Title: 'I had no idea that it could be put this way': The language barriers of migrants with non-native English to enacting emotionally intimate relationships

Abstract

This paper explores a very particular aspect of non-native English language use, which is in the enactment of an intimate relationship. Drawing on semi-structured interviews this paper uses Goffman's (1969) concept of facework to examine how non-native English language speakers experience interactions with a partner or a spouse. The paper provides some background of the difficulties of speaking non-native English in the informal context of a relationship, despite overall high English language competency. In particular I focus on Eugene who was a native French language speaker. Eugene's example demonstrates that non-native English language speakers can experience difficulties in the informal context of an intimate relationship which can be damaging to their sense of face, and which was unexpected. This was because, as Eugene noted, 'professional' English did not equip him with the emotional vocabulary that accompanies intimate relationships.
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Introduction

This paper explores the enactment and experience of intimate relationships when one partner was a migrant non-native English language speaker, and the other was a native English speaking Australian. The concept of facework is used to explore how the relationship was enacted with particular focus on the ways that 'face' was managed and corrected during social interaction with a partner (Goffman 1969). This paper draws on findings from semi-structured interviews that were part of a wider project designed to explore the friendship experiences of migrants to Australia. During the interviews, some of the participants spoke about their partners and their experiences of these intimate relationships in the context of their migration. All of the participants in this wider sample had university level education and were professionally employed, and many of them migrated via the skilled migration stream for which an English language test is a visa requirement (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012; Iredale 2001; Scott 2007; Vertovec 2002). Whilst a few of the migrants in this sample entered Australia via other visa streams, for example, on a partner visa, or a student visa, they were still proficient English language speakers. The wider sample was a total of 20, and whilst I will briefly draw on all non-native English speaking participants, because this paper is about enacting intimate relationships using non-native language, I refer to a subset of this sample which is those 3 participants that spoke non-native English language and who had an Australian partner. However, in the majority of this paper I focus on Eugene who was a native French language speaker. Eugene was an interesting case study because he spoke at some length about his intimate relationship, and hence his story illuminates that even a highly competent English speaker can experience language difficulties

in the informal and intimate context of an intimate relationship. This was because, as Eugene noted, 'professional' English did not equip him with the emotional vocabulary that accompanies intimate relationships.

An explanation of face work and the importance of language to 'being in face'

In this section I will outline the literature to explain the concept of 'facework', which I will use as a lens through which to analyse the findings from interviews and state how language is an important aspect of facework. Goffman (1969) coined the term 'facework' to apply to the ways that individuals manage the image that they present to others. Being 'in face' is when an individual achieves a sense of security and assurance during public social interaction with others (Goffman 1969: 5). Often, and when interaction goes according to plan, an individual has no reason to consider his or her sense of face. However, when the image that an individual has of themself is not sustained or is challenged in the company of others, then the individual will likely 'feel bad' or 'feel hurt' (Goffman 1969: 5). There is an element of collusion to facework as individuals collectively try to manage the positive face of each other during social interaction. This work is a kind of 'supportive interchange' that serves to ratify social harmony at the micro-level (Goffman 1971: 66, 69). Deliberately giving negative face is effectively an insult to the other person, although negative face can also occur by accident.

Goffman's concept of facework has been extended by other scholars. For instance, Brown and Levinson (1987) use the concept of face to explore politeness etiquette, and list examples of events that can lead to positive and negative face. More recently, Davies et al. (2011) explore facework in relation to the use of humour when acquainting. Of relevance to this discussion, is Cupach and Mett's (1994) who have extended Goffman's (1969) theory of facework that occurs in the public or 'front stage' area of social life to apply to intimate

couple relationships. Managing face becomes more complex for partners in close relationships as a consequence of the development and negotiation of a private relational culture. Increased familiarity changes the ways that individuals expect their partner to 'support' their face, meaning, collude or reinforce particular characteristics that they may deem desirable to a public audience (Cupach and Metts 1994: 2). This is because as relationships become more intimate and couples share the backstage area, they rely less on established social norms operating in the public sphere and tend to generate their own norms of acceptable behaviours that are relationship specific (Cupach and Metts 1994: 37). However, these norms that are established between a couple may not always be appropriate to the public realm.

Language is important to being in face, because talking is a key way that individuals present themselves to others (Crawford 1995: 17). Yet, as Apte (1985: 188) has noted:

> Language is such an essential part of human social interaction that it is taken for granted and is used unconsciously in most social situations.

