

Malay Values in Intercultural Communication

S. Awang, M. Maros, and N. Ibrahim

Abstract—Numerous studies on culture have long been conducted around the world. Yet, this area of research remains as an attraction to many scholars until today. This is true for a multicultural country like Malaysia. With its diverse ethnic groups, Malaysia provides a fertile ground for studies on various aspects of culture. This study examines the occurrence of Malay cultural values (referred henceforth as Malay values) in intercultural communication that was investigated in one public university in Malaysia. The respondents consisted five Malay candidates and two interviewers; one of them was an Indian while the other was a Malay. The data collection procedures involved observing five interview sessions which were conducted in English. These sessions were recorded on audio and video before the linguistic exchanges were transcribed. Referring to some cultural values highlighted in the literature of the Malays, the researchers identified the occurrences of these values in the observed interactions. The findings revealed that Malay values were not displayed exclusively by the Malays but were prevalent in the language use of the Indian interviewer. The paper ends with some discussions on the implications of the research findings.

Index Terms—The Malay values, culture, intercultural communication, ethnic groups.

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture has long been an attraction to many scholars around the globe. It is defined as a set of norms, values and beliefs of a particular group of community and shared by its members [1]. Culture covers a wide spectrum in one's life; from religion to customs and rituals as well as language and membership in ethnic groups.

As a multicultural country, Malaysia is a fertile ground for studies on culture. Its population comprises three major ethnic groups; the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. This country is unique because of the diversity of its peoples. The Malays are the largest population in the country followed by the Chinese and Indians. These three major ethnic groups make up the Malaysian population by the proportions of about 51%, 23% and 7%, respectively [2].

A review on the literature of Malaysian culture shows that many studies tended to focus on the ethnic values of the Malaysian peoples [3]; [4] and [5]. A study by Zawawi [4] for instance, revealed that some of the cultural values exist only among a particular ethnic group other while some are shared by other groups. In discussing the cultural values of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia, Zawawi [4] highlighted that the cultural values of the Malays included respect for

others, faith in God, humility, indirectness and politeness. Meanwhile, the Chinese were described to place great emphasis on diligence, perseverance, education, wealth and orientation towards family. Indians on the other hand, were known to have high values for the fear of God, sense of belonging, kinship, family as well as loyalty.

While past studies on cultural dimensions of Malaysian ethnic groups were mostly based on data gathered from either a set of questionnaires [6];[7], interview results [4] or response from hypothetical business situations [5], the current study diverts from this literature by conducting an in situ investigation on the occurrence of the Malay values in real communication situations. The observed interactions involved speakers of two different ethnic groups, i.e Malays and Indians.

This study addresses the following two questions:

1. What types of Malay values occur in interactions during university admission interviews?
2. During interactions with non-Malay interlocutors, are Malay values displayed only by the Malays?

Contextualized in the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation in one public university in Malaysia, this study involved observations on university admission interviews which were conducted as part of the requirements for the selection of new students in the faculty.

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese population is the second largest in this country. However, this study did not focus on them. Instead, it focuses only on the Malays and the Indians. For a better understanding of this study, it helps to briefly look into the background of these two communities. This is followed by brief literature on humour for it was found to be quite prominent in the observed interactions.

A. The Malay Community

As noted earlier, the Malay community is the largest in Malaysia. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, the supreme law of the land states that one is considered a Malay when s/he is a Muslim, speaks the Malay language, adopts and practices the Malay culture. As Muslim, the Malays have strong beliefs in the concept of Supreme Being-Allah the Almighty [7]. This community is known for its non-confrontational behaviour [8] and overall, are unassuming people who would try to be "subtle" in their conversation [9]. This is done by employing indirectness in order to avoid conflicts [9].

The above attributes are seen rooted from the upbringing of Malay children who are brought up to be seen and not to be heard. Their verbalisation also should not have any indication of "directness" [10: 175]. Anything to be said should be put across in an indirect way to avoid offending others.

As a result of this, many existing literature on the Malays describes this ethnic group as being polite and indirect [4]; [11]; [12]. Politeness, from Brown and Levinson's [13]

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perspective, are strategies in communication used to preserve a person's "face" or dignity which is much needed in establishing good relationships and maintaining social harmony [12].

Meanwhile, being indirect refers to avoiding "telling off" anyone on a certain matter. The speaker, instead, would go "beating-around-the bush [10] before the real intention is conveyed, and even then, is imparted in an indirect way [14]. Interestingly, indirectness can be employed through the use of poems and metaphors [7]. Undeniably, politeness is achieved when the messages are indirectly conveyed [15] and [16]. Thus, it is common to see that these two values are discussed together.

