

Cultural Dominance and English as a Lingua Franca

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The development of new ways of living in the world together is crucial in an increasingly globalized world, and a vital part of this involves effective communication. In this article, I address the issue of interactional dominance, which can damage communication, and was manifested among communicators from different backgrounds through spoken interactions in meetings observed in a study on which this article is based. Through examining power relations in the study, it became clear that the language (e.g., English) used in meetings is one of the major factors contributing to power asymmetry in interaction. This kind of power asymmetry, based on linguistic and cultural dominance, can cause misunderstanding, frustrations and even mistrust among communicators from diverse backgrounds. To reduce the imbalance in power relations and develop better intercultural communication skills within a group, I consider how English as a Lingua Franca can be used to address underlying beliefs and attitudes that can interfere with effective communication. This requires all participants in organizational settings to modify their linguistic behavior rather than one group attempt to assimilate to another. In discussing how this can be achieved, I draw on the ideas of Tsuda's (2008) Ecology of Language Paradigm and build towards Belay's (1993) concept of intercultural communication competence as an overall aim.

BACKGROUND

The study on which this article is based involved discourse analysis and conversation analysis of transcribed data, and ethnographic observations. The material for analysis came from a set of intercultural staff meetings among colleagues within an organization in Japan. In this setting, a total of seven individuals working in the same department participated in the study: two senior American employees, one junior Taiwanese employee, one senior Japanese employee, two junior Japanese employees, and one Japanese administrative assistant. I audio-recorded naturally occurring conversations in three staff meetings that were mainly conducted in English. Two of the meetings were transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and an ethnographic approach. In addition, two in-depth semi-structured interviews, six months apart, were conducted individually with the six participants. They were also transcribed and analyzed. Results for turn-taking, Initiation-Response-Feedback (I-R-F) analysis, and interruptions were quantitatively analyzed while some interactions in the meetings and the interview data were qualitatively analyzed.

THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL DOMINANCE

An example of cultural dominance from the study occurred when a senior American employee seemed to take pride in expressing the value of knowledge sharing as being very important in American scientific fields, and he further felt that the practice of not sharing knowledge in Japan was "not good" because it

affected work quality. While the senior American employee might have spoken in this way due to his higher position in the organizational hierarchy, he might also have been expressing an ideological position that American business and cultural practices are universal. The perception that knowledge is not shared in Japan could be interpreted as a lack of understanding of how information is usually exchanged and shared in Japanese working culture.

Consciously or unconsciously, American employees or native-speakers (NSs) of English may think and act according to their dominant U.S. business and social norms within multicultural situations and even impose such norms or ideologies on non-native speakers (NNSs). Such standards can be specifically American values, and thus non-American speakers may feel marginalized. If the NNSs feel pressured to speak English and forced to behave according to common American values and business practices, they may have difficulty in achieving successful assimilation in a hegemonic relationship. Some speakers from a dominant group may not realize this invisible aspect of culture hidden in the language discourse. Thus, it is crucial for intercultural communicators to recognize their own cultural assumptions and practices in order to adapt to situations involving participants from varied cultural backgrounds. A lack of cultural awareness in cross-cultural settings can hurt the productivity of both the American scientists and their other colleagues.

In order to facilitate more equal power relations among multicultural workers, where everyone can experience optimal intercultural interaction, it is crucial that dominant speakers make an effort to include less dominant speakers in their work environment. In the study, less dominant speakers perceived that dominant speakers, who were American, controlled the interaction by speaking their native language and employing American values and practices in the department. This type of exclusiveness demonstrated by American workers could create barriers to integrating successfully in the department and organization for the Japanese and Taiwanese workers, who have different cultural values and practices. For members who are non-American or NNSs to achieve successful integration, senior American employees need to be careful to avoid drawing a boundary along national or language lines. Furthermore, American employees should recognize that Japanese workers are often making great efforts and expending energy to adjust themselves to a foreign culture and language. In the interview data, Japanese employees felt their efforts to accommodate cultural and linguistic differences were unrecognized and unappreciated. Consequently, when American workers hold positions of power, it is crucial that they develop sensitivity and try to create an inclusive atmosphere that encourages non-American employees to feel accepted as organizational members.

