

A Study on Singaporeans' Perceptions of Sexual Harassment From a Cross-Cultural Perspective¹

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This paper addresses the question of whether culture and language in Singapore affect the interpretation of sexual harassment; that is, whether speakers from a different language and ethnic background will interpret the discourse domain of sexual harassment differently. Three studies constitute this research. The first study investigates whether certain cues relating to sexual harassment are judged equivalently across the ethnic groups. The second study examines how verbal space is conceptualized and ruled by the use of different languages used by different ethnic groups. The third study explores whether English, as a medium of communication, is a low-context language. Results show that different ethnic groups perceived the cues differently; that ethnicity affects the interpretation of a single English phrase; and that English as used by Singaporeans is a high-context language, which complicates the understanding of victims' coping responses.

The following anecdote, extracted and edited from Zhu and Thompson (2000), is a clear illustration of a classic case of cross-cultural miscommunication. It is based on a true story that took place in a university in Australia. The names of the characters, understandably, are fictitious (Zhu & Thompson, 2000). Here is the transcript of the actual conversation between the Chinese tutor, Dr. Lin Liang (L), and his student, Catherine Jones (C):

C: Catherine Jones speaking.

L: Hi, Catherine, this is Lin.

C: Hi, Dr. Lin.

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- L: I would like to invite you to our New Year's party to be held at my house this Saturday evening.
- C: This Saturday? I am afraid I won't be able to make it because I have to attend my best friend's birthday party.
- L: You know this is the end of our school year. It would be nice if you could join the other undergraduates for the gathering.
- C: But I have already promised my friend.
- L: Um . . . It is a pity. . . .
- C: Sorry about that, but—
- L: Never mind. Enjoy your party then.
- C: Thanks.
- L: That's OK, bye.
- C: Bye.

However, the story did not end there. About 2 hours later, Dr. Lin telephoned Catherine, asking her to reconsider attending the New Year's party. Late in the evening, at about 9.00 p.m., Dr. Lin called her again to repeat his invitation and added that it would be all right if she stayed just for a short while.

The next day, Catherine lodged a complaint with the dean, alleging that Dr. Lin had sexually harassed her because of his repeated telephone calls. Dr. Lin was highly distressed to learn of the complaint, and explained that he had just wanted to show his sincerity and warmth and had no other intentions.

Similar scenarios are not uncommon in the work context today. According to DuBois, Faley, Kustis, and Knapp (1999), the percentage of employees who perceive themselves as targets of workplace sexual harassment over the past two decades is substantial. Recent cross-cultural research also contends that sexual harassment is common in many societies around the world (Barak, 1997).

Could the interpretation of sexual harassment, like the aforementioned anecdote, be a result of a communication breakdown owing to cross-cultural differences? In this case, the intercultural interaction is between an Australian and a Chinese. According to Hall (1977), a high-context culture (e.g., Chinese culture) tends to stress the use of internalized or implicit messages, while a low-context culture tends to emphasize the use of explicit messages. In Chinese culture, the message may have some shared implied meanings that go beyond the linguistic forms used in the message. Kaplan's (1966) model on Oriental circularity and Western linearity seems to be in accordance with Hall's model. Young's (1994) exploration of the directness and indirectness of requests made by Americans and Chinese further substantiates this point.

Extensive research literature on the definitions of culture testifies to the importance of differences in cross-cultural communication. Gudykunst and Kim (1984) equated culture with theory in order to interpret the world and to know how to behave. Hofstede (1980) suggested that culture is "to human collectivity

what personality is to the individual” (p. 21). Brislin (1993) suggested that culture consists of ideals, values, and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behavior. To Samovar and Porter (1972), culture is manifested in forms of activity and behavior. These patterns become models for common adaptive acts and styles of expressive behavior, which enable people to live in a society within a given geographical environment at a given state of technical development. Condon and Yousef (1975) stated that culture is not to be viewed as separate or distinct from communication, for as soon as people start to talk about one, they are almost inevitably talking about the other.

Given such diversity of ingrained cultural assumptions in the interpretation of social reality, it is inevitable that the communication breakdown in this dual cultural setting between the Australian and Chinese culture leads to differing judgments of sexual harassment. Imagine a similar scenario occurring in a multi-cultural setting like Singapore, which comprises four main ethnic groups: Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Caucasians. The problem can become much more complicated with the four distinct cultures, compared to the dual cultural setting of Australian versus Chinese in the earlier anecdote.

