

## Power Play in Negotiation Interaction

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### Abstract

This paper examines power play through an analysis of language use in business negotiations. Speech acts and discourse strategies for negotiating, specifically for the act of demanding, are examined in a negotiation meeting between a Malay and a Japanese. Discourse norms and cultural orientations of the negotiating parties with specific reference to Malays are described. The interplay of power and politeness was characteristic of the Malay interacting pattern. Although power played an important role in forwarding a demand, politeness emerged as an essential tool in its quality to foster attitudes necessary for successful negotiation. The implications address politeness as a key-negotiating device, and the Malay interacting pattern as an asset in international negotiations.

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สำรวจการแสดงอำนาจในการเจรจาทางธุรกิจโดยการวิเคราะห์ภาษาที่ใช้ในการเจรจาธุรกิจ ในการนี้บทความได้บรรยายถึงบรรทัดฐานของการใช้ภาษาและกรอบของวัฒนธรรมในบริบทของคนมาเลย์ แม้การแสดงอำนาจจะมีบทบาทสำคัญในการตั้งข้อเรียกร้อง แต่ความสุภาพก็เป็นเครื่องมือสำคัญที่จำเป็นต้องมีในการเจรจาที่จะประสบความสำเร็จ ผลการศึกษาแสดงว่าความสุภาพเป็นกลไกสำคัญในการเจรจาและรูปแบบปฏิสัมพันธ์แบบมาเลย์เป็นสิ่งที่มีความสำคัญในการเจรจาระดับนานาชาติ

## Introduction

This paper examines the exercise of power in negotiation interaction through an analysis of language use. Through an investigation of speech acts and discourse strategies employed for advancing a demand this study displays how power is played out in the interactions, and the effect it has on the outcome of the interactions. Implications are then drawn for negotiation in general, and in the Malaysian context in particular.

## The case-study

The research is limited to one case-study, i.e. a business negotiation between a Malaysian institution (University Business Centre, University Putra Malaysia, referred to hereafter as UBC and UPM respectively) and a Japanese company (referred to as XY). XY approached UPM with a proposal for joint venture which had to do with drug discovery where UPM was to supply agricultural resources to XY, who would then supply these resources to pharmaceutical companies in Japan for research and development in order to gauge potential ones for drug development. The venture therefore mainly entailed supply of agricultural resources by UPM to XY, whose function was as intermediary between UPM and pharmaceutical companies in Japan. The key negotiators were A1, on the side of UPM, who is Malay male 50-55 years of age, and B1 representing XY, a Japanese male in the age bracket of 30-35.

There were differences in the power positions of the two parties involved. The more dominant party was UBC and the subordinate party, XY. The power difference can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, UPM is a large and established tertiary institution in the country, backed with thirty years of experience in agricultural research. It is as such able to command more power, and especially so in the area of agricultural and pharmaceutical research, than a medium-sized company, with only about ten years of existence. Secondly, since it was XY that approached UBC with a business proposition, XY was in a more vulnerable position than UBC, as it looked to UBC for the approval and acceptance of its proposal. Thirdly, since the business negotiation meeting was held at UPM, its officers played the role of hosts while the XY officers were visitors. As hosts, UPM officers had certain rights and obligations, which placed them in a more dominant position. They could, for example, interrupt the meeting when food and drinks were served. The XY officers, on the other hand, were in their host's territory and could be expected to orient themselves towards this role as well.

## **Research Design and Framework for analysis**

The research is qualitative in nature and involves discourse analysis as the research method. Primary data was in three negotiation meetings between the parties involved while interview data was used for additional insights and interpretations of the findings from the main data. The framework employed for discourse analysis entailed an eclectic approach. Locher's (2004) framework for the nature and exercise of power was used for the identification and analysis of power in the speech data. In Locher's framework power is identified mainly in the combination of clashes of interests between participants and restrictions in their action-environments. This framework is suitable for the purposes of this study because it incorporates features of power that are pertinent for the examination of power in the research. Primarily this involves power as entailing a conflict of interests since conflict in interests is the basis for negotiating activity. Other features in the framework that are equally important are power as action-restrictive, power as situated within a context, power as dynamic and entailing a freedom of action, and politeness as a redressive tool for the exercise of power.

Politeness was found to be a significant feature in the dynamics of power play in the study, and as such warranted a framework for its analysis, for which Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness as face-management was utilized. This approach to politeness was adopted mainly because it addresses conflict and the role of politeness as a strategy to offset conflict. This is suitable for this study because negotiation at its core entails conflict in the form of disagreements or clashes in interests. Interactants are in conflict on a content level as well as on an interactional level with regard to protecting their own and the other's face. They have to achieve their negotiation goals while maintaining the social equilibrium of the relationship. Conflict, and politeness as a strategy that redresses conflict, are therefore necessary criteria for the approach to politeness in negotiation activity.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The example presented in this section entails an episode in the negotiation interactions where a demand for intellectual property rights was advanced by UBC. The example is followed with a detailed reading of the interaction from the perspective of power and politeness. (Please refer to Appendix for transcription code).

