

# Interculturality in Action at an English Conversation Club in a Thai University: The use of Cultural Differences and Spatial Repertoire/Thai

## ‘Habitat’ Factor in the Management of Interaction

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### Abstract

#### Interculturality in Action at an English Conversation Club in a Thai University

The current investigation explores interculturality by looking at the language practices of a culturally and linguistically diverse group of postgraduate students from China, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand. As members of an English conversation club at a Thai university, they met over a period of seven months to practise their English speaking skills, and in the process started to form close friendly relations.

Methodological inspiration draws from linguistic ethnography, which combines insights from discourse analysis and ethnography in order to account for the contextual boundedness and specificity of findings. Qualitative data consist of audio recordings and transcriptions of naturally occurring data, field notes from participant/non-participant observation, serendipitous interviews and online conversations via the participants’ social networking group.

Fine-grained analysis of the transcribed spoken data provide evidence showing: first, the participants’ use of cultural differences as a malleable, deployable resource to manage the exigencies of the ongoing talk; and second, the important role that the local setting, in this case a university in Thailand, plays in shaping the interaction. It is suggested that the

participants accommodate to local norms and take up linguistic resources available in the place of interaction. This paper will show what social actors actually do with culture rather than what culture is. It is argued that an effective way to capture the otherwise fleeting moments of interculturality-in-action is through a turn-by-turn analysis of naturally occurring data.

*Keywords: Interculturality, Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Ethnography, and Conversation Club*

### บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้สำรวจความแตกต่างระหว่างวัฒนธรรมโดยดูจากการใช้ภาษาของกลุ่มนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาโทที่มีความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมและภาษา จากประเทศ จีน ญี่ปุ่น เวียดนาม ฟิลิปปินส์และไทย

ในฐานะสมาชิกของชมรมสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษที่มหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทย ผู้เข้าร่วมงานวิจัยพบกันเป็นระยะเวลา 7

เดือนเพื่อฝึกฝนทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษและในกระบวนการเริ่มสร้างความสัมพันธ์อันดีที่ใกล้ชิด

แรงบันดาลใจในการเก็บข้อมูลงานวิจัยมาจากชาติพันธุ์วิทยาทางภาษาซึ่งรวมข้อมูลเชิงลึกจากการวิเคราะห์วาทกรรมและชาติพันธุ์

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และบทสนทนาออนไลน์ผ่านกลุ่มเครือข่ายสังคมออนไลน์ของผู้เข้าร่วม

การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลคำพูดที่ถอดความอย่างละเอียดเป็นหลักฐานแสดงให้เห็นว่า ประการแรก

การใช้ความแตกต่างทางวัฒนธรรมของผู้เข้าร่วมเป็นทรัพยากรที่ปรับเปลี่ยนไ

ด้และปรับใช้ได้เพื่อความต่อเนื่องของบทสนทนา และประการที่สอง

บทบาทสำคัญของบริบทที่ทำการศึกษา

ในกรณีนี้คือมหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทยมีบทบาทในการสร้างปฏิสัมพันธ์

ผู้เข้าร่วมปรับใช้ภาษาของบริบทและใช้ทรัพยากรทางภาษาที่มีอยู่ในบริบทสำหรับ การโต้ตอบ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าการสนทนาในทางสังคมส่งผลต่อการสื่อสารต่างวัฒนธรรมมากกว่ามุ่งเน้นว่าวัฒนธรรมคืออะไร

เป็นที่ถกเถียงกันว่าวิธีที่มีประสิทธิภาพในการศึกษาการสนทนาระหว่างวัฒนธรรมคือการวิเคราะห์แบบต่อเนื่องของข้อมูล

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## 1. Introduction

This over-arching aim of this this ethnographically informed study is to explore how a group of international students from diverse backgrounds *do* interculturality through talk-in-interaction. Specifically, ‘what communicative strategies and resources do they use?’ and ‘how does the setting or place influence the ongoing interaction?’ This particular group consists of postgraduate students at a Thai University. They come from Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, China and the Philippines. Using excerpts from naturally occurring conversations, collected via participant and non-participant observation with audio recording, we show how the group members navigate between treating each other as representatives of their ‘solid’ national culture (Dervin & Dirba, 2006) to demonstrating the ‘liquidity’ (ibid) of their cultural identity, which highlights the discursive, moment-to-moment construction of social relations (Hansen, 2005; Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Moerman, 1993). Despite what might seem like the presupposition of a binary ‘solid-liquid’ relationship this study is really about ‘activating the hyphen’ (Humphrey, 2007). It is proposed that the hyphen is located in the middle of the interaction between speakers. In other words, the analytic focus is not the individual but the *inter* between individuals.