Furthermore, the problem may become more complex in the absence of a precise definition of sexual harassment. For instance, the Constitution of Singapore does not protect the individual explicitly against sex or age discrimination.³ Since there are no Constitutional guidelines on sexual harassment in Singapore, sexual harassment as a term can lend itself to widely differing explanations.

This research, which comprises three studies, attempts to explore the various aspects of intercultural communication relating to issues on sexual harassment within the context of Singapore. The first study investigates whether certain cues relating to sexual harassment are judged equivalently across the ethnic groups. The second study examines how verbal space is conceptualized or ruled by the four languages used by these ethnic groups. The third study explores whether English spoken by Singaporeans is considered a low-context language. These three aspects constitute a framework underpinning the study of language and culture in the discourse domain of sexual harassment. It addresses and determines whether cultural differences (beliefs and values) and language differences (mother tongue/first language) influence and impact on the interpretation of sexual harassment.

Study 1

How Do Caucasians, Chinese, Malays, and Indians Judge Cues That May Trigger Sexual Harassment?

Sexual harassment as a term or an act defies definition and measurement because of the disparity in perceptions. Up to today, the definition of sexual

³Report of the Constitutional Commission (1966), paragraph 11.

harassment has been debated hotly in literature, policies, and procedures. Hotelling (1991) argued that culturally determined attitudes and beliefs have an effect on sexual harassment. Frazier, Cochran, and Olson (1995) suggested that sexual harassment includes quid pro quo forms of harassment, such as sexual bribery, sexual propositions, and sexual touching. What is agreed upon is that coarse language, flirting, and staring are generally not considered harassment. Unfortunately, rapid legal changes have created further communication issues and tensions in behavior that is difficult to pinpoint as sexual harassment. This has promoted sexual harassment to some degree (Brandenburg, 1997).

Identifying which behaviors correspond to sexual harassment has been a controversial topic and the subject of a great deal of debate in the legal, psychological, and human resource management literatures. The issue of defining harassment may be even more complex and controversial in multicultural environments where culturally derived values and beliefs serve as norms that determine when certain behaviors and feelings are appropriate and when they are not. As illustrated earlier, the anecdote shows that the breakdown of communication between the two parties concerned can be attributed to culturally derived values. Distorting cues can prevent interactions or cause existing communication between people to break down. Interestingly, one might ask "What exactly are the cues that could cause a breakdown in communication between people?" The following section aims to examine whether certain potential cues—comprising both verbal and nonverbal language—could be considered to be a form or a part of sexual harassment.

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 students and staff members (30 Chinese, 30 Malay, 30 Indian, 30 Caucasian) from Temasek Polytechnic, Institute of Technical Education, Singapore Institute of Management, Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University, and National University of Singapore.

Stimuli and Design

Considering participants' competence in English (the medium of instruction at school and the lingua franca in Singapore), the instruction and the rating task were prepared in English and presented to 120 randomly selected participants from four ethnic groups. They were asked to read five verbal and nonverbal cues. The verbal cues in English are "Busty," "You look great," and "You look sexy." The nonverbal cues are "Touches your shoulder" and "Caresses your lap." Each cue was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly*

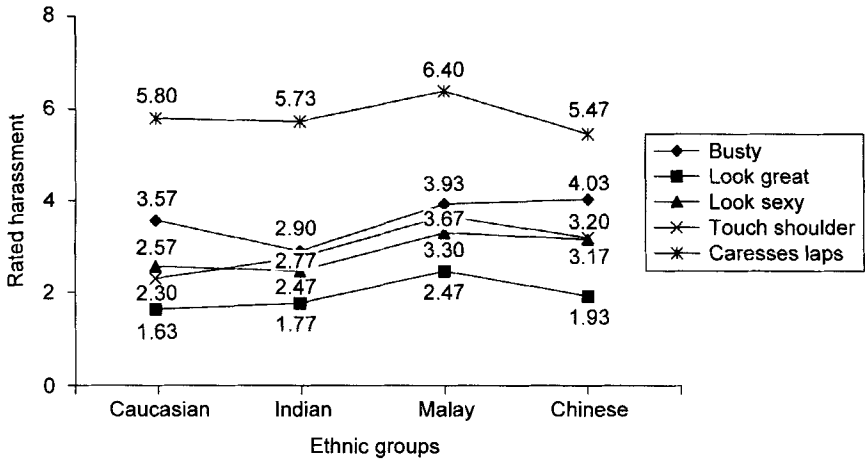


Figure 1. Mean ratings of harassment as a function of ethnic group and potential cues. Neutral rating has a value of 4, smaller values denote disagreement, and larger values denote agreement.