Humility is another value that describes the Malays. Teo [14] refers humility as a sociocultural convention to avoid self-praise which is done by making understatement rather than overstatement. While the former is considered the norm among the Malays, the latter is seen as being proud or arrogant, thus, should be avoided. One symbol of humility, according to Abdullah [3] is an apologetic behaviour among the Malays.

Aside from the above, Zawawi [4] and Zamani [8] quotes other Malay values which include affiliation, appreciative, fairness, loyalty, obedience, tolerant and hospitable [8].

Derived from all above values, the Malays, being a majority of Malaysian population, live harmoniously with other ethnic groups. The country has even been referred by many as a model of a peaceful and harmonious multicultural country.

B. The Indian Community

Consisting about 7 % of the Malaysian population [2], the Indian community is the third largest ethnic group after the Malays and the Chinese. They consist of Tamilians, Pakistanis, Malayalis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankas, Punjabis, Bengalis and Gujeratis in descent [6]. Despite the differing origins, the Indians preserve their religious teachings and traditions [17]. Majority of them practise Hinduism and place great emphasis on their cultural values which include sense of belonging, brotherhood, family, modesty, participation, hard work, security, face-saving acts, loyalty, champion of causes and harmony [18]. The Indians used to occupy estates and public works but today, many moved to the urban areas and serve as professionals in their careers.

C. Humour

As noted earlier, humour was quite prominent in the observed interactions. Davies [19] who examined humour among English learners in their jokes with the native speakers of English, reported that humour and culture somehow relate to each other. Further studies indicate that humour helps to lessen tension and conflicts as well as reduces social distance between members in a group [20]. Additionally, Ibrahim and Nambiar [21] postulate that humour allows for human touch in an otherwise tense and hostile situation. Subsequently, this contributes to group cohesiveness and the maintenance of consensus within the group.

In some situations, humour can be employed as a strategy to insert indirectness in communication. In contexts like this,

more often than not, humour is viewed as an exchange that results in laughter. It is pertinent to note at this point however, that this laughter must be shared by the speakers and interlocutors. Otherwise it can be a form of an intimidation for the latter. The extent to which humour serves as indirect form of communication in this study is yet to be examined.

Aside from humour, the researchers expect that various forms of accommodating devices will emerge from the data. Needless to say, speakers would employ various communication strategies as a means to enhance effectiveness in communication. These strategies can be in the forms of code-switching, paraphrasing, repetitions and the like. In some cases, speakers tend to be flexible in order to accommodate their interlocutors. Discussed within the framework of accommodation theory [22], these accommodating devices are part of cultural considerations that are usually present in communication.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study involved observations on oral interactions that took place in university admission interviews in one public university in Malaysia. Five interview sessions conducted in English were recorded on audio and video before the linguistic exchanges were transcribed. The researchers then analyzed the data by observing the video recording and scrutinizing the use of language by candidates and interviewers. Emergent themes congruent to the study were noted.

III. RESPONDENTS

The respondents in this study can be divided into two groups. The first group consisted of five Malay candidates applying for a bachelor's degree programme at the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation in one public university in Malaysia. Ranging from 20 and 27 years old, these candidates spoke Bahasa Malaysia as their first language while English was their second language. As for the interviewers, one of them was a Malay female and the other was an Indian male lecturer, each was identified as Int. 1 and Int. 2, respectively. Similar to the candidates, both interviewers spoke English as a second language.

As there was only one candidate in each interview session, their identities were marked according to their turns in interviews. With C denoting "candidate", the candidate in the first session was identified as C1 while the candidate in the second session was marked as C2. The final candidate is thus C5.

IV. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

The research methodology of this study involved observing oral interactions between candidates and interviewers in university admission interviews. After consent was obtained from the authorities, five interview sessions conducted in English, were recorded using a MP3 player as well as video recorder. The linguistic exchanges were transcribed using Jefferson's notation [23]. This

transcription system was chosen mainly because it is the most used system of conventions [24] and allows natural conversations be transcribed as they are conversed [25]. In analyzing the data, the researchers viewed the video recordings in tandem with the transcriptions. The main focus of analysis was the occurrence of Malay values in respondents' utterances.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section reports on the findings based on the two research questions in this study. First it discusses the types of the Malay values that occurred in all interview sessions. Second, it addresses the question on whether such values also occurred in the utterances of the non-Malay. The paper ends with some discussions on the implication of the research findings.

