DISCOURSE FEATURES OF VENDOR-CUSTOMER INTERACTION IN A TRANSACTIONAL SETTING IN SIBU

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DISCOURSE FEATURES OF VENDOR-CUSTOMER INTERACTION IN A TRANSACTIONAL SETTING IN SIBU

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

The Almighty God, who is merciful, gracious and abundant in goodness. His love carries me throughout the completion of this thesis.

my grandmother, parents, brothers and sisters and boyfriend, who always love and care for me.

the loving memory of my grandfather and grandparents (maternal side), who had given me assurance of my ability in completing this degree.
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ABSTRACT

DISCOURSE FEATURES OF VENDOR-CUSTOMER INTERACTION IN A TRANSACTIONAL SETTING IN SIBU

KIMBERLEY LAU YIH LONG

The study examined the discourse features of vendor-customer interaction in a transactional setting in Malaysia. The study focused on the schematic structures of transactions in the retail encounter and the languages used for various stages of the encounter. A total of 100 naturally-occurring interactions between vendors and customers in a traditional Chinese cake shop in Sibu were audio recorded for analysis. Relevant contextual information and non-verbal expression of the vendors and customers were observed and noted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the sellers to obtain their perspectives of the transactions. Fourteen transactions in three cake shops of the same type were recorded and analysed to verify the discourse features of the retail encounter in this study. The results indicated that the cake shop transactions were realised in eight functional stages, namely, Sale Request, Sale Enquiry, Sale Initiation, Greeting, Sale Compliance, Goods Handover, Purchase and Purchase Closure. Among the eight stages, four of the stages (Sale Request, Sale Compliance, Purchase and Goods Handover) were obligatory stages of the retail encounter, with Sale Request, Purchase and Goods Handover stages being realised non-verbally. Stages which functioned as greetings and closings were infrequently present in the retail encounter of the present study. All the stages of this study were not restricted by any specific sequences. The results also showed that the language choice
for interaction depended on the ethnicity of the customers, in which Mandarin and Chinese vernacular languages (Foochow, Hokkien) were used for intra-ethnic communication whereas Bahasa Melayu and Bazaar Malay were used for inter-ethnic communication. The language choice for transaction in this study was determined by the customers and the sellers accommodated to the choice by code switching. Switching in the content words related to price, type, quantity, turn, availability and appreciation indicated the importance of such words in transactional interaction, and pointed to the stages of Sale Enquiry, Sale Request and Purchase Closure being enacted in a language which was different from the language of the interaction. The findings have implications for designing marketing plans.

Keywords: retail encounter, transactional interaction, schematic structure, language choice
ABSTRAK

KIMBERLEY LAU YIH LONG


Kata kunci: pertemuan runcit, interaksi urus niaga, struktur skematik, pilihan bahasa
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the study, research problems, purpose and objectives of the study, the socio-cultural background of Sarawak, operational definitions of terms, significance and scope of the study.

1.1 Background of the study

In the business world, successful selling of products or services is crucial (Leong, 2001). For this purpose, sellers work out various ways to interact with the customers during the transactional interactions in order to be rewarded with a successful transaction. The importance of customer-seller interaction is reflected in the effort taken by a company to equip its sales personnel with the necessary communication skills for successful marketing. The equal importance of communication during transactional interaction is indicated by the establishment of business courses in preparing potential students to enter the business world. Language is central to achieve the instrumental purpose of an interaction (Halliday, 1975) and is used to get things done. In the context of transactional interaction, fulfilling the needs and wants of the customers is vital (Solomon, Marshall, & Stuart, 2008), and language is used to communicate these needs and wants so as to get the business done.