**Example:** The demand for intellectual property rights

A1: Managing Director of UBC

B1: Chief Executive Officer of XY

113 A1: let me let me explain

114 B1: yes

115 A1: of course one of our as you know (.) job here as a business centre is in  
116 research commercialization (.) we are also doing consultancy  
training

117 and other business ...so in terms of research

118 B1: yes

119 A1: commercialization (.) this is why all this bio-diversity conventions now  
120 Malaysia has instituted this intellectual property right now for the last  
121 one hundred years (.) the British came get all our sample develop  
122 product (.) and on the country does not get anything (.) one very good  
123 product is Quinine you know that malaria pill (.) we lost in don't know  
124 a billion dollar industry ah and then a lot of other product (.) the  
125 Canadian British American just go into our forest get it out (.) they  
126 manufacture (.) ah *ubat* (medicine) and all this then they forget about us (.)  
127 that's why our country sign that bio-diversity convention ok so (.) this is  
128 why we have to (.) when we are talking about about er research  
129 collaboration this is the sticky point/ah intellectual property whose IP  
130 is it ok UPM (.) collaborate with many organization (.) in the country  
131 (.) like you said we are the leader in the country in terms of research in  
132 agriculture, forestry, environment (.) so many organization and (.)  
133 quite a number also from Japan ah Ministry and universities local I  
134 myself do project with Yokohama National University yah but (.)  
135 again like we said basic research if basic research is easy you know  
136 there's no (.) like what I'm doing with Yokohama National University  
137 is fine method (.) to reforest eh so when it's successful (.) then it's  
138 joint intellectual property with Yokohama it's just basically research  
139 producing papers but when it comes to getting a product or what so  
140 even like you know the university medicinal also when you go into  
141 business then we have to work out the details (.) you are actually a  
142 consultant firm to all this companies very good we can make  
143 contact with you and then you make contact but (.) when it  
144 comes to this how do we do when it comes to research  
145 when after three years four years we already got a product then you  
146 want to sell it (.) what does the country get what does the university  
147 get ah this is the thing if basic research just measuring trees planting

- 148 trees but when it comes to finding new species of trees suitable for  
 149 what area ah then it becomes er intellectual property so like I said we  
 150 have worked with many organizations and now the university is also  
 151 trying to find ways how to share the profit so that we just don't do  
 152 research and our people who do research do not just don't get  
 153 anything we must also get something  
 154 B1: yes  
 155 A1: as far as collaboration we welcome with open arms (.) with open  
 156 heart (.) but when it comes to (.) er sharing the product sharing the  
 157 profit we always worry if we don't sit down and write the agreement  
 158 properly ha (.) we have a few cases with Cambridge for example eh  
 159 our researcher develop a pregnancy test or something like that (.)  
 160 then Cambridge said it's theirs (.) you know because we didn't sign  
 161 an agreement (.) but this researcher actually was doing PhD in  
 162 Cambridge (.) so Cambridge said it's their property (.) so they want  
 163 to commercialize it so because we didn't sign an agreement (.) ah we  
 164 lost to Cambridge even we lost our researcher who went back to  
 165 Cambridge as well (.) Malaysian (B1 laughs) ah and then er quite  
 166 quite a number of cases where the university and the country lost this  
 167 is why (.) er now even you want to go to a forest you cannot go now  
 168 without cooperation with local university and you probably have to  
 169 talk to FRIM or forest department (.) so that is one issue we have to  
 170 address the second one is (.) what product are you talking about  
 171 what research are you talking about (.) last time we talk about  
 172 Roselle you know  
 173 B1: that that is my own er interest but er at this moment I'm working as a  
 174 consultant to the pharmaceutical companies so (.) we are interested in  
 175 pharmaceutical product

In the example above A1 made a demand on behalf of UPM for intellectual property rights. The demand was indirectly advanced using speech acts of assertion, particularly 'to inform', 'to state' and 'to question'. The demand was first implied in lines 127-130 using the speech act, 'to inform', "this is ... IP is it". A1 informed B1 about the issue of intellectual property rights in collaborative research. The demand was then repeated in lines 144-147, "when it ... university get". Using the question form, A1 again indirectly demanded for intellectual property rights. In lines 150-153, "now the ... get something" using the speech act 'to inform', the demand was again implied. A1 asserted that UPM was looking into ways to address the issue of intellectual property rights. The demand was implied the final time in lines 169-170 through the speech act 'to state' "so that ... to

address". The demand was advanced four times and on all counts it was indirect. By avoiding a direct, explicit, bald on record demand, A1 displayed face considerations for his addressees. Deference was given to the other party by not assuming his compliance to the demand. The underlying politeness strategy was "don't coerce H", "don't assume H is able/willing to do A" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 131).