Interculturality has been conceptualised as that ‘capacious space of unfolding interactions across lines of difference’ (Rowe, 2010, p. 216). This malleable site of encounter gets created when *individuals* from different sociocultural contexts (national, ethnic, gender, etc.) negotiate intersubjectivities, make meaning and construct or collapse identities to suit the goals of the interaction. In this intercultural space, individuals may draw from their preconceived notions of the Other and oscillate between imagined stereotypes and newly constructed ways of knowing and thinking based on specific personalized experiences with said Other. We adopt an interculturality paradigm which acknowledges that our participants belong to multiple and overlapping categories and that that sociocultural differences are discursively constructed, negotiated and made relevant (or not). As Hua argues, “being

‘culturally different’ is a socially constructed phenomenon and needs to be studied through a fine-grained analysis of interaction on a case-by-case basis” (Hua, 2011, p. 259).

Following Liddicoat (2015), we take interculturality to involve the creation of ‘intermediary positions’ between speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These intermediary points, captured via audiorecordings and then transcribed, enable us to make visible how individuals use language to perform interculturality. We return to this point in the analysis section to illustrate how cultural differences are discursively blurred and used as a resource for emphasising similarities.

In today’s highly interconnected and multicultural world, English has been the undisputed global lingua franca (Galloway & Rose, 2015). Indeed, the participants in this study who are members of the Conversation Club, recognize the value of improving their English language skills. Numerous studies on the use linguistic aspects of English as a common language for speakers of other languages have been conducted. However, what has been neglected is the intercultural nature of the contexts (Holmes & Dervin, 2016). Given that English is arguably the most common medium of intercultural communication, it is concerning that the intercultural aspect of the lingua franca encounters have not received the scholarly attention it deserves, “and that where it has been discussed it has often been marginalised and misrepresented” (Baker, 2018, p. 26). This is the gap that that this study aims to fill.

We stated at the outset that we intend to show how our linguistically and culturally diverse participants *do* interculturality through talk. In order to systematically accomplish this, we have structured this article as follows: first, we discuss our view of what it means to analyse language in interaction to with the aim of unpacking interculturality through talk. We argue that shining the spotlight on to the discursive spaces between interlocutors can add insights into our understanding of intercultural encounters; and then, given the importance of contextualised interpretation, we describe the research setting and provide some background about the English Conversation club and how the data were collected. We then present themes that emerged from the data through the analysis of transcribed excerpts. In the excerpts, we highlight how speakers use cultural differences as an interactional resource and how they draw from their spatial repertoire of being in Thailand to negotiate interactional norms. Finally, we argue for the importance of further research and present three

recommendations for theoretical and methodological consideration for those interested in conducting further investigation. We emphasise the utility of using naturalistic spoken data (data not elicited by the researcher) as the focal point of contextually-sensitive linguistic analysis to capture the discursive spaces between speakers.

## 2. Analysing Language-in-Interaction-in-Context

It has been claimed that language is the ‘repository of culture’ and a ‘tool by which culture is created’ (Hall, 2012, p. 19). Thus, an analysis of spoken language is in part an analysis of culture. An investigation then of discourse between two or more individuals becomes an opportune site for studying the in-between, the *interculture*, which some scholars refer to as ‘third space’ or ‘intermediary points’ (Liddicoat, 2015, p. 3). We take discourse analysis as the study of language in action in specific contexts (Cameron, 2001). Taking a sociocultural position, we suggest that in order to unpack the ‘dynamic, vital and emergent’ aspects of culture, it is important to direct our gaze towards the ‘discursive spaces between individuals’ (Hall, 2012, p. 17).

Discourse Analysis is better viewed as a field of research rather than a single practice as it encompasses various strands, each describing different types of disciplinary alliances and utilizing different types of data as the focus of inquiry (Antaki et al., 2003). The methodological orientation adopted here draws from linguistic ethnography which combines analyst-imposed categories of text analysis provided by linguistics, with self-reflexive insights and sensitivity to context provided by ethnography (Tusting & Maybin, 2007). The analytical process employed in this paper borrows insights from Conversation Analysis (CA) in its use of naturally occurring data and the attention it pays to the turn-taking machinery of the normally taken for granted, mundane interactions (Egins & Slade, 1997). Its meticulous attention to the micro-structural aspects of talk enables the analyst to explicate the unspoken rules of turn-taking giving us a view of how interlocutors organise their talk-in-interaction (Sacks et al., 1974).