agree) concerning the extent to which they agreed that the item constitutes sexual harassment.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 presents a summary of responses of the participants. Repeated-measures ANOVAs conducted on the rating data indicate that there was a main effect of cues, with the rated harassment in ascending order being “Look great,” “Look sexy,” “Touches shoulder,” “Busty,” and “Caresses lap,” $F(4, 464) = 140.96, p < .001$. The Caucasian sample is the only group that rated “Look sexy” as more of an indication of sexual harassment, compared to “Touches shoulder.” There was a significant main effect of ethnic groups, with the highest rating of harassment being obtained from Malays ($M = 3.95$) and the lowest rating of harassment being obtained from Caucasians ($M = 3.17$), $F(3, 116) = 4.23, p < .01$. Post hoc tests show that the most differentiated paired comparison was the rated score for “Touches shoulder” between Malay and Caucasian raters ($p < .01$, Bonferroni correction).

The finding of a significant main effect of ethnic groups is not surprising, given that Malay custom and culture are strongly influenced by Islamic teachings (Shasel, 1997). Unlike other moral teachings, Islam stresses *halal* (permitted) or *haram* (prohibited) in all matters. This explains why, of the four ethnic groups, Malays are generally more conservative, as suggested by higher ratings for the various cues. A further possible explanation offered for the most differentiated

paired comparison (i.e., the rated score for “Touches shoulder” between Malay and Caucasian raters) could be because of the differences between high- and low-contact cultures (Hall, 1959; Vargas, 1986).

It is worth mentioning that in dressing, apart from cleanliness, Islam also stresses the importance of covering the *aurat* (part of the body that should not be exposed). Another cultural inhibition or prohibition is that Muslims strictly do not shake hands with a person of the opposite sex, regardless of race and religion (Ministry of Community Development of Singapore, 1990). Similarly, the Confucian view of order expects that males and females shall not allow their hands to touch in giving or receiving anything.⁴ This explains why touching the shoulder of a member of the opposite sex may be regarded as a taboo by the two ethnic groups of the higher rating score: Malays and Chinese.

The legal implication from Study 1 is that differences in the ratings attributed to sexual harassment by the different ethnic groups may signal complications in different lawsuits in a multi-ethnic society like Singapore. For instance, a Malay judge may consider the behavior of “Touches shoulder” sexual harassment, but a Caucasian judge may think otherwise. This may lead to different perceptions of injustice in a jury’s decision if members of the jury were to comprise different ethnic groups. Clearly, the execution of justice in a lawsuit on sexual harassment has cultural overtones.

Study 2

How Is Verbal Space Ruled by English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil?

Schermerhorn (1990) argued that the task of direct translation to bridge cultural gaps is fraught with difficulty. In his studies, he found that differences in interpretation and response depend on the medium used (either Chinese or English). He concluded that the direct translation of specific words does not necessarily guarantee the congruence of their meaning. This viewpoint is supported by Higashiyama and Ono’s study (1988). They found that for English-speaking Canadian subjects, the domain of the word *here* surrounds the speaker and increases according to the distance between the speaker and the listener. The word *here* was then translated to Japanese; namely, *koko*, *soko*, and *asoko*. For Japanese subjects, the domain of the word *koko* is nearer to the speaker. The domain of the word *soko* includes both the place near the listener and the outer place of *koko*. The domain of the word *asoko* surrounds the *soko* domain. The *soko* area increases according to the distance between a speaker and a listener, while the *koko* area does not.

⁴男女授受不亲 (from *The works of Mencius. Book IV: Chapter XVII*), which demands greater personal space for heterosexual dyads.

McGrath (1984) identified verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, and environmentally oriented behaviors as cues people use to control their interpersonal space and accessibility to other people. Other studies have focused on the concept of personal space and its interrelationship with culture. According to Hall and Hall (1990, p. 11), *space* refers to the invisible boundary around an individual that is considered "personal." This sense of personal space can include an area or objects that have come to be considered that individual's "territory." Personal space can be perceived not only visually, but also "by the ears, thermal space by the skin, kinesthetic space by the muscles, and olfactory space by the nose" (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 11). Hall's previous studies (1959, 1963, 1966) on spatial distance in human communication identified four ranges of distance based on the nature of the relationship between individuals. In his organizing model of space, he listed four distances and concomitant voice levels that Americans use in the structuring of dynamic space (Hall, 1966). Each of these four distances has a close phase and a far phase.