It became increasingly clear in the study that the use of English as an official language can contribute to power asymmetry in cross-cultural encounters. The use of English as a dominant language should be examined as a potential problem of linguistic and cultural hegemony. While it is evident that English is a language of international communication today, it is also important to note that the use of English could cause not only linguistic and communicative inequality but also lead to feelings of anxiety and insecurity, especially on the part of NNSs in a multicultural workplace. Therefore, there is a need to consider how to balance the power asymmetry in intercultural communication from this perspective.

In a situation where English is the dominant language of communication, NNSs are often disadvantaged. For example, NSs of English can take advantage of the linguistic and communicative inequality for their own benefit consciously or unconsciously. NSs of English in the English-dominated situation may use their linguistic advantage to magnify their power so that they can establish an unequal and asymmetrical

relationship with the NNSs, which results in interactional dominance. Furthermore, those who cannot speak English fluently may be labeled as incompetent and perceived to be inferior by NSs. Understandably, while NSs can easily express ideas any time, NNSs are often compelled to struggle with English and may have difficulty expressing thoughts and ideas.

In order to reduce the imbalance of power due to interactional dominance, the Ecology of Language Paradigm proposed by Tsuda (1994) can be promoted to resist the hegemony of English. To reduce the risk of the interactional dominance issue of unequal power relations among communicators from diverse backgrounds, the Ecology of Language Paradigm proposed by Tsuda (2008) will be considered.

ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

Tsuda (2008) explains that the Ecology of Language Paradigm assumes that “language is culture and is a source of personal identity, and is not a mere instrument but is an environment that influences and shapes us” (p. 173). Because the paradigm holds that language is integral to people and people are integral to language, inequality among languages means inequality among people as well. Tsuda summarizes some of the implications of the Ecology of Language Paradigm for the betterment of intercultural communication as follows:

- 1) It provides a critical perspective for the present English-dominated international communication and raises consciousness about issues such as the right to language and equality in communication;
- 2) it serves non-English speaking people by providing a theoretical base for building strategies to fight the hegemony of English and promote their cultural security and empowerment and serves as a strategy for creating a balance of cultural and linguistic power between English and other languages;
- 3) it provides a theoretical foundation for the development of a global language policy, especially from the position of promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism;
- 4) it serves English-speaking people by providing them with a critical awareness and knowledge with regard to the dominance of English, raising consciousness about equality in communication, the right to language, and linguistic and cultural pluralism (Tsuda, 2008, p. 176).

As Tsuda points out, English is the lingua franca today and we cannot deny the use and learning of English as an international language. However, there is a need to promote awareness of the existing reality of asymmetric power relations due to language, as shown in the study used in this article. I try to explore some ways to deal with them as the world increasingly becomes globalized by considering the use of English as a Lingua Franca.

As observed in the study, use of the English language can create asymmetric power relations among interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, because NSs of English have mastery of the language, they might consciously or unconsciously take advantage of this linguistic advantage and even assert their dominance in conversations.

One way to reduce the imbalance of the power relations between NSs of English and NNSs is to encourage NSs to modify their ways of speaking and learn to use English as a lingua franca (ELF) or international language (EIL). A lingua franca is any language serving as a medium for mutual understanding between different nations whose own languages are not the same. NSs of English are naturally given a

linguistic advantage as language experts since English is the main lingua franca today; however, in Tsuda's analysis, it is also their responsibility to grade their English in order to communicate effectively with NNSs. Therefore, to avoid creating interactional dominance, it is crucial that NSs use simple and clear English as an International Language to ensure that their NNS interlocutors comprehend them and participate in interaction with them.