CA’s object of inquiry is the ‘here and now’, thus context includes only what is evident and relevant as revealed through talk. Indeed, most CA practitioners focus on the meticulously transcribed talk and refrain from making inferences about what people are thinking. They are also less inclined to interview participants about their thoughts and feelings about a

particular stretch of talk (P. Baker & Ellece, 2011). This is our point of departure from a purely CA approach. In our own investigation of the conversation club data, we found it very limiting to centre the analysis only on what speakers make salient through talk. We are also interested in what speakers think about what they or other people say. In addition to the transcription of audiorecordings, we also used informal member elicitation interviews (Gumperz, 1982) to supplement our interpretation. Thus, in addition to observation with audio recording, we conducted serendipitous and opportunistic interviews with the participants. This is where the ‘ethnography’ in ‘linguistic ethnography’ as our chosen methodology plays a useful part. It enables the researcher to provide a contextualised interpretation not only based on what was experienced in the field but also based on what speakers think about a particular utterance. It has been claimed that a weakness of a purely CA approach as it applies to our data collected over a number weeks, is its ‘limited ability to deal with complete, sustained interactions’ (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 32). And while it provides us with a ‘powerful interpretation of conversation as a dynamic interactive achievement, it is unable to say just what kind of achievement it is’ (ibid). For the sake of disciplinary clarity and out of respect for those who adhere strictly to the theoretical and methodological principles of CA we adopt the term contextually informed linguistic analysis in exploring our data.

### **3. Research Context**

The setting was an English conversation club at a Thai university consisting of seven postgraduate students, between 25 and 35 years old. They come from Japan, China, Philippines, Vietnam (3 of the 7 participants) and Thailand. As members of the university’s postgraduate community, the students were already somewhat acquainted with each other before they joined the English conversation club. It is through the weekly meetings that they got to know each other better. They met at least once a week over a period of 28 weeks, each session lasting between one to two hours. In addition, they socialised during events that they themselves organised such as going to English-language movies, having meals together at Thai restaurants of their choice, and visiting areas of interests in the province such as a floating market not far from the university.

Attendance and participation in the conversation club were voluntary. The members cited wanting to improve their spoken English as the main reason for joining. As one of the

participants said, 'we need to practise English used in real-life, not classroom English.' The members believed that when they go back to their home countries after their studies, they might not have as many opportunities to speak English.

The topics during the weekly sessions were not pre-set; they were subject to on-going negotiation by the members. One of the researchers, who was teaching at the university at the time of the data collection, attended all the conversational club meetings. Her role was to act as a resource person and to make arrangements with the university regarding access to meeting rooms. Before the start of the data collection, it was envisioned that a non-participant approach would be adopted. This would involve sitting somewhere inconspicuously in the background while the students go about their activity. But being a passive observer proved to be difficult to sustain as the participants sometimes tried to include the observing researcher in their conversations especially when they did not know some words in English.

It was initially planned to video record the interactions, however, some students felt that the presence of the camera would make them feel self-conscious. They agreed to our use of audiorecording since it was seen as less intrusive. Admittedly, although the researchers' presence in the room and corresponding observation notes provided rich contextual information, they cannot compensate for the level of detail that video recording might have offered. But since the study is not designed to generate a multimodal type of analysis, observation with audiorecording was 'good enough for the purpose at hand' (Cameron 2001, p. 39). The conversations in the first few meetings were not audiorecorded to give members a chance to feel comfortable with each other and with me without the intrusiveness of a digital recorder. Conversations during the social events outside of the university were also not recorded for pragmatic reasons. The noise level in restaurants and outdoor markets where the events took place makes for less than ideal situation in collecting audio data.

The themes that emerged from the data analysed herein were based on 22 hours of audiorecorded naturalistic talk transcribed in its entirety by one of the members of the conversational club. Having someone who was familiar with the different accents of the members and who had in-group knowledge of context was deemed important in the transcription process. While the member did the rough-and-ready transcription, we



transcribed the audiorecordings in detail after listening to the interactions iteratively. We then applied the transcription conventions indicated in Appendix 1 as part of the analytic process.

Due to the detailed nature of the transcriptions as well as the challenge of transcribing multi-party interactions, it took about six to seven hours of transcription per hour of data. This translates into more than 150 hours of iterative listening and transcribing. To facilitate detailed analysis, transcription software called Express Scribe was used. Express Scribe enabled the researchers to ‘bookmark’ themes which the participants discursively flagged up as salient to the interaction. Thus, instead of the widely accepted practice of ‘memoing’ (Birks et al., 2008) we deployed ‘bookmarking’ of the audio data. This process allowed the analysts to overcome the mediating effect of the written transcript. The audio bookmarks were then compared to the written transcription to ensure that the bookmarks and themes (or codes) correspond.

Due to space limitations, only four extracts are analysed in this paper. They are illustrative examples of the two overarching strategies used by participants to manage interaction: using cultural differences as a resource and deploying spatial repertoire/drawing from the Thai ‘habitat’ factor. It can be argued that the conversation club members’ heightened awareness of the potential for misunderstanding, owing to their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, influenced them to preserve harmonious relations (Mauranen, 2006).

