

Chapter I

Vive la Différence: Communicating Across Cultural Boundaries in Cross–Gender Online Collaborative Discussions

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ABSTRACT

The differences among peoples and how their respective culture and history may affect their adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as their preferred usage patterns, are often discussed in the literature. But do we really need to look that far to find such cross-cultural differences? Considering language is one of the major defining attributes of culture, this chapter takes a sociolinguistic approach to argue that there is a cross-cultural aspect to ICT adoption also within the same culture. Sociolinguists have claimed for years that to a large extent, communication between men and women, even within the supposedly same culture, has such characteristics due to their different underlying social objectives which affect their communication patterns. This chapter examines this sociolinguistic perspective in the context of online courses, where students are often requested to collaborate with their classmates in online threaded discussions. Although the stage is set in online courses to smother cultural and gender differences if participants wish to do so, a key finding is that gender based cultural patterns still emerge. These differences were strong enough to allow significant identification of the student gender, despite the gender neutral context of the course discussions. Implications for ICT in general in view of this Vive la Différence are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major manifestations of culture is language and the way it affects communications: who we prefer to talk to and the some of the underlying objectives of the communication. Communication is not a mere exchange of words or information. It is a social process and, as such, it is imbued with a social meaning of inclusion, exclusion, and social hierarchy. These cultural aspects are a prime aspect of cross-cultural research, including in the context of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adoption and usage patterns (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000). But one need not look that far to find cross-cultural differences. They are here among us all the time – that at least is the basic premise of sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics deals, among other things, in the way culture affects and determines communication. Most import in the context of this study is that culture is not only a manifestation of language and national heritage. Culture is also a matter of gender. Men and women communicate differently, and do so with different underlying social objectives. This is part of our evolutionary past (Brizendine, 2006), which also affects online collaboration (Kock & Hantula, 2005). Gender is so much a part of communication in communication that in many languages there are distinct rules in the language about how men and women should conjure the sentences they speak and their expected speech patterns. But it is much more than superimposed linguistic gender segregation. It is, at least in the view of sociolinguists, a matter of a cultural difference between men and women.

In general terms, men, according to sociolinguistics, communicate more with the objective of creating and preserving their social status, while women do so more with the objective of creating rapport and social inclusion. Not surprisingly, the result of this is that communication across genders is often an exercise in cultural miscommunication (Brizendine, 2006; Tannen, 1994, 1995). Indeed, when men communicate with each other it is often

on a basis of exchanging information, or as Tannen calls it “report talk”, while women do so to exchange emotions, or as Tannen calls it “rapport talk” (Tannen, 1994). The consequence of this is often communication that are gender segregated (Hannah & Murachver, 1999; Yates, 2001).

Looking at this distinction in the context of virtual communities and supporting it, Gefen and Ridings (2005) commented that when men joined virtual communities composed of mostly male members, they did so with the declared objective of sharing information, while when they joined mixed gender virtual communities it was more for emotional support. In contrast, women who joined mixed virtual communities did so for information exchange but when they looked for emotional support they too joined mostly female ones. Indeed, even in what should be a gender and emotion neutral settings, women perceive more social presence in email (Gefen & Straub, 1997) and ecommerce websites (Gefen, 2003).

The objective of this study is to examine whether the expected gender-related cultural differences in oral communication, predicted by sociolinguists regarding oral communications, hold true also in the explicitly created gender-neutral ICT environment of online courses where the nature of the controlled course conversations make social dominance and rapport rather irrelevant. If these gender communication patterns hold true also in this scenario, then how much more so that such cross-cultural differences should hold true in other ICT induced environments. This is a crucial question, because if true, then cross-cultural research in ICT should look not only across the border, but also within.

The data support the basic *Vive la Différence* proposition of the study even in the stoic context of online course discussions. Male students did prefer to respond to other male students and female ones to females, and men did show a more domineering attitude in their postings. Therefore, cross-cultural studies in ICT should consider gender as another dimension of culture.

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