The English used by NSs usually contains many idioms and expressions that are difficult to understand for NNSs. These idioms and expressions can create linguistic barriers and cause confusion in intercultural interactions, which lead to frustrations and misunderstandings. Therefore, NSs of English need to learn to avoid using tricky idioms and expressions if they wish to communicate smoothly with NNS interlocutors. In addition, when trying to make a point clear, NSs communicators often need to slow down their pace of talk and make use of significant pauses, giving NNS communicators enough time to digest the language. Further, regularly providing a summary of what has been said in the meeting may be another effective strategy to ensure NNSs' comprehension. Finally, choosing the right 'register' or selecting the appropriate words and expressions, and tone of voice for a given situation is suggested. For example, NSs can simplify their register by using simple connectors such as 'moreover', 'therefore' or 'however'. Further, NSs can try to avoid using many softeners for politeness such as, "I was kind of wondering if you could possibly ask him", or "you might wanna consider possibly revising your plan". Instead, they can express the same messages by saying, "can you please ask him?" or "could you please revise your plan?" to make it simple and clear for NNSs to comprehend. NSs need to be considerate of those who struggle with comprehending their non-native language and expressing their thoughts in an L2. Interlocutors from other linguistic backgrounds are under huge pressure in many ways, and English grammar and pronunciation are not so straightforward as NSs assume. Finally, asking confirmation questions such as "do you understand what I am saying so far?" or "are there any questions?" to check NNSs' comprehension is always an effective strategy to show sensitivity and empathy for NNSs. If they are given enough time to answer those questions, NNSs would feel empathic attitudes from NSs experiencing more equal power relations in intercultural interactions.

In order that NNS and NS participants understand each other adequately and successfully, some communication strategies need to be employed more frequently and explicitly. Because NNS participants cannot utilize their shared knowledge and conversational practices as much as they can in L1 communication, the use of communication strategies (CSs) could help to prevent or reduce breakdowns in intercultural communication. In the presentation phase, NSs need to try to use CSs effectively in order to facilitate the NNS interlocutors' understanding. For example, if an NS provides a lengthy definition or difficult concept at this stage, it may be considered problematic in the case of intercultural interaction. In second language communication, NSs should modify interactive strategies and increase the use of CSs such as confirmation checks, clarification requests (questions to seek clarification), comprehension checks, reformulations and repetitions (Williams, Incoe, & Tasker, 1997). On the other hand, NNS participants should use CSs effectively in the acceptance phase in order to show clear understanding. In this stage, an NNS can give a sign that either she/he does or does not understand what was meant by an NS. In this process an NS and an NNS can develop mutual understanding, establish common ground, and have a satisfactory intercultural interaction. This type of collaborative approach requires both NNS and NS participants to balance their efforts, and this could help them to achieve more balanced power relations at the same time.

It is critical that multicultural communicators understand how cultures affect communication styles. For instance, in the study on which this article is based, one American employee and a Taiwanese employee expressed frustration that Japanese employees were hesitant to express their opinions. In meetings, an American worker often made proposals and brought up items for discussion. However, as the data showed, Japanese colleagues hardly ever spoke up. It is possible that the issues were presented for the first time to the Japanese workers, and they did not have enough time to share their opinions with their co-workers ahead of time, or possibly they were having difficulty expressing their opinions in English. In Japan, as one American worker in this study mentioned, it is a common practice to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to all group members to maintain harmony. If Japanese employees express an opinion in opposition to others, they may risk being perceived as confrontational or disruptive, having not consulted with colleagues about it ahead of time. In such situations, it is important that an American colleague understands that Japanese people usually hesitate to give opinions when asked, and to also recognize that it is important to give everyone enough time to consider the meeting agenda items beforehand. Another different communication style was pointed out by one of the employees in his interview. Americans in general may not hesitate to show disagreement in the meetings, but Japanese may interpret it as an aggressive form of behavior, seeing it as conflict that threatens group harmony or interpersonal relationships. In Japanese culture, it is often best to speak to Japanese colleagues and ask their opinions in one-to-one communication instead of staff meetings.