#### **4. Themes that Emerged from Data**

In this section, we present and analyse illustrative examples of salient themes that emerged from the talks-in-interaction. Divided into two parts, part 1 consists of one long extract illustrating how speakers deploy culture as a malleable conversational resource. While culture permeates the about-ness of the talk, it is really what they do with it that makes it worthy of analysis; part 2 consists of three extracts that point to the importance of place and context in the study of interculturality.

#### 4.1 Part 1 Cultural Differences as Interactional Resource

The prefix ‘inter’ in interculturality immediately evokes a sense of liminality, of being in-between two or more cultures. ‘Inter’ is relatively unproblematic until we try to grapple with ‘culture’. Indeed our conceptualization of culture has serious implications in our understanding of interculturality (Liddicoat, 2015). From a macro level perspective, individuals are seen as passive bearers of a stable set of characteristics and identities that they share with a group of people. This is closely associated with a ‘solid’ approach to interculturality which refers to ‘descriptions of national features imposed on all the representatives of the country by others – or even by themselves’ (Dervin & Dirba, 2006:259). In this reified view of culture, an individual is seen as ‘little more than an instance of the group’ (Liddicoat, 2015, p. 2). A constructivist view, on the other hand, sees culture as a process, always dynamic and in flux (Angouri, 2010) and thus resonates with a ‘liquid’ approach that treats ‘any encounter to be based on *liquid individuals* rather than solid representatives of *cultures* (Dervin & Dirba, 2006, p. 260). In any form of social interaction, speakers constantly navigate between evoking the solid aspects of each other’s identity—pigeonholing each other as representatives of their national culture (Dervin, 2016) – to exercising their individual agency to foreground a liquid, diverse self reacting to the immediate goals of the interaction. It can be said therefore that a person’s manifested behaviour in intercultural communication or interculturality is informed by their fuzzy view of culture as a durable entity and ‘the momentary contingencies’ of the ongoing talk (Moerman, 1993, p.87). They might use the solidity of nationality as an interactional resource and a heuristic device for various reasons such as foregrounding a particular identity (Holliday, 2010a; Liddicoat, 2015) or performing sociality.

While recognizing the need to tread lightly in the muddled waters of ‘national’ culture because of the political and ideological baggage that it carries, this investigation forced us to re-examine our own notion of national culture. Data analysis indicates the importance of recognizing the ‘integrating capacity’ of a nation—of shared history, language, conventionally accepted practices and ways of meaning-making (Rozbicki, 2015, p.11). As Holliday (2010b) states, national culture can be valuable if used heuristically to increase our understanding of the complex interplay between individual agency and structures within society. Furthermore, as the examples in the data illustrate, cultures can be used as a deployable resource (Dervin,

2011). Indeed, individuals sometimes “draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others” (Young & Sercombe, 2010, p. 181).

It has been claimed that there tends to be a ‘differential bias’ in intercultural interactions, that is being different from others is celebrated whereas sharing similarities is obscured (Dervin, 2016, p. 35). The extract below shows a more fluid relationship between similarities and differences.

**Extract 1: Differences between cultures**

- 1 Ha There are differences ermmm between cultures erm  
among countries
- 2 Luli erm, oh YES, yes!
- 3 Ha It’s very interesting, yeah very interesting
- 4 Luli Cultures, okay, maybe we can just talk about cultures, cultures
- 5 R<sup>12</sup> Yeah yeah
- 6 Luli well our culture is like erm (.02) yeah (?) FESTIVALS!
- 7 All (unclear multi-party talk)
- 8 Luli I know Vietnam have their own (?) New Year festivals
- 9 called (Tet?) festival//
- 10 Ha //Yeah, festival, new year Vietnam the same China//
- 11 Luli //Ah the SAME in China! Alright so we have the
- 12 spring festivals from the New Year, New Year is different from the year
- 13 it’s NOT the first day of the January//
- 14 Ha // Oh! WE have the SAME! (sounds very excited)
- 15 Luli // yes, it depends on the calendar of the Chinese tradition, [yes (laughs)]
- 16 Ha [
- (laughs)]

Ha, from Vietnam, began her utterance by saying there are differences between cultures (line 1). She then self-corrects and recasts ‘culture’ as ‘among countries’ giving an indication that

her notion of culture is tied to a geographic location or country. Luli ratified the suggested topic (line 2). In line 6, she uses the phrase ‘our culture’ which resonates with a solid notion of culture as something that can be possessed. ‘Our’ also suggests exclusion of the others and yet in lines 8 and 9, Luli pulls Ha back into the conversation by signaling knowledge of Vietnamese New Year. Lines 10 to 16 show Ha, and Luli seeming to take delight in knowing that the Vietnamese and the Chinese New Year are ‘the same’ in that they are not celebrated on the first day of January. Indeed, it can be said that ‘Individuals select cultural information according to their interests and the vicissitudes of the situation’ (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006: 475).

