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Paper Communicating Without Words: Focus on Malaysians

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Abstract. Japan is a socially constructed society with group-orientation and social interdependence play an important role in Japan. Communication without words (silence) is possible and preferable (Wong, 2005).

For instance keeping quiet to show deference or respect to others or, to maintain harmony in certain situation;

are highly valued in Japanese society. Is silence a salient feature in discourse among the various ethnic groups in multiracial Malaysia? This is the focus of this study. This study looks at how the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia view 'silence' as a tool in communication. Data is analyzed using SPSS and findings are presented in two sections.

Key words: Malaysian Malays, Chinese, Indians, communication, silence

1. Introduction

Silent communication flourishes in Japan due to the Japanese belief in kotodama (the spirit of language)

which makes them careful when speaking, once a word is uttered it must be carried out (Wong, 2005).

Talking seems to be seen as an excuse for procrastinating, and decisive action is characterized by silence

"fugenjikkou" (Lebra, 1986).

However, unlike Japan, Malaysia is a multicultural society where communication patterns to some extent

depend on cultural upbringing and ethnicity. Many studies (Asmah Haji Omar, 1995, Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 1995, 2000, David and Kuang, 1999; David, Kuang and Zuraidah Mohd. Don 2002;) argue that the way

Malaysians behave in an interaction depends on their ethnic backgrounds. Asma Abdullah and Pedersen

(2003) have also shown how the different ethnic groups behave and describe this as 'Delights, Puzzles and Irritations.'

David and Kuang (1999) also found that while Malays are generally indirect whether in spoken discourse

or in writing, the Chinese were found to be more direct in saying what they mean whereas the Indians may

be direct or indirect depending on their professions. Despite these studies, not many have been able to

illustrate how Malaysians view silence. Communication without words must be studied to determine the use

and perception of silence amongst Malaysians.

2. Aim

This study will show the how the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysian view silence as a tool of communication. Section I will provide information of the respondents' perception of loquacious and taciturn characteristics, Section II will discuss silence and action in communication. The findings will give us a better insight into the observation of silence among the three ethnic groups that may differ and in what setting is silence observed most by each group.

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study applies the theoretical framework of social constructionism which views all forms of communication, including silence as socially constructed, and historically and culturally situated (Berger and

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Luckman, 1966). This framework is chosen based on the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multicultural

society. Gergen (1994) argued that in a socially constructed society, social truth/reality emerges through social consensus and self-reflection with the help of language. The uses and effects of language

(verbal and non-verbal) are of central importance to social constructionism. On the other hand, from the

linguistic and non-linguistic dimension, Jaworski (1993) shows silence as an extremely powerful communicative tool in theoretically pragmatic terms, and argues that silence can be accounted for by the

same principles as those of speech. He gives a clear and comprehensive explanation of what makes silence

capable of carrying out different meanings and for expressing different functions and how interactants arrive

at these meanings. His integrative study of culture, looking at language including silence is an integral part of

social interaction.

2.2. Methodology

Table 1 illustrates the result of a self-administered questionnaire which was administered on 661 Malaysians: 228 Malays, 326 Chinese, 101 Indians (6 missing value) aged between 20 to 60.

Respondents were mainly students and academic staff of University Malaya and University Tunku Abdul

Rahman. The questionnaire was also administered on their family and friends throughout Malaysia. This

approach was taken to accomplish as many respondents as possible in the shortest time. SPSS is used for

data analysis to determine the frequency and differences among the respondents regarding the items posed.

Details of respondents

Table 1 Respondents

Ethnicity Male Female

Total

Malays 83 145 228 (34.8%)

Chinese 96 230 326(49.8%)

Indians 20 81 101(15.4%)

Total 199 (30.4%) 456 (69.4%) 655 (6 missing value)

2.3. Framework analysis

The questions asked in the questionnaire are divided into 2 major parts for analysis. They are:-

1) Respondents' perception of loquacious and taciturn characteristics.

Two questions are asked to elicit information from respondents to assess themselves or others who

have loquacious and taciturn characteristics .Some of the questions/statements asked to determine

this are:-

1. I am more a man/women of few words than a talkative person.

2. I prefer a person of few words to a talkative person.

2) Respondents' perception towards silence and action in communication.

4 questions/statements are asked to elicit information related to the perception of using silence as a

tool of communication. These are:-

1. Silence is more persuasive than spoken words

2. Silence is golden, speech is silver.

3. The higher the position you achieve, the more careful you become in word choice, as a result the

more silent you become.

4. Action speaks louder than words.

2.4. Findings

We will first discuss the perception of Malaysians towards loquacious and taciturn characteristics,

silence and action in communication and determine the contexts in which silence is maintained.