The way an individual chooses and expresses their spoken language in everyday life is influenced both by what they hope to say, and often by their desire to generate rapport, maintain camaraderie and build solidarity with another person (Tannen: 1986). During interaction, conversation is co-constructed and individuals come to a 'shared interpretation' of what is meant (Holmes 2005: 27). However, even when people share the same native language, the ways that each individual uses language can be complex, so it is not always possible to know what is meant during a conversational exchange (Tannen 1986: 21).

In Australia, English is the dominant language, so migrants that are non-native English speakers can experience particular problems using conversation during informal social settings. Language is used in a variety of ways, depending on the formality of the setting, and people speak differently according to the occasion, whether that is the professional context of work, or socially, for example spending time with friends (Argyle and Graham 1981: 293, 297). Findings demonstrated that for migrants in a relationship, the taken for granted aspect of being able to communicate using a common language was challenged. The language challenges that the participants faced impacted on their sense of face, because in the words of Tannen (1986: 19):

> A perfectly tuned conversation is a vision of sanity – a ratification of one's way of being human and one's place in the world.

When an individual is misunderstood in their own language it can be disquieting because it undermines their sense of competence. This feeling is exacerbated when communicating in a non-native language (Tannen 1986: 19, 41). Ultimately, an inability to clearly express oneself using language can lead to a threat to face, which can lead to feelings of alienation from others.

The limitations of 'classroom English' to participants informal interactions

In this section I will briefly outline the English language experience and competency of the participants to demonstrate that in general, their English skills were good, but that they still experienced some challenges. As language is such an important aspect of 'being in face', this can be a challenge for migrants that speak non-native English. Some of the participants in this study arrived in Australia speaking good English. For example, Eugene, Gert, and Yayoi

had lived in English speaking countries prior to coming to Australia, for work or study. Margaret was from Quebec in Canada, where the official language is French, however, English is still used. Other participants had only really experienced 'classroom English' prior to migrating, such as Eva, Fiona, Grace Ignacio, and Joy. This was sufficient to communicate effectively after moving to Australia, and to gain a skilled migrant visa. Formal language learning tends to focus on the public nature of language, whilst the majority of speaking that individuals engage in is private: 'talk between two or among a few people' (Argyle and Graham 1981: 293; Tannen 1986: 8). Eugene was a bi-lingual French/English speaker who had many years of practice speaking English having attended high school in America, and completed post-graduate study in Canada. He said:

> The language barriers are not that bad because I still speak reasonably well. So, it is still alright, but I still see where I have got limitations, or limits, sorry.

Eugene was confident speaking English 'reasonably well' and he was alert enough to correct himself in-train, retracting 'limitations' for 'limits' as he spoke.

Participants with an Australian partner or spouse

In this section, I will give a brief overview of the participants in this sample who had met an Australian partner prior to or after migrating. Whilst the wider research was a study of friendship, none-the-less many of the participants considered that their partner or spouse was a friend, and they related stories about their intimate relationships during interviews. Indeed, previous research notes that friendship is similar to courtship and marriage, because there is an assumption of commitment that will keep people together, and that there will be increased liking as the relationship progresses (Duck 1977: 16). In this sample, Fiona, who came from

Hong Kong China, and Ignacio who came from Venezuela, both migrated to Australia to be with an Australian partner that they had met via online dating sites. Fiona told me:

> I just decided to give the relationship a go […]. I never considered Australia […] but then I met Tony through [the] Internet. […] He went to China to see me once, then I came back to Australia to see his family, then I went back to Hong Kong to make the decision to come here.

In another case, the Australian partner was met in Australia. Joy, who was from Hong Kong China, had met and married an Australian man following her migration. She described her husband as follows:

> He is patient. He accept[s] what I am like. He knows Chinese people. He is not going to change me. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to get along.

Joy had been married for 25 years when I interviewed her. She elaborated that her relationship with her husband had not always been as harmonious with acrimony in the early years contributing to negative face and her wanting 'a divorce'. However, 'patience' and 'acceptance' were qualities that Joy also described later during her interview as reasons that she and her husband had been able to sustain their marriage in the face of language and cultural differences.

Eugene had met his Australian girlfriend in Sydney. He was emphatic about the special status of a partner as a great friend. When I asked him if his girlfriend was his friend he said:

Yes, definitely. [...] Yeah, you are the best of friends, I hope. [...] Well, it is somebody that you can rely on, it is somebody that you get along with well, it is somebody that hopefully, will try and make you happy, and try and do things that you like.

The qualities that Eugene had described - 'reliability', mutual affinity and happiness - are all qualities that are key to successful ongoing relationships.