The role of language in transactional interaction has been the focus of a number of studies in the western setting. For example, Mitchell (1957) studied the market auction, market (non-auction) and shop transactions in Cyrenaica and found that the process of buying and selling
encompass certain stages which make up the whole transactional interaction. Mitchell (1957) noted that the staging varies with the type of transactions, for example, auction, market and shop transactions. Halliday and Hasan (1985) found that retail encounters are enacted in several stages and some of the stages are common in transactions. Halliday and Hasan (1985) divided the stages into obligatory and optional stages. According to them, in a transaction, it is compulsory for the buyer to request (Sale Request) and pay (Purchase) for goods, and the seller to comply with buyer's request (Sale Compliance), name the price (Sale) and thank (Purchase Closure) the customer. The other elements such as enquiring, greeting, farewell bidding and attention seeking are optional. Ventola (1987), however, noted that the fixed stages in the transactional framework are not able to represent all transactions as the interactions do not always end with buying. Ventola (1987) found that some of the stages are recursive and others are non-verbal. Hence, the sequence of stages in her framework is not fixed and the non-linguistic element of handing over of goods is added as a stage in her framework. In these studies, the related and required elements in retail encounters have been detailed out with some variations across the different types of shops.

In the non-western setting, studies on the way that language is used to accomplish transactions have also been carried out across different settings, including a Korean store in the United States (Bailey, 2001), government offices and banks in Hong Kong (Kong, 1998), and department stores, bookstores, specialty shops, convenient stores, food-stands and restaurants in Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Pan, 2000). The studies show that the interactional patterns of the non-western settings often lack of the greeting and farewell bidding sequences. Bailey (2001) reported that the stages of transactional interactions in Korea are basically similar to the western
setting but the stages of greeting and farewell bidding are frequently lacking. In Kong’s (1998) study, it was found that interactions in the government sector and bank do not contain the greeting and farewell bidding stages. In the Malaysian setting, Ting and Lau (2009) found that greeting and thanking stages are often omitted in the simulated telephone conversations involving business negotiation conducted by university students. Based on these studies, it can be deduced that transactional interactions in the non-western setting have features which differ from transactions conducted in the western setting.

Moreover, the choice of language in transactional interaction is also of interest to researchers in transactions. In speech communities which are made up of people from different language backgrounds, more than one language is used for communication and speakers need to know when to use a particular language in a social context appropriately. The choice of a particular language may imply different patterns of thought and different customer motivation (Hollensen, 1998). The language used in transactions has been the focus of a number of studies in the speech communities of Malaysia. A study done by Platt and Weber (1980) in West Malaysia found that language choice depends on the type of shops and the ethnicity of the interactants during the interactions. In the study, it was found that interactions among people from the same ethnic group are carried out in their own speech variety, for example, Indian Tamil in Tamil and Chinese Cantonese in Cantonese. Platt and Weber also found that English is used in the more fashionable types of shops and Bazaar Malay is used for communication in shops and stalls in the market. Similarly, Burhanudeen (2006) indicated that Bazaar Malay is used for inter-ethnic market transactions in the Kuala Lumpur-Selangor setting. In another study, Wong (2000) noted that the regional dialect – Sabah Malay dialect – is used in market, shopping complexes,
restaurants and public transports. In a similar vein, Mahadhir, Ting, and Tumin (2008) also found the use of Sabah Malay dialect in the weekly market by the Kadazandusun customers. The results of these studies show that the language choice for communication differs by transactional settings and ethnic groups in the localities studied. Although the studies detailed the language choice for the retail encounters across settings, they seem to be silent on the schematic structure of the business interactions in the Malaysian setting.

Thus far, past studies have examined the different types of transactional interactions in the western and non-western contexts and have identified differences in the staging of transactions. However, the interactional pattern of the retail encounter in Malaysia is yet to be identified as the past studies seem to focus more on the language choice of the interactions. Analysis of the naturally occurring interactions during the retail encounters will offer insights to the patterns of transactional interactions, supplementing the publications on business transactions which have been presenting situations in the western context.

