

Communication and Social Identity Dynamics in UAE Organizations

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This research focuses on cross-cultural communication in the workplace between United Arab Emirates Nationals (Emiratis) and western expatriate employees. Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory were the major theoretical frameworks used, to examine how Emirati employees perceived expatriate employees in terms of either “ingroups” or “outgroups”. 192 Emiratis (158 males and 34 females) from a variety of organizations in Dubai completed questionnaires in which they described an interaction they recently had with a western expatriate co-worker. The results indicated that miscommunications and negative perceptions invoked Emiratis’ perceptions of social distance from their western co-workers; that is, negatively perceived co-workers were categorized in negative outgroup stereotypes. However, many Emiratis reported positive communication with their expatriate co-workers. These respondents perceived their interactants at a more individualistic level, as opposed to categorizing them as a member of a stereotypical cultural outgroup. Given the rapid globalization of the workforce in the Middle-East, this study contributes towards a better understanding of cross-cultural communication between Arabs and westerners in a workplace context. Individuals from different nationalities, religions and values need to adopt a more inclusive approach to communicating with each other, to enable a shared a common identity and purpose when working shared towards organizational goals.

Field of Research: Management

1. Introduction

This paper presents research on cross-cultural communication between United Arab Emirates Nationals (Emiratis) and western co-workers. The major frameworks in this study were Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Social Identity Theory (SIT). The main research question was to explore if these two theories would be useful in analysing how Emirati employees perceived expatriate employees in either “ingroup” or “outgroup” terms.

We begin with an overview of the two theories and their theoretical and operational development. Next we apply the two theories, using the methodology of Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), which produces results that support the hypotheses and contribute to the research literature. Finally we interpret the findings and conclude that the two main theories are indeed useful for examining communication of social identity between UAE Nationals and expatriates.

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Given the rapid globalization of the workforce in the Middle-East, this study contributes towards a better understanding of cross-cultural communication between Arabs and westerners in a workplace context, where individuals from different nationalities, religions and values are required to adopt a more inclusive approach to communicating with each other, enabling them to share a more common identity and purpose when working together towards their organization's goals.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings and Literature Review

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The main theoretical framework adopted in this research is communication accommodation theory (CAT). For comprehensive overviews of CAT, see Giles, Willemyns, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). Central to CAT is the proposition that during interactions, people often modify their communication style (e.g., accent, dialect, formality) in order to achieve various goals (see Gallois, O'gay & Giles, 2006). For example, interactants may have *accommodative* goals or motivations, such as seeking the other's social approval (Auer & Hinskens, 2005), making communication as smooth and effective as possible (Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles & Coupland, 1988), or signaling that they belong to the same social group, such as a particular ethnic, socioeconomic or professional group (Giles & Johnson, 1981; Watson, Gallois, Ward & Leggett, 2009). Conversely, CAT proposes *counteraccommodative* goals or motivations, such as signaling disapproval, emphasizing social distance (Willemyns, Gallois & Callan, 2003), or even making communication problematic (Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan & Monaghan, 2005).

Social Identity Theory (SIT). CAT takes a largely intergroup perspective when examining interpersonal communication where perceptions of social identity play a major role in accommodation processes (see Callan, Gallois & Forbes, 1983; Giles, Scherer & Taylor, 1979). An understanding of social identity theory is necessary to understand the complexities of communication accommodation processes. Social identity was defined by Tajfel (1974, p. 31) as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him (sic) of the group membership'. Social identity theory proposes that one's self-concept is comprised of a personal identity (based on idiosyncratic characteristics such as bodily attributes, abilities, and psychological traits), and social identities, based on group memberships. In this conceptualization, an ingroup is seen as a group to which one belongs, while an outgroup is a relevant comparison group which is viewed in contrast to one's ingroup (Williams & Giles, 1996). When one's social identity is salient, so too are intergroup processes. The more a person identifies with his or her ingroup (e.g., supervisor), the more he or she will feel distinct from outgroup members (e.g., supervisee). For a comprehensive review of social identity in organizations, see Haslam (2004).

Several researchers (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hartley, 1996) have argued that social identity theory can assist in our understanding of the intergroup nature of communication between individuals from different social groups in organizations (see also White, Hartel & Paunipucci, 2005). Drawing on social identity theory, CAT proposes that interactants' communication styles contain social markers that convey not only content information (the actual words spoken), but also information about

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the speaker's personal and social identity (e.g., personality, age, ethnicity, social status; Giles et al., 1979).