Luli’s and Ha’s ‘show of knowledge’ (Schegloff, 1972, p. 93) about each other’s New Year practices can be interpreted similar to Schegloff’s (1972) use of place formulations in discourse analysis. It is argued that talking about a place familiar to both speakers is a way to manage community membership. Put another way, after displaying common knowledge with regards to New Year celebrations, the speakers managed to establish intermediary points.

Luli uses the shared laughter (lines 15, 16) as ‘topic flow manoeuvring’ device ((McKinlay & McVittie, 2006:811) as she ‘apportions’ the conversational floor to Jib.

- 17. Luli and erm (.) Thai? (directs eye gaze towards Jib)
- 18. Jib my New Year is um, we call Songkran//
- 19. All Ohhh SONGKRAN! (animated voices, multiple overlaps?)
- 20. Jib Songkran festival, because of mid-April will be like summer, because summer,
- 21. because like mid-April is of course summer, erm, Songkran like a play of water
- 22. and like erm to reduce the hot weather, something like that.

Line 17 suggests an other-directed quality of Luli’s floor apportionment to Jib, the Thai member of the group, treating her as legitimately entitled to the next turn (McKinlay & McVittie, 2006) by virtue of her Thai-ness. In line 18, Jib starts from a position of ‘difference’ by qualifying New Year as ‘my New Year’. She continues in lines (lines 20 to 22) saying that it is in mid-April. Why this information now? Although she seems to be emphasizing difference—her New Year, being unlike Ha’s and Luli’s New Year in the spring—she is actually maintaining cohesion in discourse. The two previous speakers already made the

‘when’ as relevant when they said that their New Year is not the first day of January. Jib adheres to this design and cooperates with topic development.

Continuing the discussion on Songkran, Luli asks (line 25) if others ‘criticise’ to play waters, wondering if there might be those against ‘wasting’ water during the Songkran holidays to which Jib says ‘no::’ (line 26).

- 23     Luli     ahh, yes. so in Songkran we can play waters, (laughs)  
24             and is that any others (.)- others erm others  
25             others criticize to play waters (.) others you know,  
26     Jib       no::

When Jib gives Luli a dispreferred response ‘no::’ in line 26, Luli, immediately switches to the topic of special food (line 27) to which Ha seems to agree with. As stated by Holtgraves (2002, p. 98), ‘If there are indications that the next turn is dispreferred, then the current speaker can quickly change an utterance before it is completed.’ we suggest that the line of questioning that followed the dispreferred response (line 26) signals a search for commonality. This interpretation is defensible as the next turns of talk unfold:

27.     Luli     is there any special food?//  
28     Ha       //yes, food! [in this time]  
29     Jib                             [food?]  
30     Luli     yes, in this festival?  
31     Jib     I am not sure, (.) yes, yes, yes because- but I think (.) erm it’s not special-  
32             but some food, but we have make a lot of food to prepare for erm all relative  
because  
33             we will (.) have come together like erm to say hello together (.) all relative.  
34     Ha       ahh, it’s meant many just prepare more food a lot of food in this time for  
(family?)  
35             relationship and time together//

- 36 Luli //RELATIONSHIP!
- 37 Jib because we will, like you, stay at the different country or different province
- 38 you want to come and enjoy with y-your relative uhuh
- 39 Luli oh yes! (laughs) prepare food to take to relatives, right? (.)
- 40 Ha (laughs)
- 41 Luli that's good erm (laughs) because in New Year we have this special food  
(laughs)
- 42 Ha erm, yes the same!  
[...]

Lines 27 to 42 show how the speakers from China, Vietnam and Thailand seemed to be attuned to finding points of commonality rather than highlighting differences. Thailand's Songkran practice is very different from China's and Vietnam's in that it takes place in April and there are some unique customs, including pouring special water by younger family members onto the palms of older family members, and splashing water to unsuspecting passersby and tourists. However, through a series of 'hunt for intermediary points' questions, the differences become less visible and the similarities are celebrated. In line 37, Jib uses 'like you' to indicate that Thai practices are similar to the Vietnamese and the Chinese with family members coming from different parts of the country or province to spend time together. In line 42, Ha, makes relevant the fact that the custom is 'the same!' in Vietnam.

The lengthy stretch of discourse in part 1 is characterised by a quality of 'joint celebration' (Aston, 1993, p. 240) in that the speakers' awareness of their differences 'allow[s] the relatively everyday to be treated as extraordinary' (ibid). Put another way, the talk illustrates how cultural difference can be used as a resource for accomplishing interactional goals (Hansen, 2005; Mori, 2010), in this case the maintenance of friendly relations. Indeed, it has been argued that the use of language by the speakers from different cultural backgrounds can be viewed as 'primarily an act of sociality: that is it is not simply the case that information is transferred from one participant to another, but rather language is used to create and maintain social relationships' (Liddicoat, 2009, p. 116).