Only

significant differences found across the three ethnic groups will be displayed using bar charts.

2.4.1 Respondents' perception of loquacious and taciturn characteristics

Table 2: Respondents' perception of loquacious and taciturn characteristics

Questions

Do you agree that _____ ?

Strongly agree %

Agree% Total

strongly

agree +

agree

Disagree% Strongly

disagree

%

Total

strongly

disagree +

disagree

Malay 16 44 59 31 10 41

Chinese 13 40 53 35 12 47

I am more a man/woman of few words than a talkative person.

Indian 10 40 50 28 23 51

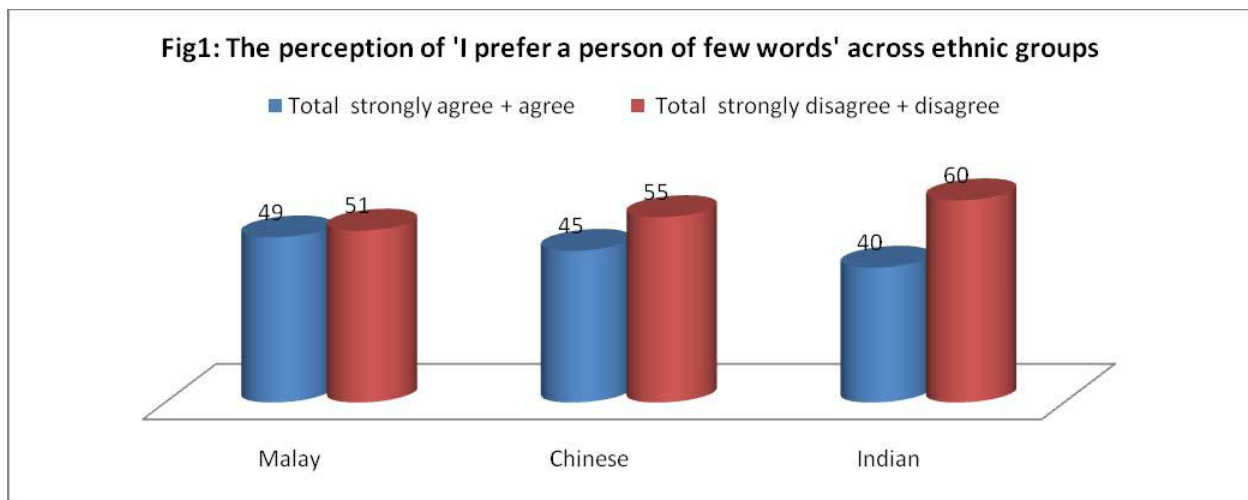
Malay 10 39 49 44 7 51

Chinese 8 36 44 51 5 56

I prefer a person of few words to a talkative person

Indian 16 25 40 42 18 60

The respondents' assessment of themselves or of others with loquacious and taciturn characteristics across the ethnic groups are almost the same. More than half (59%) of the Malay respondents think themselves to be taciturn more than the other two ethnic groups. In contrast about a quarter (23%) of the Indian respondents 'strongly disagree' with the statement 'I am more a man/woman of few words than a talkative person.' There is a significant difference ($X^2(6) = 26.9, p < 0.000$) regarding the preference towards a person of a few words. Malay respondents (49%) prefer a person of a few words in contrast to 60% of the Indian respondents who preferred a person who talked more.



2.4.2 Respondents' perception towards silence and action in communication

Table 3 shows that 58% Malay respondents agreed that 'silence is more persuasive than spoken words' compared to 43% of the Indian respondents. For 'silence is golden,' 53% of the Malay respondents agreed with the statement as compared to 42% of the Indian respondents. However, as for the statement 'the higher the position you achieve, the more careful you become in word choice.....' 69% of the Indian respondents agreed with the statement compared to 40% of the Malay respondents who disagreed with the statement. For the statement 'action speaks louder than words,' a significant difference is found ($X^2(6) = 19.8, p < 0.003$) among the ethnic groups. More than 70% of the Malay and Chinese respondents agreed with the statement as compared to only 56% of the Indians respondents (see Figure 2).

Table 3: respondents' perception towards silence and action in communication

Questions

Do you agree that

_____?

Strongly

agree

%

Agree

%

Total

strongly

agree +

agree

Disagree

%

Strongly

disagree

%

Total

strongly

disagree

+disagree

Malay 10 48 58 38 4 42

Chinese 8 36 44 45 11 56

Silence is more persuasive than
spoken words

Indian 8 35 43 45 12 57

Malay 12 41 53 41 6 48

Chinese 10 35 45 48 7 55

Silence is golden, speech is
silver

Indian 17 25 42 42 16 58

Malay 16 44 60 33 7 40

Chinese 18 49 67 28 5 33

The higher the position you
achieve, the more careful you
become in word choice, as a
result the more silent you
became.