Different cultures set distinctive norms for closeness. For instance in speaking, business, and courting, standing too close or too far away can lead to misunderstandings and even culture shock. Given that different cultures and contexts will elicit differing expectations on distance of interaction, Feeley and de Turck (1995) found that persons who violate expected spatial relationships are judged to be less truthful than those who do not commit such violations. Hall (1966) suggested that personal space is culturally patterned, and foreign spatial cues are a common source of misinterpretation.

A more recent study (Li, 2001) on the cultural and ethnic influence on proxemic behavior, especially on the response to invasions of personal space, found that rated distance scores were ordered from Indian–Chinese dyads (the most distant), then Malay–Chinese, Caucasian–Chinese, and Chinese–Chinese dyads, in that order. The Chinese Singaporean subjects demanded greater personal space when the proposed spatial invader was an Indian or a Malay than when the proposed invader was a Chinese or a Caucasian. Gender of the raters did not influence reactions to spatial invasion.

In the current research, the attempt is to investigate how verbal expelling distances (i.e., the distance that the speaker requires the listener to move back) are conceptualized and governed by the four official languages in Singapore: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. The following experiment aims to make use of verbal command to measure the expelling distances.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants. Participants who participated in Study 1 also participated in Experiment 1 in Study 2.

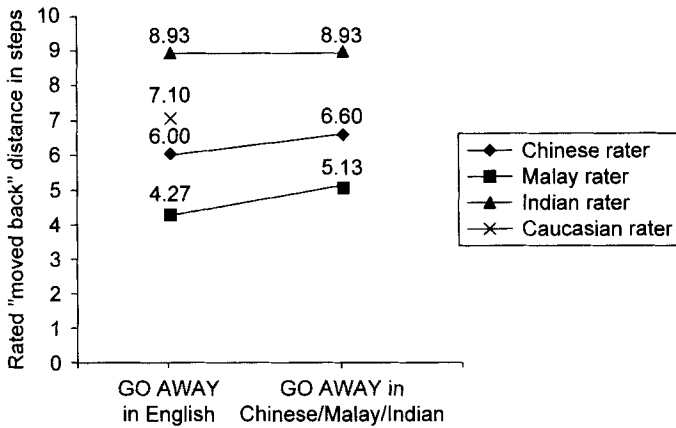


Figure 2. Mean requested distance that the harasser moves back by ethnic rater and by language. Caucasian raters lack comparable mother tongue data as their mother tongue is English.

Stimuli and design. Participants were asked to answer the following question: Suppose that your response to a sexual harasser is “Go away!” Please indicate the minimum distance at which you expect the harasser to move back. Write your answer (e.g., a number from 1 step to 10 steps or more) in the blank space given below:

_____ step(s) back

For each of the ethnic groups, participants were again asked to answer the same question presented with the words “Go away” directly translated to its mother tongue. They were: 走开 (Chinese group), Berampus (Malay group), and **Quit** (Indian group). As such, four versions of the questionnaire were designed for each of the four different ethnic groups. There was, however, no repetition of the question for Caucasian participants since their mother tongue is English.

Results and Discussion

The mean requested distance that the harasser moves back as a function of language and ethnic rater is shown in Figure 2. A 2 × 3 (Language: English vs. Mother Tongue × Ethnicity of Rater: Chinese, Malay, or Indian)⁵ ANOVA conducted on the data indicates that there was a significant effect of ethnic rater

⁵The Caucasian rater lacked comparable mother-tongue data.

on the rated "moved back" distance, $F(2, 87) = 12.58, p < .000$; but there was no significant effect of language, $F(1, 87) = 3.64, p > .05$; and no interaction, $F(2, 87) = 1.00, p > .05$. The mean ratings in descending order are the Indian rater (who requested the greatest distance), followed by the Caucasian rater, the Chinese rater, and finally the Malay rater. Post hoc tests show that all multiple comparisons were significant, except for the Malay raters versus the Chinese raters ($p > .05$).

These results show that each of the ethnic groups has a different definition of the discourse domain "Go away" in a sexual harassment context. This has wide implications in intercultural communication. Consider, for example, a sexual harassment incident taking place between two distinct ethnic groups, such as a female Indian and a male Caucasian. When the Indian asks the Caucasian to keep a distance away from her, she may have expected him to move at least six steps away. However, according to the Caucasian's cultural perception of personal space and practice, he may move merely three steps away from her. Based on the Indian's cultural custom, she may allege that he is sexually harassing her, as the "three steps" do not seem adequate to her. This form of miscommunication arising from differing cultural perceptions of personal space can indeed be a serious social problem in a cross-cultural encounter.