## 4.2 Part 2 Spatial Repertoire and the Thai ‘Habitat’ Factor

The mutually constituting relationship between the physical setting and language has long been acknowledged by scholars of language and culture. Speakers automatically use different sets communication conventions in different places such as the church, the workplace and at home. The linguistic resources available at the disposal of the speakers physically situated in a particular place has been referred to as ‘spatial repertoires’(Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014). The influence of place as realized in language is also taken up by Pözl and Seidlhofer (Pözl & Seidlhofer, 2006) in their notion of ‘habitat factor’. It has been posited that speakers are more likely to use their culturally learnt ways of communicating when interacting in their natural habitat, whereas, those who find themselves in an alien environment, outside of their natural habitat, are more likely to accommodate to the norms of the local setting (ibid). Indeed, human geography scholars have also fruitfully theorized the link between geographically placed self in relation to identity, language and habitus (Campelo et al., 2014; Casey, 2001; Johnstone, 2010).

The extracts in this section illustrate how the speakers from China, Vietnam, and Japan accommodate to Thai social and linguistic practices. The transcribed data collected at a Thai university show how the international students create an intermediary space that harmonizes transgressions and differing linguistic and cultural repertoires. It is suggested that the uncertainty regarding which social norms apply in the interaction, dispose the participants to accommodate to local norms in their chosen habitat, Thailand.

The examples below illustrate the ways in which the conversation club members use the spatial repertoires provided by their ‘not so alien’ habitat.

### Extract 2 Pii (พี่) and Nong (น้อง)

Prior to the exchange below, Luli had introduced her friend Fai, also from China, to the conversation club members. Fai was just visiting for the day. Typical of the discourse that characterize the interaction of unacquainted speakers (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984), the conversation club members asked the guest ‘category-activity sequence questions’ which are designed to elicit the types of activities that the person are engaged in related to their ‘categorization’ or ‘membership’ device as a student (Sacks, 1972). Once it has become clear

that they all belonged to the category of postgraduate, international students, one challenge remained: how to address the visitor. The local custom regarding honorifics dictates that *Pii* (plus first name) be used to address older people and *Nong* (plus first name) to address someone younger. The extracts below show how terms of address are negotiated:

- 188 Huri Pii, erm erm (.) right? (gaze directed towards Fai)
- 189 Fai (laughs) If you call a girl a Pii. I think she must – must be
- 190 angry with you [(laughs)]
- 191 Luli [this is Thailand, it's okay (laughs)]
- 192 Fai you should call her Nong!//
- 193 Luli //Nong (corrects Fai's pronunciation)//
- 194 Fai //Nong (repeats the word//
- 195 Jib //Nong (corrects pronunciation)//
- 196 Luli //Oh, (.) Nong! (imitates Jib's pronunciation), sister,
- 197 Huri it's similar, the Thai culture is very similar to
- 198 Japanese culture so like//
- 199 Luli // really?
- 200 Fai So (.) Pii Huri (laughs)//
- 201 Huri //NO::, I'm YOUNGER than you (laughs)
- 203 All (laugh)
- 204 Huri Chai, chai (ไช้). I'm younger, so it's easy to understand. (.03)

In line 188, Huri's hesitation markers (erm, erm) and a brief pause show a degree of uncertainty as to his estimation of age. This indicates a 'tentative process of other-discovery'



and his confirmatory question is designed to reduce the uncertainty of the interaction (Nao, 2015:197). Fai's reply makes explicit that girls would be annoyed if they are addressed as *Pii* because it would mean they are older, so she teases Huri and advises him to use *Nong* to flatter the opposite sex.

The importance of pronouncing the Thai term of address is made salient by Luli who corrects Fai's pronunciation (line 193). Jib further corrects Luli's pronunciation (line 195). As the native speaker of Thai, Jib is obviously seen as having the final say by virtue of her Thai-ness. This part of the exchange clearly instantiates 'habitat factor' showing Luli and Fai, both Chinese, accommodating to the local context and deferring to the Thai member as possessing expert knowledge.

Fai teases Huri in line 200, 'so Pii Huri' to which Huri disagreed (line 201) because he is younger than Fai. Huri stakes his claim as an authority in this particular practice in lines 197 to 198 stating that Japanese culture is similar to Thai. This interpretation is supported by his utterance in line 204 using 'chai-chai' (ไช้), thus performing Thai-ness. It can also be argued that his use of 'chai-chai' can be seen as a backchannel device to manage rapport. But why would a Japanese speaker, talking to a Mandarin speaker use a Thai expression in an English-only environment<sup>3</sup>. When asked, Huri said he often used Thai phrases 'to create unity' within the group. This appeal for 'unity', we posit, comes from a sense of insecurity in terms of which norms to apply thus the need to create an impromptu 'habitat' or space that would allow for the negotiation of diverse practices. The accommodation to Thai social practices and linguistic resources reflect the deeply bounded relationship between the spatial repertoires available in the current habitat and the linguistic inventories that individuals carry with them (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014). The next extract also deals with the theme of *Pii* and *Nong*, arguably an important aspect of social interaction amongst the participants.

