

# **AN ANALYSIS OF TOPIC MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND TURN-TAKING BEHAVIOR IN THE HONG KONG BILINGUAL ENVIRONMENT**

The Impact of Culture and Language Use

Bertha Du-Babcock  
*City University of Hong Kong*

---

*This study builds on and contrasts with the earlier published framework of Du-Babcock by analyzing the topic management patterns and turn-taking behaviors of 10 additional groups of Hong Kong bilingual Chinese in their first- and second-language decision-making meetings. Although 8 of the 10 groups matched Du-Babcock's earlier findings, two groups did not and offered new reasons for such a result. The 8 replicating groups confirmed that different communication behaviors emerged in the domain of topic management for both Cantonese (first language) and English (second language) meetings, whereas the 2 nonreplicating group results indicated that second-language proficiency is likely a contributing factor that affects the topic management of Chinese bilinguals when participating in Cantonese and English meetings. This article discusses why the topic management patterns and turn-taking behaviors emerged as they did across these 10 additional groups. The article also suggests implications for international business communication practice and further research.*

**Keywords:** topic management strategies; turn taking; business communication behavior; second language communication

---

A large and rapidly growing segment of bilinguals speak English as a second or foreign language. This is because English has emerged as the world's prominent linking language (Crystal, 1997; Kameda, 1996) and as a genuinely global language (Gildsorf, 2002, p. 366) in international business communication. Crystal (1997) notes that 75% of English-speaking individuals are second- or foreign-language

---

Bertha Du-Babcock is an associate professor in the Department of English and Communication at City University of Hong Kong. This article is based on two research studies (Project No. 9030727 and No. 9030827) funded by the City University of Hong Kong. The generosity and kind support of the University Research Committee are gratefully acknowledged. The author also acknowledges the valuable comments by the anonymous reviewers and especially the help and support of the editors and associate editor. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Bertha Du-Babcock, Department of English and Communication, City University of Hong Kong, 83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong; e-mail: enbertha@cityu.edu.hk.

Journal of Business Communication, Volume 43, Number 1, January 2006 21-42  
DOI: 10.1177/0021943605282373  
© 2006 by the Association for Business Communication

users. Of these nonnative English speakers, Chinese bilinguals (including overseas Chinese around the world) make up the largest and the most rapidly growing segment of “the global English picture” (Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1992). This phenomenon suggests that English-language speakers of varying competency have the potential to directly communicate with and relay messages to native- or nonnative-English speakers in international business contexts.

Given the uniqueness of the language environment in Hong Kong (e.g., Du-Babcock, 1999), Chinese bilinguals live in a collective culture (Hofstede, 1991) and speak Cantonese (a high-context language) in general and English (a low-context language) with native-English speakers and non-Cantonese speakers in business contexts. As Cantonese and English are spoken concurrently in the workplace, Hong Kong bilingual Chinese cannot help but monitor and unconsciously compare first- and second-language messages when they switch between these two codes. Given its prominence as an international financial center and its pattern of multiple and simultaneous language use, Hong Kong is an ideal research site for a comparison of the first- and second-language business communication practices of Chinese bilinguals.

In an earlier study of mine (Du-Babcock, 1999) that provided an in-depth analysis of how and whether Hong Kong bilinguals managed the topics of discussion differently in their first- and second-language decision-making meetings, the findings revealed that Hong Kong bilingual groups followed spiral or circular topic management strategies in first-language (Cantonese) decision-making meetings and linear topic management strategies in related second-language (English) ones. The analysis of this group explained why the communication behaviors of Hong Kong bilingual speakers differed when they interacted in comparable first- and second-language strategic formulation and decision-making meetings. However, the results suggested a need for further and broader investigation. Thus, in this study, the topic management strategies and turn-taking behavior of 10 additional groups have been analyzed using the same methodology in codifying the data. This extension of the earlier study not only explores a range of topic management strategies and issues applicable to the Hong Kong bilingual business environment but also examines factors that are likely to influence groups using strategies that deviated from the previous findings. The purposes of this study were to do the following: (a) to ascertain whether my earlier findings can be applied to all bilingual groups; (b) to explore factors that might have contributed to the differences in the different groups’ turn-taking behaviors and topic management strategies; and (c) to provide plausible explanations for the different topic management strategies that the Cantonese bilinguals followed or did not follow in their first- and second-language decision-making meetings.

For the purposes of this study, *turn-taking* is defined as the ordering of moves that involve any organized interplay of speech acts operated by speakers “one at a time while speaker change occurs” (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 726). The allocation of turn-in-interaction can be self-selected or abided by the speaker’s nomination of the next speaker. Unlike turn-taking in social interaction, such as a

dinner party conversation (e.g., Erickson, 1982), each turn in a structured decision-making meeting has a relationship with the turns that precede and follow it. Topic management refers to the related topic subjects discussed by the speakers during the turn taking. In this study, the topic areas were the eight decision areas that each functional manager needed to address during the strategic management meetings.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To investigate the impact of culture and second-language proficiency on the communication behavior of Chinese bilinguals, I first review the influence of culture on thought patterns resulting from topic management patterns. Second, I discuss how language proficiency of Hong Kong bilinguals affects their communication behavior (i.e., turn-taking, speaking time distribution, felt degree of influence, and felt degree of information exchange) in interconnected first- and second-language decision-making meetings.