Further, the present finding is that there was a significant effect of ethnic rater on the rated "moved back" distance, but there was no significant difference between the mean "moved back" distances when "Go away" was in English and when it was in mother tongues. This suggests that the requested "moved back" distance in English was probably anchored to the requested "moved back" distance in the respective mother tongue. In Study 1, it was found that different ethnic groups rated the English verbal cues ("Busty," "You look great," and "You look sexy") differently. However, it can be argued that the findings are a result of the language, rather than culture difference, because there is the possibility that varying levels of English fluency among Chinese, Malay, and Indian participants will confound the results. In order to examine further whether the rating differences between ethnic groups are attributable to knowledge or understanding of English or attributable to culture or ethnicity, a second experiment was then designed.

Experiment 2

Method

Participants. Participants were 170 Chinese students and staff members from Temasek Polytechnic, Institute of Technical Education, Singapore Institute of Management, Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University and National University of Singapore.

Stimuli and design. Two versions of the questionnaires with two scenarios, differing only in the bracketed phrases, were presented to participants.

Suppose that your response to a sexual harasser is “Go away (走开!)” Please indicate the minimum distance at which you expect the harasser to move back. Write your answer (e.g., a number from 1 to 10 steps or more) in the blank space given below:

_____ step(s) back

Suppose that you are being stared by a sexual harasser and your response is “What are you looking at? (看什么)” Please indicate the minimum time at which you expect the harasser to stop staring. Write your answer (e.g., a number from 0 to 10 seconds or more) in the blank space given below:

_____ second(s)

Each version was assigned randomly to participants. Half of the participants received Version 1, and the other half received Version 2.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate that the mean number of steps that the harasser was expected to move back in response to the phrase “Go away” in English and Chinese were 6.35 and 6.51, respectively. The difference between “Go away” and “走开” was not statistically significant, $t(168) = 0.26, p > .05$. Similarly, the results indicate that the mean number of seconds that the harasser was expected to stop staring in response to the words “What are you looking at?” in English and Chinese were 3.92 and 3.45, respectively. The difference between the phrase “What are you looking at?” and “看什么” was not statistically significant, $t(168) = 0.91, p > .05$. These results support the findings in Experiment 1, which showed no significant effect of language.

One possible explanation that might account for the results shown in Experiment 1 and Experiment 2, where language was not shown to have any significant effect on rating, is probably language interference: transfer of meaning from one language (in this case, the mother tongue) to the other (English). The direction of transfer is usually from mother tongue to English. In addition, there is code-mixing (English with a local dialect or language), which is essentially what Singapore colloquial English (SCE) or *Singlish* is.

On the other hand, how does one account for the fact that the results also indicate differences in the interpretation of “Go away” when different languages were used in the experiment? One possible explanation is that since language is intertwined with culture, when a command “Go away” is uttered in the speaker’s

mother tongue in a sexually harassing situation, it introduces into the discourse domain the cultural ethos of the affiliated culture. For instance, when “Go away” is uttered in English, the language is neutral insofar as cultural or ritual symbolism is concerned. But when it is uttered in Malay, it could invoke religious and moral associations that could impact the speaker’s attitude toward the situation and the harasser. It is perhaps the conscious or unconscious association of language with culture and its attendant social mores that affects the results of the ratings.

Study 3

Is English Used by Singaporeans a Low-Context Language?

What is the difference between a diplomat and a lady? The following has been suggested as a proper solution of this interesting conundrum.

When a diplomat says “Yes,” he means “Perhaps”; when he says “Perhaps,” he means “No”; when he says “No,” he is no diplomat.

When a lady says “No,” she means “Perhaps”; when she says “Perhaps,” she means “Yes”; when she says “Yes,” she is no lady.
(Anonymous, 2000)

These lines, which appeared in a Singapore Chinese daily newspaper (*Lianhe Zaobao*), illustrate how an affirmative/negative may be phrased and interpreted in a high-context culture. According to Hall (1977), *high context* and *low context* refer to the amount of information that a person can manage comfortably. This can vary from a high-context culture (e.g., Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Mediterranean) where background information is implicit, to low-context culture (e.g., Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, North America), where much of the background information must be made explicit in an interaction. People from a high-context culture often send more information implicitly, have a wider network, and thus tend to stay well informed on many subjects. People from a low-context culture usually verbalize much more background information and tend not to be well informed on subjects outside their own interests.