In the study, interruptions were also analyzed to examine interactional dominance, and the results indicated that American senior employees interrupted far more frequently than their Japanese counterparts. In order to reduce this imbalance of interactional dominance by interruptions, the dominant group may have to understand the different communication styles practiced by other members of the group. For example, to Americans, often “a turn is a chance to demonstrate knowledge and credibility, and this distribution of power is exercised in the American account executives’ meetings where American executives take the greatest number of turns in their own topic” (Yamada, 1997, p. 100). However, these types of frequent interruptions may be perceived as chaotic and dominant by other members of the group. In the study, Japanese employees hardly ever spoke up, but when they attempted to do so in English, they were frequently interrupted by the American section chief, and their time to speak was taken away without being able to complete their turns. To balance the unequal power relations of interruptions, it is important that dominant speakers wait and hear what less dominant speakers want to say by letting them complete their turns. Moreover, Japanese use silence more frequently and their silences tend to be longer than those of Americans; it is crucial that Americans understand that Japanese may need such silences so as not to feel rushed along. Therefore, active listening is encouraged for American workers in order to have effective intercultural communication with their Japanese colleagues.

Considering the effort required by NNSs, Japanese employees need to be aware that Americans are not used to many long silences and may feel frustrated by them. Japanese employees may need to recognize that their frequent use of silences could cause uncomfortable feelings in Americans, who end up interrupting the Japanese speakers. Thus, while Japanese employees can improve this kind of situation by communicating more explicitly, Americans and other non-Japanese can develop their intercultural skills by remaining calm, waiting, and asking more confirmation questions such as “do you mean....?” to elicit Japanese colleagues’

opinions before asserting their own. Further, Japanese speakers need to be aware that their turn-taking patterns, such as waiting for seniors to speak due to consideration of hierarchical relationships, do not always work in cross-cultural contexts. Instead of using *enryo* (refraining from imposing) which is often used for politeness in interaction among Japanese speakers (Yamada, 1997), they need to modify and learn strategies to take control of completing their turns in conversation. It is important for Japanese to recognize that in American culture as well as in some other cultures, a turn is a chance to demonstrate knowledge and competence. Therefore, in order to have an equal distribution of power in interaction, Japanese communicators also need to make efforts to take a greater number of turns on their topic. Finally, Americans need to be aware that initiations in the meetings could control the direction of the interaction, which could lead to interactional dominance. When faced with initiating roles in meetings, American employees can consciously try to use eliciting initiation such as “how about you? What do you think about ...?” rather than giving information, opinions or advice directly such as “here is.... I think you should...” to encourage Japanese participation.

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

As I have noted above, while dominant American employees should create an inclusive atmosphere for Japanese and Taiwanese workers, it is also important that Japanese employees become inclusive in terms of modifying their own practices that may exclude American or Taiwanese colleagues. If Japanese employees also make an effort to accept and include non-Japanese colleagues as their group members and to function in a Japanese work situation, it could also empower non-Japanese colleagues and allow a positive acculturation to Japan for them. Once they feel accepted as members of a Japanese organization, they may be ready to assume responsibility by developing Japanese language skills as well as an understanding of how Japanese culture influences business. Just as Japanese and other non-American colleagues do, Americans might also need to make efforts to take time to know and understand Japanese people, culture, and business practices, sometimes through the Japanese language and the use of code-switching. On the other hand, Japanese and other NNSs need to continue to make efforts in improving their English language skills, including strategies for managing conversational turn-taking that will ensure more equitable participation and engage in effective intercultural communication in a rapidly globalizing world. Thus, both groups need to expand their boundaries beyond nationalities and work towards linguistic and cultural adaptation as well as acquiring professional skills in order to make positive contributions in a multicultural workplace.

The aim for all participants in organizations should be intercultural communication competence. This means the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with others in a given situation. The model of intercultural communication competence proposed by Belay (1993) aims at promoting interactants’ ability to “acknowledge, respect, tolerate, and integrate cultural differences, so that they can qualify for enlightened global citizenship” (p. 221). It also represents a transformational process of symmetrical interdependence by suggesting intercultural sensitivity, open-minded and non-judgmental attitudes. As the model proposes, it is crucial that particularly dominant members develop non-judgmental attitudes towards outside members to avoid defensive reactions from less dominant members.