1.2 Research Problem

Malaysia is made up of West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) and East Malaysia (Sabah, Sarawak). The ethnic groups in Malaysia are mainly Malay, Chinese, Indian and the indigenous group. In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia is the national language and official language. However, differences exist in the mastery of Bahasa Malaysia due to the differences in the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools. In Sarawak, Bahasa Malaysia was made the medium of education in 1977, seven years after the medium was changed from English to Bahasa Malaysia in West Malaysia (Ting, 2001). Moreover, the ethnic composition of Sarawak
also differs from West Malaysia with the presence of a larger population of the indigenous group. The greater linguistic and ethnic diversity in Sarawak produces a situation whereby it is appropriate to assume that the probability for the use of different languages in the transactional interaction is high. In this setting, using an appropriate language goes beyond the choice of a commonly understood language as languages have social meanings in the speech community which could have been derived from the socio-cultural and historical background of the area.

In Malaysia setting, thus far, research on language in transactions are generally on the language use of the buying and selling interactions. These studies have been separated into the language choice patterns for the lower and higher end of the transactional domain, in which Bazaar Malay prevails in inter-ethnic interactions in the market whereas English is more commonly used in restaurants in West Malaysia (Burhanudeen, 2006; Platt & Weber, 1980). In another Malaysian state, Sabah, the regional Sabah Malay Dialect is a lingua franca, from the marketplace to restaurants and shopping complexes (Mahadhir et al., 2008; Wong 2000). In the Malaysian state of Sarawak, the colloquial variety of Bahasa Malaysia is usually used by older vendors who did not have formal education in Bahasa Malaysia (Ting & Chong 2008; Ting & Lau 2010a; 2010b). The studies on Malaysian transactions have identified differences in the choice of languages but are silent on the mediating effect of the language choice on the specific interactional patterns of the transactions as these could include languages which differ from the main language of interaction. This is an area which warrants investigation as a successful communication during business interaction is not only about communicative efficiency, but are affected by various contextual factors such as culture, language of the buyer and seller as well as the geographical location of the business setting. Hence, a study into a specific business context
in a specific area in Malaysia and amongst the multiracial participants will depict the interactional patterns of the business encounter and offers insights into the mediating factors in a transaction.

1.3 Purpose and objectives of the study

The study investigated the discourse features of vendor-customer interaction in a traditional Chinese cake shop in the Sarawak setting. The objectives of the study were:

1. To investigate the schematic structure of transactions in retail encounter;
2. To examine the language used in transactional encounters in a setting where the customers and sellers were of different language backgrounds; and
3. To analyse how various stages of retail encounter were enacted in different languages.

1.4 Socio-cultural background of Sarawak

Sarawak, which joined Malaysia in year 1963, is the largest state in Malaysia. It is located on the Borneo Island with Indonesian Kalimantan at the east and Brunei Darussalam and Sabah (another Malaysian state) at the north. Sarawak has a population of 2.07 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2011). The community of Sarawak is made up of people from various ethnic groups which include Iban (29.1 percent), Chinese (25.9 percent), Malay (22.3 percent), Bidayuh (8.1 percent), and other groups (14.6 percent) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2011). The other indigenous groups include Melanau, Bisaya, Betawan, Kayan, Kedayan, Kelabit, Kenyah, Lahanan, Lun Bawang, Penan, Sekapan, Kejaman, Baketan, Ukit, Sihan, Tagal, Tabun, Saban, Lisum and Longkiput (Sarawak Government, 2010). In
Sarawak, the Chinese are made up of many sub-groups such as Foochow, Hakka, Cantonese and Teochew, with their own distinctive language and cultures.

In the rest of this section, the official status of Bahasa Malaysia and English are explained as these languages are the medium of education at different points of the history of Sarawak and may be used in interactions. The historical changes in language policy in Sarawak result in the different levels of proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia of the people from different age groups in Sarawak. Bahasa Malaysia was accepted as the national language in the year 1963 but English, the colonial language, remained as the official language until the year 1985. At that time, English was still used for communication between the government and the people of Sarawak and the government policies were in English; and Bahasa Malaysia functioned as the language to inculcate loyalty and unite diverse ethnic groups (Ting, 2011). In the year 1970, Bahasa Malaysia replaced English as the language of instruction in West Malaysia, and it was only in 1977 that Bahasa Malaysia was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary one in Sarawak. The change in instructional language resulted in three groups of people with varying level of proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia in Sarawak:

- Little proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia as the subject had not been introduced in Sarawak schools – those born before 1963 (aged 48 and above in 2010);
- Better proficiency in English than Bahasa Malaysia from learning the subject in school – those born between 1963 and 1969 (aged between 41 and 47);
- Better proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia than English from Bahasa Malaysia-medium schools – those born from 1970 onwards (aged 40 and below).