Intercultural communication in the workplace is highly influenced by intergroup processes (Bourhis, 1991). As Gudykunst (1991) argued, when social identity predominates, intergroup behavior occurs. Hogg and Abrams (1988) argued that communication is more often a function of the ingroup or outgroup status of the interactants than of their personalities, and that if the interaction takes place in the context of an intergroup orientation (e.g., between co-workers of different nationalities), accommodation processes can fulfill an identity function. Thus, interpersonal communication in the workplace is not only a function of individual characteristics of communicators, but also of social group memberships, such as cultural background or status (Gallois, McKay & Pittam, 2004; 2006)

Intergroup Communication and Accommodation

When investigating the effects of intergroup processes on accommodation, much CAT research has focused on approximation behaviors (e.g., convergence or divergence of accent, dialect or language). However, there is much work to be done in examining how intergroup processes may affect the other, more discourse oriented accommodation strategies that interactants can draw upon. For example, Stohl and Redding (1987) argued that one way of distinguishing interpersonal from intergroup communication behaviors is by examining the formality of interactants' language; the less formal it is, the more interpersonal it is, while intergroup communication is characterized by higher levels of formality. In CAT terms, interactants may accommodate by becoming less formal in their language usage with each other. This tactic can be conceptualized as falling under the CAT strategies of interpersonal control (role relations), and discourse management (informal tenor).

Pre-interaction mediators. CAT also indicates the importance of pre-interaction variables (Williams & Giles, 1996). These include variables such as personal and social identity, individual differences in social skills and conversation sensitivities, and pre-existing stereotypes about the other interactant or social group.

Labeling and attributions. The CAT model proposes that interactants may make various attributions or evaluations about each other on the basis of the other's accommodative stance (Gallois et al, 2006). Such evaluations feed back into the interaction, influencing the interactants' subsequent communication strategies, then influencing their subsequent evaluations, and so on. For example, when entering an interaction with a stranger from a different ethnic or social background, stereotypes about the stranger's outgroup status may initially be salient. However, during the interaction, the stranger may adapt his or her communication to become more interpersonal (e.g., through linguistic convergence, self-disclosure, less formal tone, discussing common interests, etc. A likely outcome of such accommodative behaviors is that the stranger's outgroup status becomes less salient, so his or her behavior is no longer labeled so highly on the intergroup dimension. This may result in the other interactant modifying his or her own communication style to become more interpersonal.

Communication Accommodation Strategies

In their present form, the communication accommodation strategies have proven to be a robust heuristic. However, as discussed below, they are in need of conceptual elaboration and refinement in order to allow CAT to be further empirically tested and developed.

Approximations. As noted earlier, the origin of CAT was the communication strategy of speech approximation. The main approximations are convergence, divergence, and maintenance. According to CAT, convergence is a process whereby people modify their speech, nonverbal behavior or discourse patterns to become more like their interactant in a bid to decrease social distance or to seek or signal approval (i.e., to accommodate). Researchers have found, for example, that when two people meet, they often become more alike in terms of accent (Willemyns, Gallois, Callan & Pittam, 1997), language usage pronunciation speech rate and vocal intensity (Giles & Ogay, 2006)

CAT draws upon similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to propose motivations for convergence. According to similarity-attraction theory, the more similar people are on various characteristics, the more likely they will approve of or be attracted to each other. Accordingly, interactants may increase the likelihood of interpersonal attraction or approval by making their communicative behaviors more similar to each other (either consciously or subconsciously). Thus, convergence can be a means of accommodating (Giles & Smith, 1979). At a more intergroup level, CAT draws upon social identity theory to propose that individuals often converge to signal that they belong to a similar social group. An interactant may emphasize his or her accent or dialect to signal that he or she belongs to a similar social class as the other interactant. For example, Willemyns et al. (1997) found that job applicants converged to their interviewers' accents, including converging "downwards" to less prestigious accents.

The opposite of convergence is divergence, whereby interactants accentuate their communicative differences. Again in line with similarity attraction theory and social identity theory, CAT proposes that people diverge to signal disapproval or social distance between themselves and the other (i.e., to counteraccommodate). For example, a person with an upper class accent may diverge when speaking to someone with a regional accent, by emphasizing their prestigious accent, thereby emphasizing that they belong to different social groups.