Although the speech acts employed to advance the demand gave deference to the other party, they nevertheless exercised power. The acts 'to inform', 'to question', and 'to state' performed the function of 'to demand'. The combination of these acts with demanding constrained the action environment of B1 into taking up the demand. This is evident in his lack of response throughout A1's discourse. The backchannel in line 154 is not agreement but merely that he is listening and paying attention to A1. The interview data confirmed that he was constrained into agreeing with A1's demand. B1's response on this issue, gathered at an interview with him, was, "we feel we have no choice we have to accept it (.) we understand UPM would like to be involved in the IPR as much as possible this is part of the bio diversity convention although we can't see at any point during this primary stage of research there will be any IPR issue (.) only when if the foreign collaboration party found any interesting compound in the sample it will touch about the IPR and from there it must be discussed further". A1's exercise of power however was not damaging to the negotiation. This is because the exercise of power was not overt. It was masked by deference politeness, which was displayed primarily through indirection.

In addition to the use of indirect speech acts, indirection was also accomplished through the inductive rhetorical strategy. Four reasons justifying the demand were put forth. The first reason emphasized how Malaysia had lost out to the British and the Americans who had made use of Malaysian resources for the manufacture of medicines without compensating the country (lines 117-127 "in terms ... bio-diversity convention"). In the second, third and fourth reasons, joint research projects between UPM and foreign companies, which resulted in losses to UPM were quoted as rationale for the demand (lines 130-141 "UPM collaborate ... the details", lines 147-149 "if basic ... intellectual property", and lines 156-166 "but when ... country lost"). All the reasons served to convey A1's demand for intellectual property rights as a general rule in research collaboration that involves product development. This served as rationale for his demand. The demand was thus made by "mak(ing) the claim without impinging on the hearer, stat(ing) the claim as a general rule" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 131).

In addition to the inductive organization of the proposal, the speech act, 'to agree with the other party', was also employed as part of the structure to demand. Agreement with B1's proposal for joint venture was expressed in lines 142-143, "you are ... make contact" and in lines 155-156, "as far as ... open heart". Within the structure 'to demand', this speech act served to establish solidarity with the other party as a way to soften the impact of the demand, and to keep B1 receptive to it.

A1's demand was structured as,

Justification 1 --- Demand

+

Justification 2 --- Agreement --- Demand (reiterated)

+

Justification 3 --- Demand (reiterated)

+

Agreement --- Justification 4 --- Demand (reiterated)

The underlying strategy to the demand was in the interplay of power with politeness. Power was exercised in the speech acts used to advance the demand; 'to inform' (lines 127-130 and 150-153), 'to question' (lines 144 -147) and 'to state' (lines 169-170). The combination of informing, questioning and stating with demanding was action restrictive in that B1 was constrained into taking up the demand. Other than these acts, power was also displayed through repetition. A1 conveyed his demand for intellectual property rights four times (lines 127-130, 144-147, 150-153 and 169-170). To convey a demand four times is a clear indication of power. Repetition emphasized the point about intellectual property rights that A1 wanted to make absolutely sure got across to B1. As a result B1's action environment was restricted to taking up the demand, so that A1 can be perceived as exercising power over B1.

A1's display of power, however, was not damaging since power was integrated with deference and solidarity politeness, which preserved the positive affective climate of the interaction and the business relationship.

Deference politeness was displayed through indirection, which was accomplished in several ways. Firstly, was in the use of indirect speech acts to advance the demand (i.e. the acts 'to inform', 'to question', and 'to state'), and secondly through the inductive rhetorical strategy which was used to structure the demand. The inductive pattern mitigated the impact of demanding by giving the

participants from XY a feel of the situation and an understanding of the background behind the demand so that they would be receptive to the demand made. Deference was also accomplished by making the demand without impinging on the other party (Brown and Levinson 1987). This was done by conveying UPM's right to intellectual property rights as a general rule in its joint ventures with foreign companies. The four reasons that supported the demand served to convey this point. In addition to deference, solidarity was also displayed in A1's demanding pattern. Solidarity between the parties was emphasized through agreement with B1's proposal (lines 142-143 and 155-156), which served "to convey S and H as cooperators" (Brown and Levinson 1987). The interplay between deference and solidarity balanced power, and protected the harmony of the relationship and interaction. This helped B1 in being receptive to A1's demand.