### **Extract 3 How old are you?**

21 Huri How old are you?

22 Jib (laughs) NOT a good question (.2) I'm always eighteen (giggles). (.)

- 23 I will tell you, twenty-eight.
- 24 Huri Arai na? (อะไรนะ) ( I beg your pardon?)
- 25 Luli Yii sip pet! (ยี่สิบแปด twenty eight)
- 26 Huri Pi::i! (laughs)
- 27 Jib and how about you, Huri (smiles)
- 28 Ha Thirty! (in a jokey tone)
- 29 Huri Oka::y, guess, (.3)
- 30 Ha Thirty-eight (laughs)
- 31 Huri (turns gaze towards Luli) you know?
- 32 Luli No::oo? (.) Yii sip ha (ยี่สิบห้า twenty-five?)
- 33 Jib Twenty-four?
- 34 Huri Yeah, I'm youngest.
- 35 All Laughter (simultaneous talk)
- 36 Jib You feel better? (jokey tone)
- 37 Huri Everybody, call me Pii Huri! Pii Huri! (laughs)

The conversation above is another instantiation of how the Thai 'habitat factor' is manifested in talk as the speakers negotiate terms of address. What is also very observable apart from the talk about address terms and the use of Thai expressions (lines 24, 25 and 32) is the playfulness that accompanies the exchange. The teasing that the speakers engage in while negotiating a particular Thai practice suggest that they are not just trying to reproduce a static cultural practice but using it as a resource to establish friendly relations.

Not to be overlooked in extracts 2 and 3 is how the female speakers, Fai, from China in extract 2 and Jib, a native Thai, both lightly reprimand Huri. They seem to suggest that

‘gender trumps cultural norms’, that is, women want to be seen as looking younger than their biological age. Thus, it is better to address them as *Nong* rather than *Pii*.

### Extract 3 Sabai-sabai (สบายสบาย)

- 9 Huri Don't be serious, sabai-sabai! (take it easy, relax)  
10 Luli No::  
11 All Sabai-sabai (laugh) (.)  
12 Luli MAI sabai (laughs)//  
13 Huri // (laughs) Why (.) MAI sabai,  
14 Luli Yes//  
15 R What's 'why' in Thai?  
16 Luli T'mai (ทำไม) (why)  
17 R T'mai  
18 Luli Ah (.) T'mai mai 'sabai'? //(addressing Huri)  
19 Huri T'mai mai sabai ?  
20 R Yeah, t'mai mai sabai  
21 Luli (laughs) so we are switch to Thai?  
22 All (laugh)

Luli had expressed worries about the writing of her master's thesis. So, Huri tells her to be 'sabai-sabai' (line 9). Sabai-sabai connotes a feeling of being happy, relaxed, comfortable and tranquil all at the same time. In the current context used, it means to 'chill', 'take it easy' or 'to not be serious'. Sabai-sabai is often associated with the Thai way of life, of having a calm attitude about things. Thus in essence Huri has advised Luli to adopt a Thai outlook. I participated in the exchange (line 15) by asking how to say 'why' in Thai so I could ask Luli why she was not 'sabai-sabai' (line 20). In line 21, she tries to deflect answering the question by asking why the switch to Thai (line 21). Noticing her hesitation, the researcher (R) did not pursue the topic, neither did Huri.

How can the use of Thai language between a Japanese and a Chinese native speaker in an English-as-a lingua franca environment be interpreted? Could it be a case of translanguaging