Theoretical and Operational Development

Coupland et al. (1988) added a more discursive dimension to CAT, by adding the strategies of interpretability, interpersonal control, and discourse management.

Interpretability. Interpretability strategies are seen as arising from an interactant's perceptions of the other person's interpretive abilities (i.e., the other person's ability to understand what is being said). A conversation partner's interpretive abilities are often perceived on the basis of their social group membership, and hence, on the basis of social stereotypes (Manusov, 1999).

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It is also possible to use interpretability tactics in a counteraccommodative manner (i.e., to increase social distance, and/or to make an interaction more difficult for the other person). For example, an interactant from one nationality may maintain his or her own language to maintain social distance from a person of another nationality, and to make communication difficult.

Interpersonal control. This communication strategy is seen as influencing the role relationship of the interactants. Thus, interpersonal control strategies may be used to try to keep the other person in either an ingroup or outgroup role (counteraccommodation). To date, few explicit operationalizations of interpersonal control behaviors have been articulated by CAT theorists.

Discourse management. Discourse management is seen as arising from interactants' attention to each others' conversational needs (Giles et al., 1988; Williams & Giles, 1996). Thus, one may accommodate by helping the other to meet such needs, or counteraccommodate by hindering the meeting of such needs. For example, Coupland et al. (1988) proposed that accommodative interactants may facilitate their partners' contribution to the interaction by offering speaking turns, eliciting information, and using 'conversational repair.' Like interpersonal control, and, to a lesser extent, interpretability, this strategy has not been clearly operationalized (Gallois & Ogay, 2006).

Face issues. Recent research and theorizing in organizational communication has emphasized the importance of *face* in interpersonal or intergroup communication, particularly in intergroup interactions (e.g., Morand, 2000; Tracy, 2000). Consideration of face issues is especially important in cross-cultural communication involving Middle-Eastern interactants, as face is a major moderator of communication behavior in the Middle East.

In his pioneering work, Goffman (1967) conceptualized face as a self-presentation concept where individuals desire positive value for the public face they present. Brown and Levinson (1987) similarly described face as the wish to appear desirable to significant others, by way of various forms of linguistic politeness. Face concerns include both positive and negative face. Positive face is the "want to be desirable to or solidarity with significant others", while negative face, conversely, is the "want that actions be unimpeded by others" (MacMartin, Wood & Kroger, 2001, p. 222). Note the relevance of positive and negative face to the central CAT goals of approval seeking and ingroup solidarity or affiliation.

Giles and Coupland (1991) suggested that much of the theorizing by Brown and Levinson regarding "positive politeness" discourse strategies could be readily integrated into CAT. The strategies include interactants' moves to redress face threats, including face-promotion and face maintenance. As Giles and Coupland argued, such politeness strategies are clearly linked to the central accommodative motivations of approval seeking and desire for communicative smoothness and efficiency.

Face issues are clearly integral to accommodative communication in the workplace. In his sociolinguistic study of facework and power in an organizational context, Morand (1996) described various positive and negative facework tactics which individuals may use during interactions to show consideration and support for the

face of others. Positive politeness tactics or behaviors may include compliments, appropriate use of first-name or ingroup name or claiming a common point of view. They also involve the avoidance of face-threatening acts such as criticizing, disagreeing, interrupting, embarrassing, and even imposing by making requests.

Methodological Approaches

Thematic content analysis. At the operational level, this study used thematic content analysis (TCA; Popping, 2001), to develop a coding scheme of communication accommodation themes from Emiratis' written descriptions of interactions with expatriates in the workplace. The accounts were transcribed and segmented into meaningful text units, mainly at the micro-level of phrases and sentences. The transcripts were then coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where, over many readings of the data, and many iterations of constant comparison of themes and text-units, coding, as well as constant recoding and re-organizing of hierarchical coding categories, meaningful coding categories or themes emerged from the data. Although emergent from the data, the coding scheme was also guided by using a substantive theory-based approach, where concepts relevant to CAT were coded. Thus, the coding was both data-driven and theory-driven. The coding was facilitated using the qualitative software program QSR NVIVO (Richards, 1999).

