors that are important to you in developing, or not developing close, long lasting friendships with Australian students?

Please feel free to express your valuable opinions:

15. In general, how do you feel when communicating with Australians? Is the way you feel impacting on your relationships with them?

A little bit more to go, Great Job so far!

Thinking about yourself and other International students:

16. How do you feel about your level of English while talking to other International students in English?

(1-not at all; 2-rarely; 3-sometimes; 4-oftenly; 5-very much)

Ashamed 1 2 3 4 5
Humiliated 1 2 3 4 5
Proud 1 2 3 4 5
Please with myself 1 2 3 4 5

17. Is it important to you what non-Australian speakers think of your English?

1 2 3 4 5
Not Important Very Important
18. When talking to a Non-Native speaker of English, do you feel….  
As an equal to him or to her, I feel confident 1 2 3 4 5  
I participate in conversation, but don’t always say what I want to 1 2 3 4 5  
I feel I am more of a listener and less of a speaker 1 2 3 4 5  
I feel the non-native speaker dominates the conversation most of the time 1 2 3 4 5  
I feel disadvantaged, I can never say what I want to say 1 2 3 4 5  

19. How often do you do things socially with Non-native English speakers (that includes: going to movies, parties, meeting on campus, going to each other’s place)?  
Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time  

20. Do you feel supported by International students? 1 2 3 4 5  
(on a scale from 1-5: 1-not at all; 5-very much)  

21. The best relationship you’ve had with an International student, non-native speaker of English is best described as:  
Acquaintance Just friend Good friend Best friend  

22. In general, your relationships with International students can be described as:  
Acquaintance Just friend Good friend Best friend  

23. Would you like to make more good International friends? 1 2 3 4 5  
(1-not at all; 5-very much)  

24. While talking to non-native speakers of English:  

Feeling good or bad about myself is an important factor for wanting to make International friends.  
1 2 3 4 5  
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
Feeling good and confident about my English is an important factor for wanting to make International friends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

25. In your opinion, what are the factors that are important to you in developing, or not developing close, long lasting friendships with International students? Please feel free to express your valuable opinions:

26. In general, how do you feel when communicating with other International students? Is the way you feel impacting on your relationships with them?
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