Table I below contains the types of Malay values identified in the data and their frequency of occurrences gathered from the five interview sessions.

TABLE I: MALAY VALUES AND FREQUENCY OF OCCURENCES

Types of Values	Frequency
Indirectness	6
Humility	5
Accommodating	4
Politeness	3
Faith in God	1
TOTAL	19

Referring to Table 1, indirectness was reported to occur six times throughout the five sessions and therefore, was the most frequent Malay value. This was followed by humility, accommodating and politeness which occurred five, four and three times, respectively. A verbal indication of candidate's faith in God was seen only once.

Table II illustrates the excerpts from which the above values were derived. These excerpts were presented according to the interview session (indicated by the number of sessions). The respondents who made such utterances were also identified for ease of reference.

The following section discusses some of the Malay values that were identified in the excerpts shown in Table II. However, due to words limitation of this paper, the paper will only focus on some selected items.

A. Indirectness

The first case of indirectness was seen in Session 1 (c). Here, Int. 2 insisted that C1 pursued her studies in business rather than sports science. When the candidate failed to convince Int. 2 of her choice, she uttered "that will be my second degree, sir" that put Int. 2 at loss of words before everybody burst in laughter. The use of humour seemed to work in this situation since the candidate was able to defend her stand without causing an offence to anyone.

Indirect form of communication was also seen in Int. 2's utterances. This interviewer, of Indian origin, was captured to be indirect in two different cases. In Session 2 (a), he firstly asked the candidate about Malaysia's ranking among other participating countries in the Commonwealth Games 2010. When the candidate answered "seven", Int. 2 responded

"you let me know afterwards". This caused everyone, including the candidate, to laugh for it was understood that the answer given was wrong. Instead of telling the candidate off, Int. 2 tried to be subtle in informing the candidate that his answer was wrong.

TABLE II: EXCERPTS THAT CONTAIN THE MALAY VALUES

Sessions	Respondent	Excerpts
1	(a) C1: First of all, I would like to apologize because the photocopy er cert, or, I haven't endorsed (<i>politeness</i>) (b) C1: Err:: sorry. I don't get it clearly, at, as in-? (<i>politeness</i>) (c) C1: That will be my second degree, sir. (<i>indirectness</i>)	
2	(a) Int.2: You let me know afterwards (<i>indirectness</i>). (b) Int.2: God answer that!(<i>indirectness</i>) (c) C2: May I ask the past graduates, their jobs- (<i>politeness</i>)	
3	(a) C3: Insyallah, if I have a chance (<i>faith in God</i>) (b) C3: As you know, I'm not very good in English (<i>humility</i>) (c) Int.2: So, you are [a] person who are in the boat, in the sea, you are not in the bank, you have to sail all way, which way do you want to go, okay? (<i>indirectness</i>)	
4	(a) Int.1: Okay, Syakirin. Do you follow Commonwealth Games, recently? C3: Commonwealth:: London? Int.1: Syakirin tengok tak Commonwealth Games yang baru ni, kat India (<i>accommodating</i>) (Did you watch the recent Commonwealth Games in India?) (b) Int. 1: Everything will be delivered in English (<i>indirectness</i>) (c) Int.1: You think you can survive? (<i>indirectness</i>) (d) Int.2: Okay, er:: we have to speak in bahasa, you don't, not understanding us. Err:: Syakirin, you, you, ada tak cuba ambik, buat diploma dulu? (<i>accommodating</i>) (Did you ever apply for diploma?)	
5	(a) C5: Because, um:: I'm not [a] sporty girl. It's like we, (outside workers) my stamina is not higher. (<i>humility</i>) (b) C5: Actually, business is my weak subject. (<i>humility</i>) (c) C5: I applied one, two three, I don't qualified, well, may be don't qualified. (<i>humility</i>) (d) Int.2: Do you have health problems? C5: Erm:: Not yet. (<i>humility</i>) (e) C5: Okay, I don't, I don't mind anywhere. (<i>accommodating</i>) (f) C5: Sabah, also can la, travel. (<i>accommodating</i>)	

Similarly, in Session 2 (b), the candidate asked Int. 2 about employment opportunities for sports science graduates before the latter responded "God answer that!". Such response was meant to indirectly inform the candidate that he should find out the answer himself. Although this might not be favoured by the candidate, it was still better than to be directly informed that such question was inappropriate. At the very least, the interviewer's response helped to alleviate tension in the candidate who should then realize that, by asking such question, he had actually revealed his own failure to do his homework before attending the interview.