Work on framing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986) and on methods of elicitation (Payne, 1982; Tversky, Sattath, & Slovic, 1988) has shown preferences to be remarkably sensitive to the ways in which options are described and to the methods through which preferences are elicited. Different frames, contexts, and elicitation procedures highlight different aspects of the options and generate different considerations, which often give rise to inconsistent decisions. This may imply that a diplomat version of *Yes* and a lady version of *No* can be expected to

be noncomplementary in the sense that the decision of accepting is not the mirror image of the decision of rejecting.

When people from these two cultures exchange information, misinterpretations often arise naturally (Hecht, Anderson, & Ribeau, 1989). People in high-context cultures expect others to understand unarticulated moods, subtle gestures, and environmental clues that people from low-context cultures fail to process. English, spoken by North Americans (a low-context culture), has always been regarded as a low-context language. This poses the question "Does it mean that English spoken by Singaporeans is a low-context language as well?" In other words, if a German manager says "Yes," she means "Yes" (Cullen, 1999), where 100% *Yes* means 0% *No* (i.e., complementary); while if a Chinese Singaporean manager says "No," does she mean 0% *Yes*?

Various theories attempting to explicate communication and behavior have been postulated, one of which is the uncertainty reduction theory (URT; Berger, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The URT argues that individuals are concerned mainly with predicting behavior and use communication behavior to facilitate the process. The URT is particularly adept at articulating how uncertainty is reduced between strangers in initial interactions (cf. Berger, 1973; Clatterbuck, 1979; Douglas, 1990). For instance, in the context of sexual harassment, it is interesting to note that the harassed would attempt to reduce uncertainty by passing a clear message to the harasser that sexual harassment is not welcomed. Frequently, the effort to reduce this uncertainty is often undermined by the use of communication styles, which inadvertently vary across cultures.

In this study, we attempt to determine whether SCE, which differs to some extent from standard English, is a low-context language. It examines how the decision-making process is affected by the absence/presence of a SCE final discourse lexeme: *lah*⁶ in the context of sexual harassment.

Method

Participants

Participants were 200 Chinese students and staff members from Temasek Polytechnic, Institute of Technical Education, Singapore Institute of Management, Singapore Management University, Nanyang Technological University, and National University of Singapore.

Stimuli and Design

A scenario, which describes a male coworker approaching his female colleague from behind and pulling her bra strap, was presented to participants. They

⁶*Lah* is a particle in Singapore colloquial English or Singlish.

were asked to rate the responses made by the female colleague the extent to which they think that she was rejecting/accepting sexual harassment. Responses were rated on a 7-point scale. The following responses (fairly representative of SCE expressions) were presented to participants:

- 1a "Don't be like this!"
- 1b "Don't be like this lah!"
- 2a "Stop it!"
- 2b "Stop it lah!"
- 3a "Behave yourself!"
- 3b "Behave yourself lah!"

The two versions were presented to two different groups of participants. Half of the participants received the "reject" version, and the other half received the "accept" version. If accepting and rejecting of sexual harassment are complementary, ratings of the two versions for these responses should be the same when rejecting scores are converted to accepting and vice versa.

All of the directives in SCE 1a to 3b are commands of varying degrees of illocutionary force (cf. Searle, 1969) conveying the speaker's intention that the harasser stops behaving in that objectionable manner. The "b" versions of directives are examples of SCE or Singlish, with its utterance final lexeme "lah." The term *Singlish* refers to the low end of a speech continuum or a cline of proficiency. The lowest variety is termed the *basilect*; as opposed to the medium range, the *mesolect*; and the high variety, the *acrolect* (Platt, 1977). *Lal/lah*, a particle in SCE, is "regarded as a joke by Singaporeans, yet it adds a colorful and unique quality to this low variety" (Richards & Tay, 1977, p. 143).

One of the most notable things about SCE is the presence of large number of particles, often used at the end of utterances for emphasis; for instance, *-lah*, *-hor*, *-meh*, *-mah*, *-loh*, *-leh*, and *-hah*. These lexemes acquire pragmatic meanings that are increasingly subjective. For instance, they convey the emotion or attitude of the speaker—whether the speaker is impatient, puzzled, emphatic, persuasive, or friendly. The use of *-lah* as a discourse final particle is generally associated with relaxed communication, even a marker of in-group solidarity (Lee-Wong, 2001).