Identity-implicative discourse analysis. This study aimed to examine communication processes at a qualitative level, and to interpret salient themes in Emirati-Expatriate workplace communication. The content-coding was guided by the interpretive analytical approach advocated by Tracy and Naughton (1994), which they termed *identity-implicative analysis*. Tracy and Naughton argued that the identity-implicative approach is different to more traditional conversation analysis approaches, which tend to focus on structures or organization of conversation. Rather, identity-implicative discourse analysis seeks to go beyond what is visibly displayed in communication, and to take a more ethnographic approach in inferring meanings of interactants' communications. The identity-implicative approach also has a strong focus on inferring speakers' personal and social identities from their communication, including their occupational and ethnic identities.

Hypotheses. As the present study was exploratory in nature, broad hypotheses were made. In sum, it was expected that the major content categories that would emerge from the analyses would include themes such as cultural distance ("outgroupness") and conversely, affiliation ("ingroupness"), as well as personal similarities, self-disclosure, active listening, inclusive communication, and positive and negative face. At a more specific level, it was expected that ingroup and outgroup communication accommodation strategies or themes would emerge from the analyses (e.g., discourse management, interpersonal control, and interpretability).

3. Method

Participants

Questionnaires were given to 300 Emiratis, with a return of 192 usable questionnaires (i.e., a response rate of 64%). The participants consisted of a

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convenient sample of 158 males and 34 females ranging in age from 22 to 55; mean age 33.22 years). They were recruited by Emirati university students who were asked to have questionnaires completed by a working Emirati friend or relative. The participants' occupations and places of work covered a wide spectrum, including multinational banking and finance, as well as government departments.

Procedure

Questionnaires. Each participant completed a questionnaire which asked him or her to describe a conversation they had recently had with a western expatriate co-worker. The questionnaires were written in Arabic. Participants wrote up to one page (responses ranged from approximately 100 to 250 words) describing the conversation in as much detail as they could recall, including specific statements made by themselves and their co-worker. The questionnaire also obtained brief responses (one or two sentences) to open-ended probe questions (e.g., "How important was your co-worker's personality [or status] to the way he/she communicated? Please provide an example"). The written responses were translated from Arabic into English.

Development of the Coding Scheme

The development of the coding scheme was conducted using the QSR NVIVO qualitative research software. Transcripts of employees' descriptions of the interactions were content-coded using a combination of a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where salient concepts emerge from the data over several readings and iteratively refined recategorizations, and a substantive theory-based approach, where statements relevant to CAT strategies were coded. Thus the coding was both data-and theory-driven. The text units were coded at the micro level of phrases or simple sentences.

4. Results and Discussion

3,220 text units (e.g., phrases and sentences) were coded into CAT-based categories (e.g., "Interpersonal Control", "Discourse Management" and "Face" strategies). Table 1 shows the major themes determined and typical examples of each theme.

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Table 1: Major communication themes and typical examples of each theme

ACCOMMODATIVE (ingroup) codes	COUNTERACCOMMODATIVE (outgroup) codes
INTERPERSONAL CONTROL	
<i>Equistatus</i> e.g., He treated me as an equal.	<i>Cultural outgroup references</i> e.g., Just the way he talks, he thinks westerners are smarter than locals.
<i>Non-work role references</i> References to co-worker in a non-work role e.g., He said being a family man himself he could understand my problem.	
<i>Friendship role references</i> References to co-worker as a friend e.g., She is very approachable and treats me as a friend.	
<i>Similarities (Interpersonal similarities, similar values)</i> e.g., When she told me she was in the same club as I was, I saw her in a different way.	
DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT	
<i>Willing to discuss/listen</i> e.g., He listened intently and pointed out ...	<i>Unwilling to discuss/listen</i> e.g., He would not let me explain, He would walk off while I was talking. He cut me off He would not give me an answer.
<i>Small-talk</i> References to the co-worker speaking about non-work topics, chatting, pleasant conversation e.g., We gave examples of what sports we had played, or friends had played.	
<i>Self-disclosure</i> Where the co-worker discloses relatively personal information about themselves, or their feelings about issues or other people. e.g., I saw a side of him that I didn't realize existed - he apologized and explained he'd been brought up in a household where compliments weren't given much".	
FACE ISSUES	
<i>Praise/Valued</i> Praise, encouragement, thanks, other explicit statements of valuing employee e.g., He said 'Great work - you have done a fantastic job - I couldn't have done a better job myself.	<i>Criticism</i> Any inference or reference to being blamed, accused, or criticized unjustly. e.g., He deliberately attempted to publicly embarrass me (in front of my co-workers) so that by the time he had finished I felt two inches tall.
<i>Positive face</i> Where the co-worker communicates in a way to help the employee save face e.g., He did the right thing by taking me quietly aside before pointing out my mistake.	<i>Face threat (e.g., embarrassment, challenges)</i> References indicating the co-worker has put the Emirati employee in a position of feeling "imposed upon" or embarrassed. e.g., He again asked me about my wife. It is not his business and he should not ask.