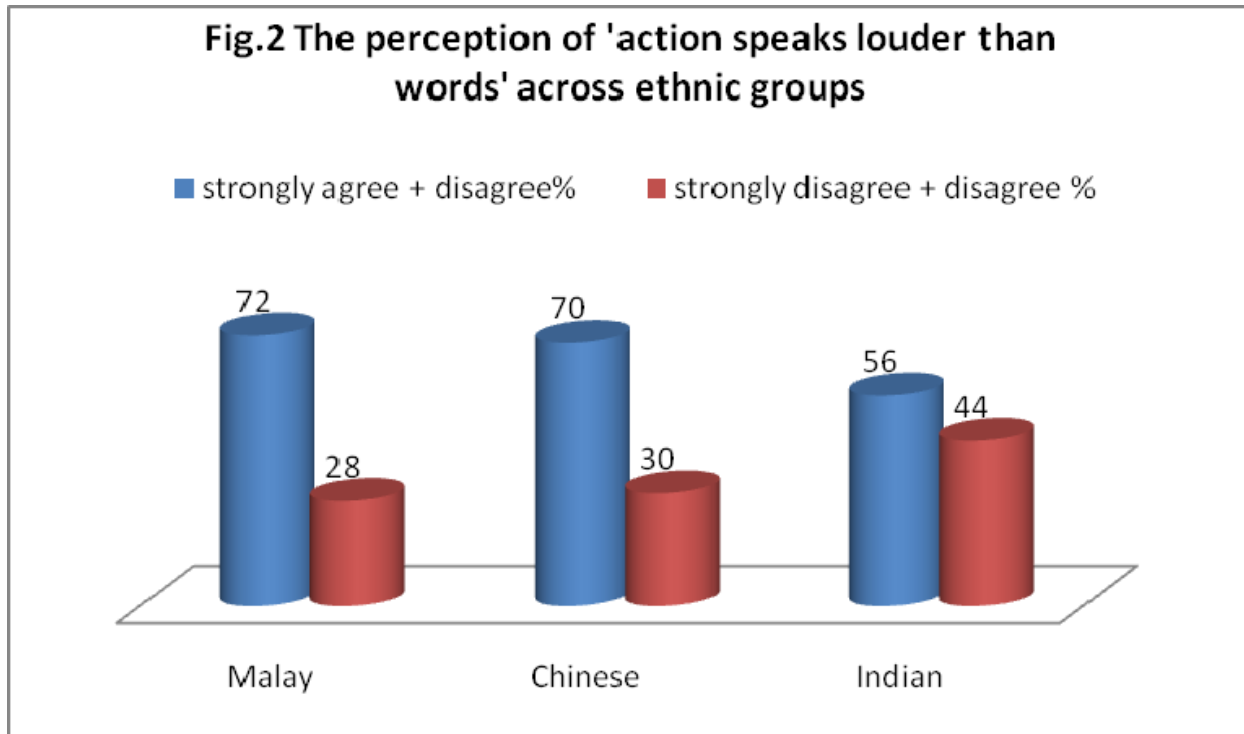
Indian 23 46 69 28 3 31

Malay 26 46 72 21 7 28

Chinese 32 39 71 25 5 30

Action speaks louder than words

Indian 17 39 56 30 14 44



We can conclude from the results that, the Malay and Chinese respondents perceive silence and 'action' (to take action rather than talk) more positively in communication than the Indian respondents. From the responses, it appears that the Indians respondents will become more silent when they achieve a higher position in society as contrasted to the Malay respondents who talk more once they achieve a higher social position.

2.4. Conclusion

The findings suggest certain preferences of Malaysians toward silence and talk. We can see that the

attitude towards silence varies amongst the ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Overall, like the Japanese, the Malays value the perception of silence as a tool of communication more

positively (silence is more persuasive than spoken words and silence is golden); and view action more

positively as compared to talk. However, they talk more when they achieve higher social position.

As for the Chinese, they are more careful in using direct expressions to convey messages, Like the

Malays, they prefer action (take action rather than talk) more. Their perception towards 'loquacious and

taciturn characteristics' is polarized. This suggests that the old teaching of Confucius that 'silence is golden'

seems to be shifting gradually.

Moving on to the Indians, silence carries a more negative meaning in the process of communication.

They perceive talk more positively than silence and action. Their preference towards loquacious characteristics is more than the other two ethnic groups. Generally, they do not treat silence as a positive tool in communication. However, as they move up the social ladder they speak less.

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