A1's display of politeness reflects Malay cultural values. His exercise of deference and solidarity display Malay values for *budi* (courteousness), *hormat* (respect) and *santun* (discretion). The Malay culture, as noted earlier, is one of collectivism the emphasis of which is on people and their relationships. These values are reflected in the verbal behaviour of the Malay participant in this study. Although the Malay was in a dominant position and displayed power to accomplish his demand, power was redressed and balanced with politeness. In order to avoid conflict and appear courteous, power was intertwined with deference and solidarity. Although he had the option to advance the demand direct on record, he did not. Preference was placed on the relationship. In this way not only was the demand for intellectual property rights accomplished, the relationship was also preserved and protected. It can thus be said that preserving the harmony of the relationship and interaction was part of the interaction goals of the Malay participant, apart from accomplishing his business interest. Interviews with A1 and A2 provided triangulation for this finding. A1 noted in an interview, "if you are working with a partner you know er for things to be successful it must be er conducive for them to work with us we should not we try to avoid squeezing our partners ... but we would negotiate in every instance we try to negotiate we try to understand what our partners thinking and we explain to them what the university wants ... we are not here to hit and run you know exercising power in a true corporate sense is er when we want to gain something hit and run is not the way (.) the university is here to stay you know we want good reputation that we are reasonable we are cooperative (.) people who work with us you know are at the end of the day would give favourable words about the university we are a party you can work with". A1's interacting style in the interplay of power with politeness can be said to reflect the Malay proverb *Seperti menghela rambut dalam tepung, rambut jangan putus, tepung jangan terserak*, (As if pulling a



strand of hair from the flour, without the strand breaking and the flour spilling). The proverb underlines that when achieving an intention, one has to accomplish it without offending any other party.

## Summary

Power acted as a mechanism of control. It restrained the recipient of power into complying with the wants of the exerciser of power. In the example above this is evidenced by directive and assertive speech acts used when demanding such as 'to inform', 'to question' and 'to state', and discourse strategies of power such as repetition. The combination established a constraining effect on the recipient of power. His action environment, and action alternatives, was constrained into complying with the wishes and wants of the exerciser of power.

However, the study shows that the exercise of power as constraining was insufficient for accomplishing negotiation goals. Politeness was necessary as a device to balance the constraining effect of power. The exercise of solidarity and deference politeness proved to be crucial in the pursuit of business goals. As a negotiation strategy, the exercise of politeness attended to the relational goals of the negotiators. This was primarily to establish and maintain a harmonious business relationship between them. In relation to this, politeness extended face support to the other when face-threatening acts were committed and when power was exercised. Face support protected the relational harmony between the parties by making claims for goodwill in the business relationship. By emphasizing relational harmony in the business dealings, the participants were encouraged into being receptive to the information presented by the other, and into being accommodative and adaptable to each other's wants and concerns. These attitudes geared the participants to cooperate in coming to a compromise to resolve differences in order to achieve mutual profitable gains. The study evidenced that openness to more than one perspective on the issue of discussion, receptivity to the other's points of view, accommodation and adaptability to the other's wants, concerns and interests were crucial for successful communication and negotiation as they geared negotiators to cooperate in reaching the desired result in a negotiation, i.e. mutual agreement, and that it was the exercise of politeness as a face-management strategy that fostered these attitudes by emphasizing relational harmony. Politeness thus proved to be a crucial feature of negotiation discourse.

## **Implications of the findings**

The implications of the findings for negotiation are that firstly, politeness may be a powerful tool for fulfilling goals in negotiation. The potential in politeness lies in its ability to induce the crucial attitudes needed for successful and effective negotiation; being receptive, adaptable and accommodative. The display of deference and solidarity politeness foreground relational harmony, which in turn trigger receptivity to new information and awareness of more than one perspective to a proposal or idea, encourage adaptability in the sense that both parties adjust to the wants and concerns of the other and accommodate each other's concerns and wishes in a mutual effort for achieving agreement.

Secondly, the cultural value in the Malay culture for face support can be beneficial for accomplishing goals in negotiation. Further investigation into the role of politeness for fulfilling negotiation goals would give insights into how Malay cultural traits for politeness could be effectively and strategically used to their benefit in international negotiation and cross-cultural communication.

## **Conclusion**

This study visualizes how the exercise of power and politeness through specific actions can determine how interests are projected in the communication process. Although power is perceived as a central ingredient for fulfilling goals, politeness emerged as a key tool. The power in politeness is in its quality to fabricate the crucial attitudes needed for negotiating, i.e. receptivity and openness to more than one perspective when communicating, and accommodation and adaptability to one another's perspectives. These attitudes protect the business relationship, which in turn enhance the opportunities for striking a mutually profitable deal. From the standpoint of culture, the implications are that the Malay cultural value for social harmony in working relationships can be tapped to the benefit of the country in international negotiations and cross-cultural communication.

## **Appendix**

### Transcription guide

(.) : indicates a brief pause, approximately half a second or less

*Italicized utterances indicate native language use.*

### Notes

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