(Ting, 2011, p. 4)
This creates a situation whereby either English or Bahasa Malaysia may be used for interactions with strangers in public domain such as transactions. Apart from Bahasa Malaysia and English, the people in Sarawak also speak their own ethnic language. The Chinese subgroups in Sarawak have their own vernacular languages which are not mutually intelligible, for example, the Hokkien speak Hokkien and Foochow speak Foochow. However, nearly all Chinese speakers speak one common standard language – Mandarin, a language taught in Malaysian schools. The Malays in Sarawak speak Sarawak Malay, a regional dialect; whereas the other indigenous groups such as Bidayuh and Melanau have languages of their own. Therefore, it can be generalised that an educated Sarawakian can master at least two to three languages, namely, the Bahasa Malaysia and English which are formally taught in schools and the dialect of their own ethnic groups. During transactional interaction, more than one language can be in-use for the negotiation of business. In view of the linguistic diversity in Sarawak, it is relevant to examine how the buyer and seller interact during transactional interactions.

1.5 Operational definition of terms

1.5.1 Transactional encounters

In marketing research, the definition of transactional encounters is very broad and encompasses a wide array of buying and selling encounters which involve the exchange of money; and the definition also covers retailing as well as service encounters (Gummesson, 1994). In this study, transactional encounter refers to the buying and selling of cakes between the sellers and customers in the cake shop. The term does not cover casual conversation between the buyers
and sellers on the matters which are not related to the buying and selling interactions, such as comments on current happenings or the news about people whom they both know.

1.5.2 Discourse features

Discourse features of a text include the syntactical, rhetorical and pragmatic characteristics of the text (Cumming et al., 2006). For the purpose of this study, the discourse features of the transaction encompass the schematic structure and language of the transaction.

1.5.3 Schematic structure of shop transactions

Schematic structure is a type of linguistic pattern which operates at different levels or within the different linguistic units to build chunks of talk within the flow of chat (Eggins & Slade, 1997). In this study, the schematic structure of cake shop transactions refers to the stages in which the transactions are realised and the typical pattern of such stages.

1.5.4 Language choice

Language choice refers to the languages used by the customers and sellers during the transactional interaction. In this study, the use of a word in a language different from the initial language in the interaction is considered to have taken place in two languages.
1.5.5 Code switching

According to Gumperz (1982), code switching involves the “juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59). Following Gumperz’s definition, in this study, code switching refers to instances when sellers or customers use two codes during transactions. The code can be two languages, one language, one dialect or two dialects. In this study, no distinctions are made between the switch within the sentence or between sentences. Both are considered instances of code switching. Switching involving a single word is also considered as code switching.

1.6 Significance of the study

Transactional interaction is transactionally motivated (Bartlett, 2005), in which the sellers and customers who are typically strangers, collaborate in conversation to carry out a task and achieve the purpose of the interactions. The ways in which transactional interactions are carried out differ across cultures. The literature has shown that there are differences between transactional interactions in the western and non-western setting. Several researchers (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Mitchell, 1957; Ventola, 1987) have identified the features of transactions in the western setting and there are a few studies (Bailey, 2001; Kong, 1998) conducted on interactions in the non-western setting and the findings point to the transactions being task-oriented, with the absence of a proper opening and closing. In Malaysia, research into the features of transactions is still lacking apart from Ting and Lau’s (2009) study which focuses on the structure of simulated business encounters enacted by learners of English. Much remains to be studied on the structure