Interestingly, there were relatively few direct references to cross-cultural issues in the participants' descriptions of the conversations. This may be due to the largely westernized nature of many organizations in the UAE, where even Emiratis have adopted western norms, values and communication styles. Further, most Emirati

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Nationals, particularly those working in large organizations, are competent English speakers, so language difficulties were not an issue.

However, the results indicated a clear pattern of communication behaviours and characteristics salient for Emirati employees in terms of ingroup/outgroup relations with their co-workers. The content-analysis yielded a number of categories that were conceptually related to CAT's well-established strategies, Interpersonal Control and Discourse Management. This was expected, as the Emirati-Western communication context is very much an intergroup one, and these strategies relate to ingroup/outgroup dynamics. The results were also encouraging in that they provided empirical support for the recently theorised concept of "Face" as a CAT strategy, with implications for perceptions of ingroup/outgroup membership.

Interpersonal control. The Interpersonal Control themes were highly salient in employees' descriptions of interactions with their co-workers. For example, the ingroup category "equistatus" (where the National felt he or she was treated as an equal) was one of the largest categories that emerged from the analyses. Other ingroup "Interpersonal Control" codes reflected communication behaviours that would reduce perceptions of cultural differences, emphasise interpersonal similarities, and position the co-worker more as an individual, rather than simply as a member of a cultural outgroup. Again, individualization breaks down Emiratis' stereotypes of their western co-workers.

Discourse management. At the discourse level, the outgroup categories were indicative of co-worker's lack of willingness to listen or communicate, and negatively perceived control of conversation patterns. These discourse behaviours were clearly indicative of cultural distance, which directly and indirectly induced employees' sense of distance from their western co-workers. By contrast, ingroup categories were indicative of two-way communication, openness, and pleasant interactions. Again, western co-workers were described more in terms of individual characteristics and personality rather than as stereotypical members of an outgroup. Active listening is a communication skill that has long been known to indicate that the speaker is taken seriously and that the listener cares. Self-disclosure is a powerful form of communication in terms of breaking through the outgroup barrier and personalizing oneself. Small-talk, while not as revealing as self-disclosure, can also facilitate ingroup perceptions (e.g., fans of the same football team, type of movie, etc). Over time, such positive discourse management would lead to a decrease in perceptions of outgroup membership.

Face issues. As noted, "Face issues" emerged as a major theme in the study. While face communication is a relatively new and untested concept in CAT, recent theorizing of this concept has emphasized interactants need to feel valued and respected. Positive face included the co-worker conveying that the Emirati was valued (e.g., through praise and compliments. Face threat was also a salient issue in the negative interactions. Face threat is defined by Morand (2000) as communication that is perceived as diminishing the value or worth of the recipient, and includes issues of criticism, blame and embarrassment. Face threat was evident in the present study in references to the Emirati being embarrassed, imposed upon or criticized. In one example, an Emirati described how he was offended when a male

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western co-worker regularly asked how his wife was (which is seen as highly invasive by many Middle-Easterners).

Poor handling of negative feedback also invoked negative intergroup perceptions. The study suggests that handled poorly, negative feedback (especially in public) is not soon forgotten by co-workers, and can be a major source of face threat, leading to a heightened sense of distance from the co-worker. As noted earlier, negative communication will often lead to negative perceptions of the western co-worker, and will often invoke a sense of cultural outgroup distance, despite it being an interpersonal interaction.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate the importance of employees' awareness and use of ingroup communication behaviours for building and maintaining a sense of affinity with each other. In sum, the study highlighted the importance of employees being able to relate to their co-worker not only as members of a cultural outgroup, but also as an individual and a fellow human being. All of the ingroup communication in this study can be distilled into the core theme of communicating that the co-workers are valued as members of the organization and as fellow human beings. Thus, while cultural differences may exist, perceptions of outgroup memberships may be minimized by interactants' use of accommodative communication styles.

6. Limitations and future directions

This study was limited by a relatively small sample (N=192) recruited by university students. Future research should examine the intergroup communication processes more thoroughly with a much larger and more representative sample.

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