(Creese & Blackledge, 2015), or poly languaging (Jørgensen et al., 2011) ? Arguably, different lenses can be used to analyse the above exchange but my focus, following Pennycook and Otsuji (2014) is not the ‘plurality of linguistic features (poly) or the movement between languages (trans)’ (p.164). What is more interesting is the conversation club members’ inclination to defer to local language and practices to negotiate rules of intercultural relations. *Pii*, *nong* and *sabai-sabai* should not be interpreted as Thai terms surrounded by English words. The way they have been used by the speakers directly point to structuring social relations and adopting a world view.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored how a group of postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds discursively construct interculturality. A fine-grained, turn by turn analysis of spoken discourse illuminates two important aspects of interculturality. Part 1 illustrates how ‘national’ cultural differences in terms of festivals, food and religious celebrations were deployed as an effective resource for bringing about similarities. The participants made salient their subjective conceptualization of culture as a heuristic device—initially focusing on differences and separateness and then blurring these later to manifest connectedness (Bardhan & Sobré-Denton, 2015). There is a palpable recognition of identity tied to one’s own cultural practices; at the same time, there is the discursive construction of relational identity since the participants are all postgraduate students and learners of English (Victoria, 2014). In part 2, the data extracts show how the participants take up Thai cultural and linguistic affordances to negotiate and establish norms of social relations, signal group membership and foster moments of sociality. The data reflect the intertwined relationship between linguistic resources and place. This human-habitat connection is manifested in the manner that the members used Thailand as the default guideline for structuring relations. It can therefore be concluded that the process of ‘interculture’, while emergent and fluid, is also bound by the *where* of the interaction. Through the intercultural communication, the agentive social actors transform the group culture and are transformed by it (Bardhan & Sobré-Denton, 2015). By engaging in the ‘inter’, the participants are ‘in turn reconstituted through their exchange’ (Rowe, 2010, p. 216).

At this point, our positionality as researchers and analysts need to be addressed. How do we account for the validity of interpretation? While recognizing that multiple interpretations are possible, they are not equally plausible; one is not as ‘good’ as the other. One of the researchers was always present in all the conversation club meetings. Her ‘being there’ enabled us to offer interpretations that are grounded in rich contextual knowledge and histories of interactions. Having been part of the conversation club from the first to the last day gave her an opportune vantage point to observe the development of relationships between participants. Every attempt has been made to support our interpretation based on evidence from what the participants do, not only what they say. For example, extracts 1 and 2 show the members discussing the importance of Thai honorifics *Pii* and *Nong*. Our observation of their interaction supports this analysis as the participants do address each other as either *Pii* or *Nong* (+first name) outside the conversation club meetings.

In this study we deployed the interculturality paradigm as a lens that enabled us to view the participants as individuals who use language strategically to construct and negotiate the interaction. We used fine-grained linguistic analysis to show that being culturally different or similar is a socially constructed phenomenon and is realized through talk (Hua, 2011). The interculturality perspective showed us how social actors used the resources and processes a familiar culture, in this case the Thai culture, although is not typically associated with their own national culture (Young & Sercombe, 2010). The findings will be useful to those who are interested in intercultural communication, students, teachers and researchers in particular. The study departs from the essentialist notion of culture that fixes individuals into boxed categories of nation. Put simply, the findings can be useful to any business or organisation where cultural and linguistic diversity is the norm.

Drawing from the researchers’ experience in conducting this specific study, we end with a recommendation for theoretical and methodological considerations below.

- **Participant observation.** Being embedded in the research setting and interacting with the participants give investigators a vantage point to closely observe the unfolding encounters. Furthermore, the interpretation is closely tied to an intimate knowledge of the context.

- **Naturally occurring data.** The social and co-constructed nature of interculturality is best revealed through data that are not elicited by the researcher. Naturalistic interactions between speakers allow for the examination of what interlocutors *actually do* as opposed to what *they think or say they do*, which might be the case in elicited data collection methods such as interviews or focus groups.
- **Discourse Analysis.** We acknowledge that there are different forms of discourse analysis and the type used by the investigator will depend on aims of the study. Nevertheless, we posit that the analysis of language used by the speakers should be fine-grained enough to account for the unfolding social interaction.

We would like to emphasise the context-specific nature of the findings. It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate what themes will be salient had the participants all been native English speakers and Thais or East Asians and only Thais. Thus, it is fitting to conclude by making a plea for further investigation into researching intercultural contexts not only to illuminate our notion of interculturality but also to see the interplay of multiple cultural identities that take into account gender, social class background, age and religion.

## Appendix 1 Transcription Conventions

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| (.)   | a brief pause  |
| (3.0) | number in parenthesis indicate timed pause in seconds            |
| .     | falling intonation at end of tone unit                           |
| ?     | high rising intonation at end of tone unit                       |
| ,     | slightly rising intonation at end of tone unit                   |
| !     | animated intonation  |
| -     | unfinished utterance, e.g., false start, self-correction         |
| WORD  | Words written in capitals to indicate emphatic stress: e.g. VERY |
| xxx   | unintelligible text  |

(word?) guess at unclear text: e.g. I (apologise?) for the delay in shipment

::                   noticeable lengthening of a vowel

A:           o::h, I'm sorry. [words]

[words] simultaneous speech indicated in brackets: e.g.

A:           mm// Did you [read the reJibt]

B:                               [didn't have the] time

//                   latching, no perceptible pause after a turn

A:           I'm going to be late //

B           // me too

(laughs)description of current action, transcriber's comments

[...]               some text has been deleted

Italics           foreign language are written in italics, e.g. mahal kita

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