Furthermore, interaction management suggested by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) can be utilized. As was observed in the study on which this article is based, speaking in turn in conversation and initiating and

terminating conversation appropriately or inappropriately affect the outcome of interactional dominance. Through the study, it became evident that intercultural communicators need to acquire an ability to develop a topic smoothly in interaction and gain skills that allow all participants in a discussion the chance to contribute. Interaction management is one of the major dimensions of intercultural communication competence (Chen, 1989; Olebe & Koester, 1989; Spitzberg, 1994). Guidelines for effective management of interactions in U.S. culture include: “(a) interruptions are not permitted, (b) only one person may talk at a time, (c) speakers’ turns should be appropriately interchanged, and (d) speakers should pay full attention to their counterparts” (Wiemann, 1977, p.199). As became evident in the study, interruptions were demonstrated frequently by an American senior employee in the meetings. In order to balance asymmetries in conversation and manage power relations among multicultural workers, it is crucial that the dominant members refrain from making unnecessary interruptions, and so elicit more equitable participation from the less dominant members. Further, dominant members need to bear in mind that a facilitative speech style with supportive overlaps should be used rather than interruptive behavior in order to avoid creating asymmetric power relations.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have noted that language is an important part of culture, and NSs are often unaware of underlying assumptions and practices they use that may not be shared by other members of their working groups who have different cultural backgrounds. In settings involving participants from a variety of cultures, there is a risk that L1 users attain dominance of interaction partly through their mastery of the language, but also through assumed beliefs and practices that are culturally connected to that language. There is also the risk that NNSs of the language remain rooted in the beliefs and practices culturally associated with their L1. These problems can damage communication with a group or organization, and they can prevent participants from being fully integrated into working towards the common goals of an organization, and of being fulfilled in their work.

The use of Tsuda’s Ecology of Language Paradigm is one way that problems of interactional dominance can be reduced or overcome. Through mutual efforts to engage with the underlying beliefs and assumptions of members with different cultural backgrounds, and through efforts to mutually adapt, individuals within an organization can reduce or overcome problems in communication. This leads to intercultural communication competence, which is critical for all the intercultural communicators in our increasingly global society so that we can maintain our interdependence and interconnectedness.

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Abstract

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In this article, the issue of interactional dominance in intercultural communication addressed. Cultural dominance was manifested among communicators from different backgrounds through spoken interactions in meetings observed in a study on which this article is based. Through examining power relations in the study, it became clear that the language (e.g., English) used in meetings is one of the major factors contributing to power asymmetry in interaction. This kind of power asymmetry, based on linguistic and cultural dominance, can cause misunderstanding, frustrations and even mistrust among communicators from diverse backgrounds. To reduce the imbalance in power relations and develop better intercultural communication skills within a group, the author considers how English as a Lingua Franca can be used to address underlying beliefs and attitudes that can interfere with effective communication.

要 約

文化的優位性とリングフランカ（共通語）としての英語

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本論文では、異文化間相互作用における相互作用の優位性の問題について論ずる。

本論文の基となっている研究の中で、観察対象となった会議中の言葉のやり取りを通じて、様々な背景を持つコミュニケーター間の文化的優位性が明らかとなった。この研究で力関係を調査することにより、会議で使用される言語（英語など）が、相互作用における力関係の非対称性を引き起こす主要な要因の1つであることが明らかになった。言語的、優位性に基づくこの種の力関係の非対称性は、多様な背景を持つコミュニケーターの間で誤解、欲求不満、さらには不信を引き起こす可能性がある。グループ内の力関係の不均衡を減らし、（グループ内の）より良い異文化間コミュニケーションスキルを上達させるために、効果的なコミュニケーションを妨げる可能性のある根底にある信念や態度に対処するよう、共通語（リングフランカ）としての英語をどのように使用できるかを検討する。