Results and Discussion

For the "reject" version, mean rated rejecting harassment as a function of SCE (with *lah* vs. without *lah*) and method of declining ("Don't be like this," "Stop it," or "Behave yourself") is shown in Figure 3. A 2 × 3 (*Lah*: With vs. Without × Method of Declining: "Don't Be Like This," "Stop It," "Behave Yourself") ANOVA indicates that there was indeed a significant effect of SCE on rated rejecting harassment, $F(1, 99) = 112.96, p < .000$; a significant effect of

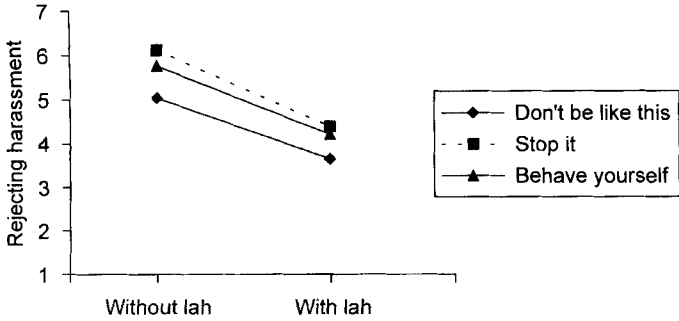


Figure 3. Mean rated rejecting harassment as a function of Singapore colloquial English (with lah vs. without lah) and way of declining (“Don’t be like this,” “Stop it,” or “Behave yourself”; 1 = not rejecting at all, 7 = rejecting totally).

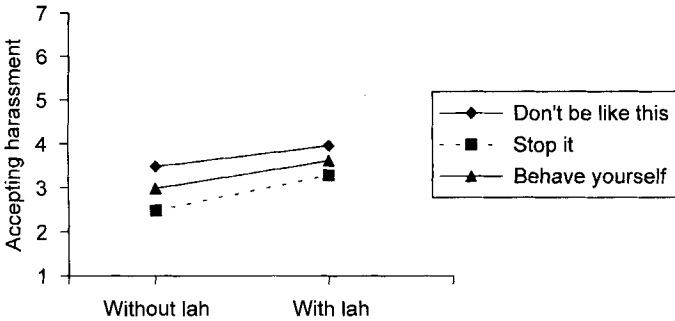


Figure 4. Mean rated accepting harassment as a function of colloquial English (with lah vs. without lah) and way of declining (“Don’t be like this,” “Stop it,” or “Behave yourself”; 1 = not accepting at all, 7 = accepting totally).

declining, $F(2, 99) = 28.69, p < .000$; but no interaction, $F(2, 99) = 2.89, p > .05$. The direction of the effects was that participants were more likely to set a lower rating when speaking with *lah* than without *lah*. Participants ranked the following ways of declining in descending order with “Stop It” being the highest rejecting score, followed by “Behave yourself” and “Don’t be like this.”

For the “accept” version, mean rated accepting harassment as a function of SCE (with *lah* vs. without *lah*) and method of declining (“Don’t Be Like This,” “Stop it,” or “Behave Yourself”) is shown in Figure 4. A 2×3 (Lah: With vs. Without \times Method of Declining: “Don’t Be Like This,” “Stop It,” “Behave Yourself”) ANOVA conducted on the data indicates that there was indeed a significant effect of SCE on rated accepting harassment, $F(1, 99) = 16.04, p < .000$;

a significant effect of method of declining, $F(2, 99) = 13.22, p < .000$; but no interaction, $F(2, 99) = 2.73, p > .05$. The direction of the effects was that participants were more likely to set a higher rating when speaking with *lah* than without *lah*. Participants ranked the inclination to accept sexual harassment in descending order with "Don't Be Like This" being the highest accepting score, followed by "Behave Yourself" and "Stop It."

When rejecting scores were converted to accepting scores (or vice versa), the mean differences of the two versions for the three expressions (all without the lexeme *lah*) were as follows: "Don't be like this," $M = 0.67, t(198) = 2.03, p < .05$; "Stop it," $M = 0.55, t(198) = 2.33, p < .03$; and "Behave yourself," $M = 0.72, t(198) = 3.13, p < .01$.

Two findings are significant as shown by these results. First, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, by adding *lah* at the end of each utterance, the ratings (either rejecting or accepting sexual harassment) become centralized. For example, in Figure 3, the mean rated rejecting harassment for "Stop it" dropped significantly from 6.12 (without *lah*) to 4.38 (with *lah*). Similarly in Figure 4, the mean rated accepting harassment for "Stop it" increased significantly from 2.48 (without *lah*) to 3.28 (with *lah*).