Eugene: Barriers of non-native English language to emotional intimacy

In this section, I focus on Eugene as an example to examine how using non-native English can impact on intimate relationships with a native language speaker. As previously noted, language is an important aspect of facework. A theme that emerged from Eugene's interview was the gap between his professional language competency and the emotional language of an intimate relationship. Eugene elaborated on some language difficulties with his new girlfriend:

Cultural differences are, immense, as far as relationship goes, it's not, a man woman interaction [or] the experience [of] my pervious partner who wasn't from my culture, but [...] she spoke my language [French speaker: Quebecoise]. So that made it that bit easier. Now, being with somebody that doesn't speak my language, and has different cultural habits, and expectations, too, I think, as far as relationships go. Just, makes it, just makes it hard, and there is more to work on than there would be in somebody that would speak your language, it would be easier to understand what you are saying and you don't have, you don't look for words. Feelings wise you can express what you feel.

Eugene outlined some of the communication issues that he had encountered, emotionally and practically, when having an intimate relationship with an Australian woman. He directly attributed these differences primarily to language and culture, although he alluded somewhere else in the interview? to the differences between using English in a professional context in contrast to using it with his girlfriend. Eugene focused on needing to use English language as the key factor in his difficulty and reflected that French was a commonality with his previous girlfriend, and even though she was from Quebec and hence as a French Canadian had a different culture, sharing the same native language had made the relationship 'a bit easier' for him to express what he felt.

> I've never been in a situation in an intimate relationship where I couldn't express what I felt. Because I do not have the words, I just do not have them. I have only ever used English for professional purpose, I have been trained for a professional purpose, I have never been trained to say how I feel.. My English is functional, it is not organic… I always have to think what I say. So, it doesn't look very honest when I do this. [...] I have to make sure of what I am saying, I don't understand why they are not taken well, or I don't understand why there is a problem with what I say, that there are things that I say that can be put in a certain way. I had no idea that it could be put this way.

In contrast to his previous girlfriend, Eugene had a different language and culture to his new girlfriend, who he perceived had 'different cultural expectations' about relationships, although he did not elaborate on what these were. Eugene grappled with the difficulty of using English language to sufficiently express his emotions to his girlfriend, and his

frustration was evident in his repetition: 'I do not have the words, I just do not have them'. With no prior experience to draw on, Eugene said: I've never been in a situation in an intimate relationship where I couldn't express what I felt' highlighting his difficulty being spontaneous and maintaining intimacy and face. Eugene perceived that he had greater scope for emotional expression in his own native language when he did not need to apply energy and effort to search for what to say and without the 'work' to 'look for words'.

The tension that Eugene experienced was as a consequence of him migrating to Australia, and being immersed in a situation where the dominant language was English. It is important to iterate that as a skilled migrant, with prior experience living and working in English language countries, Eugene had good English skills. He was therefore surprised at the challenge he faced speaking English in this context.

The public nature of language is only one context where it is used, and Eugene experienced gaps in his proficiency when the context changed to the emotional conversations of an intimate social relationship (Tannen 1986). Hence, on one level this was a linguistic work, that Eugene accounted for by the functional nature of his English language, which he had learnt for 'professional purposes' rather than to be used in an 'intimate relationship'. On a deeper level, Eugene was experiencing the emotional work of enacting a partner relationship in a non-native language and in a different culture, in his words: 'I had no idea that it could be put this way'. Consequently, Eugene had to learn to express his emotions using language that was beyond his previous range of expression. Both types of work added to the effort of his interaction and hence his need to maintain face, because he was unable to speak at the 'unconscious' level. Instead Eugene had to pay attention to what he was saying and how, whilst being attentive to how his girlfriend would receive it (Apte 1985: 188). Eugene and his girlfriend had different assumptions about language and its meanings, adding to his

bafflement that some things were 'not taken well' or the reason that there was sometimes 'a problem' with what he said. Implicit in Eugene's account and his aim to be 'honest' was his desire to build trust with his partner through effective communication, and to express himself with the appropriate degree of authenticity required in that context. Eugene was careful to present himself as honest so that the meta-message of his communication was congruent with his spoken language. In Tannen's (1986) socio-linguistic terms, the meta-message relates to the signals a speaker gives about what is being said via tone, intonation and pace and which generates a level of meaning that is beyond the words themselves. Building relationship trust in the same native language would be less work, as it would not require additional effort.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined a very particular aspect of the personal life of a non-native English-speaking migrant to Australia, which is the ways that language impacts on enacting an intimate relationship. Despite speaking good English, Eugene's experience demonstrates that learnt English did not equip him to use English language for an intimate relationship, as he was not taught emotional expressions. This was because the language that he had learnt had not equipped him with confidence expressing his feelings to his girlfriend. As a consequence, Eugene felt that his sense of positive face was threatened, which was an uncomfortable feeling for him.

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