Another interesting case involving the use of indirectness in communication is seen in Int. 2's use of metaphor to explain to the candidate the consequences should he accept an offer to be promoted from a diploma to a degree programme. Here, Int. 2 told the candidate "So, you are [a] person who are in the boat, in the sea, you are not in the bank, you have to sail all way, which way do you want to go, okay?". This metaphor inferred that once the offer was

accepted, there would be no turning back for the candidate but to move ahead with his decision.

B. Humility

Humility was firstly identified in Session 3 (b) when the candidate admitted that he was not good in English. More cases of humility however, were seen in C5's utterances. In Session 5 (a), (b) and (c), the candidate "understated" herself by claiming that she did not have good stamina, was weak in business subject and was not qualified to be accepted in other university, respectively.

Aside from this, humility could also be seen Session 5 (c). Observe the following excerpt:

Int.2: *Do you have health problem?*

C5: *Erm:: Not yet. (humility)*

Int. 1: *Not yet? Oh God!* ((everybody laughed))

At one point in the interaction, the candidate was asked if she had any health problems. When she responded "Not yet", everybody laughed because it was an unusual answer. However, this might be a reflection of the candidate's Malay root who would not boast about their good health, for fear that they could be in an opposite state of health in the near future.

C. Accommodating

Accommodating is the third most frequent Malay value displayed throughout the observed interactions. As seen in session 4 (a) above, Int. 1 showed such value by switching to the Malay language when she realized that the candidate had difficulties in speaking English. A similar case occurred in Session 4 (c) when Int. 2 also switched into the Malay language to help the candidate understand his question.

Two other cases involving accommodating value were seen in Session 5 (e) and (f) when the candidate indicated her flexibility with regard to the university campus she was willing to go if she was offered the programme. In Session 5 (e), she told that she did not mind to be sent anywhere. When asked about Sabah campus, she immediately agreed to go there as indicated in her utterance in Session 5 (d).

D. Politeness

The data also showed some evidence of politeness. One example is seen in the following excerpt taken from Session 1 (b). Here, the candidate (C1) was asking for some clarifications from Int. 1.

Int. 1: *What's (the) area that you're interested in?*

C1: *Err: sorry. I don't get it clearly, at, as in-? (politeness)*

Int. 1: *...which one would you like to (inaudible) training or fitness?-*

C1: *Training*

Here, when the Int.1's question was unclear to C1, she sought for clarifications by politely asking Int. 1 what she actually meant. After clarifications were given, C1 then understood that Int.1 was actually referring to either training or fitness areas. Notice that in this example, the candidate started by apologizing before seeking for further clarification, thus, inserting an element of politeness in her language.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Before discussing conclusions and implications of this study, it helps to reiterate that the objective of this research was to examine the occurrence of the Malay values in intercultural communication involving five candidates attending university admission interviews with two interviewers; one of them was an Indian.

Overall, the findings support what has been maintained in the current literature; that the Malays have strong ties with their cultural values. The types of the Malay values identified in this study were indirectness, humility, accommodating, politeness and faith in God. Except for the last one, it must be realized that all the identified values are indeed rooted from one common trait of a Malay i.e. conflict-avoidance. This was particularly highlighted by Zamani [8] and Ali [9]. Additionally, the use of humour in this study, is seen as an important mitigating device to reduce tension in the candidates.

Secondly, from 19 utterances that contained the Malay values identified in the data, four were derived from Int. 2's utterances. From this number, three contain the value of indirectness while another indicates his accommodating value. This clearly shows that the Malay values are not exclusively for the Malays but are also shared by other ethnic groups. Perhaps, this is an example of how people changed their behaviour to adapt to their environment needs [26]. In the context of this study, the Indian interviewer fitted in the conversations with his Malay interlocutors well, leading to a harmonious conversation to take place. More importantly, it is evidenced that it is always possible for one ethnic group to adapt themselves in the culture of others.

Drawing from these two conclusions, there is a great possibility that conflict-avoidance and ability to adapt with the values of other ethnic groups are the two elements that greatly contribute to the harmonious life of the diverse Malaysian people. As long as these elements are retained in the hearts of all Malaysians, regardless of their ethnic values, we can expect this country to remain as a peaceful and harmonious multicultural country. This is certainly a priceless asset that must be preserved for the survival of our nation.

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