This appears to indicate that the use of Singlish, as opposed to standard Singapore English, affects the illocutionary force of a directive. Specifically, the inclusion of *lah* can be used as evidence (e.g., in court) to alter the meaning of what is being communicated. In other words, the proposition of accepting or rejecting is altered by the lexeme *lah*. For instance, consider the case when a male colleague offers to massage his female colleague's shoulder when he hears that she is tired. After the acceptance of the offer, the female colleague feels that he is actually caressing her, rather than massaging her. In response to this situation, she says "Stop it lah!" The conjecture is that the male colleague is not likely to stop his "caressing" actions. This is because speaker intention—stop totally—has not been conveyed to him accurately as a result of the inclusion of discourse final lexeme *lah*. In other words, the speaker's intention—that the male colleague ceases action—is not conveyed accurately when the SCE particle is used. Conversely, the male colleague is likely to cease what he is doing when the female colleague says "Stop it!" This is because the command is not down toned by *lah*. Hence, the female colleague, who does not want to sound harsh to her colleague, and who chooses to include Singlish, is not likely to deter sexual harassment. The role of language, as illustrated by the use of Singlish, can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, even between English-speaking Singaporeans in a socially threatening situation.

The second important finding of this study is that the results show a significant difference between the accepting and rejecting ratings when the rejecting scores were converted to accepting scores or vice versa. This means that the choice of accepting and rejecting sexual harassment is not complementary. Thus,

it is suggested that the results indicate that English used in Singapore is a high-context language. What is the ramification of such a finding? Research has provided clear evidence that women generally give fairly nonassertive responses to their harassers. A review of 10 studies by Gruber (1989) found that only 10% to 15% of women either responded assertively to or reported the harasser. If the English used in Singapore is indeed a high-context language, we are left with the observation that, even if the victim were among the 10% to 15% of women who responded assertively, the harasser from a high-context culture may still continue his action, as he may perceive that the response has other implicit meanings.

General Conclusion

In examining the beliefs and attitudes of participants in their natural context, this investigation has adopted an indigenization from within (Kim, 1999; Kim & Berry, 1993): a bottom-up approach. It reveals how Singaporeans from diverse ethnic backgrounds conceptualize personal space, and interpret verbal and non-verbal cues in relation to sexual harassment. The influence of culture and language on behavior is apparent in the results of the experiments. Cultural differences no doubt arise from differences in socialization practices (e.g., religion: Islam vs. Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism) despite a shared commonality of a superimposed Singapore culture. To what extent adaptation to the highly urbanized and Westernized Singapore culture will affect social interaction in multi-ethnic Singapore remains an important question that can benefit from further research on specific issues. In the meantime, the findings of the current research have significant implications for cross-cultural communication and legal issues in multi-ethnic Singapore. On the question of sexual harassment where interactants are of different ethnic backgrounds, semantic differentials on the concept of personal space have been demonstrated to affect the interpretation of sexual harassment.

Language variation—the use of variety—SCE and the discourse final lexeme *lah* has been found to affect the degree of rejection in directives used by the harassed. As to the verdict of whether the harasser has been verbally encouraged or discouraged, further subjective opinions can be sought. What is shown explicitly is that mitigation in directives caused by the presence of a discourse particle can lead unwittingly to a miscommunication of speaker intent. Further, the fact that SCE has been found to be a high-context language should alert speakers and users of English in Singapore to be conscious of possibilities for cross-cultural miscommunication, between Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans and across ethnic groups within Singapore.

In sum, the experiments in this research on a cross-cultural study of four ethnic groups in Singapore (Chinese, Caucasian, Malay, and Indian) have been

valuable in permitting strong causal inferences: the study of language and culture in a socially threatening situation. Investigating cross-cultural perceptions of sexual harassment is a very important area, since we live in virtually an international community. Understanding differences in sexual harassment in different cultures should help to improve cultural sensitivity, particularly in environments where people of diverse races and nationalities work together.

For future research, to ascertain the impact of SCE versus standard English on culture and ethnicity, it might be interesting and worthwhile to employ non-academic participants in order to ascertain the degree to which language influences culture. Also, another dimension can be introduced to test further the effects of culture and language: the spoken forms of English. In this way, nuances such as pitch, tone, and other forms of nonverbal communication can be captured and assessed in relation to proxemics.

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