#### Culture, Communication, and Thought Patterns

An extensive literature has examined theories and empirical studies that suggest that culture has a great impact on communication and thought patterns (e.g., Hall, 1976; Kaplan, 1987; Ma, 1993). My earlier study offered cultural explanations for topic management strategies that Cantonese bilinguals might follow in their first- and second-language decision-making meetings. Examining different topic management strategies, I drew on the notion that the language communicators choose to use can influence and change message content. The linguistic relativity principle (sometimes referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) addresses this issue by theorizing about the relationship between the language people speak and its thought pattern (see also Hunt & Agnoli, 1991). According to this principle, speakers of different languages necessarily construe the world differently and are locked into the worldview given to them by the languages they use. As a result, the languages that speakers know and use will structure their understanding of the world, and in many ways the language people speak is a guide to the language in which they think (e.g., Davies & Corbett, 1997; Davies, Sowden, Jerrett, Jerrett, & Corbett, 1998; Hunt & Agnoli, 1991). The linguistic relativity principle applies especially to bilinguals when they switch between languages and adjust their perceptual and thinking processes to fit the language they are using and to introduce different content into their first- and second-language messages (see also Kay & Kempton, 1984; Matsumoto, 1994). Matsumoto's (1994) study clearly demonstrated that culture can affect the language content used by bilingual individuals and that different ideas tend to be expressed in first- and second languages.

The linguistic relativity principle continues to generate as much controversy now (Davies et al., 1998) as it did when first formulated more than half a century ago. This is illustrated by the fact that although a number of experts from various

disciplines have dismissed the principle completely (Davies et al., 1998; Lee, 1996, 1997), there are as yet no research studies on international business communication that either prove or disprove this principle. Because some current studies offer at least partial support for its validity, my argument is that the linguistic relativity principle offers a plausible, admittedly unproven, theoretical basis for implying that the language communicators choose to use does affect message content in international business communication.

Kaplan's (1966, 1987) spiral-linear thinking patterns and Ma's (1993) Taoist thinking pattern model are relevant to the linguistic relativity principle because they relate the language causation notion to Asian and Western cultures. This line of research suggests that Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans) think and make decisions in circular or spiral patterns, whereas Westerners (Americans and Europeans) think and make decisions in sequential or linear patterns. This research implies that Chinese (and other Asians) may adapt to Western thought and decision patterns when interacting in a Western language (e.g., English) but retain Chinese thought patterns when communicating in their native language (e.g., Cantonese).

It can be said, therefore, that Kaplan's (1966, 1987) spiral-linear thinking pattern and Ma's (1993) Taoist thinking model both supplement Whorf's (1956) linguistic relativity principle claim that culture, through language, affects the way people think. My 1999 empirically based study is consistent with Kaplan's model that individuals from Asian or high-context cultural societies generally reveal a spiral or circular thought pattern, and individuals from Western cultural societies generally follow a linear thinking pattern. Furthermore, I concluded that Chinese bilinguals may consistently adapt to a Western style of thinking patterns when using low-context language, yet retain Eastern spiral or circular thinking patterns when using high-context language.

### Second-Language Proficiency and Communication

Prior research (e.g., Bilbow, 1996; Du-Babcock, 1999; Du-Babcock, Babcock, Ng, & Lai, 1995) has established that second-language proficiency is positively related to communication effectiveness and participation rates in second-language communication environments. In my 1999 study, the language proficiency-based explanation argued that it was first- and second-language proficiency differentials that triggered the various communication behaviors of the Cantonese bilinguals. The results also indicated that individuals with higher second-language proficiency participated at a higher rate in second-language meetings than did individuals with a lower second-language proficiency. The results of my earlier study further revealed that although low-second-language-proficient individuals might have contributed fewer ideas, they were still able to participate in and contribute ideas to their designated functional areas at meetings. This meant that they could maintain sufficient involvement in the second-language meetings. My cross-cultural study (Du-Babcock, 2003) on the distribution of speaking time and turn-takings between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups concluded that Chinese bilinguals exhib-

ited different communication behaviors when participating in a homogeneous as compared with a heterogeneous group decision-making meeting. Taken together, both studies suggest that second-language proficiency also has a significant effect on Hong Kong bilinguals' communication behavior in such types of meetings.

Other cross-cultural studies (e.g., Ducan & Fiske, 1977; Ng, Loong, He, Liu, & Weatherall, 2000) examined the number of turns taken during a business group meeting or in family conversations and found that turn-taking behavior appears to be influenced by cultures across all groups. Yamada (1990) investigated the turn distribution strategies in business conversational topics between American and Japanese associates. He found that American participants distributed their turns unequally, whereas Japanese took short turns and distributed their turns evenly. Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) explained that this pattern of distribution can be linked to cultural differences. That is, members of individualistic cultures distribute turns unevenly, whereas members of collectivistic cultures distribute turns relatively equally because individuals from collectivistic cultures stress group sharing and harmony rather than individual gains.

Although culture is likely to be a factor that affects the distribution of the turn-taking and speaking time in intercultural group decision-making meetings, the use of language and the second-language proficiency of the speakers is also likely to be a relevant factor that influences the communication behavior of Chinese bilinguals when participating in their interconnected first- and second-language meetings.

### Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, two sets of research questions are put forward on topic management strategies, second-language proficiency, and communication behaviors. A third set of research questions examines whether Chinese bilinguals exhibit similar or different communication behavior in their interconnected Cantonese and English meetings between groups that followed or did not follow my 1999 study findings. The three major research questions are as follows:

*Research Question 1A:* Do Chinese bilinguals in a dominant first-language environment adopt culture-specific topic management strategies and, in the process, use different topic management strategies in their interconnected first- and second-language meetings?

*Research Question 1B:* Can topic management patterns identified in my earlier study apply to other Chinese small-group decision-making groups? That is, do groups follow spiral/circular topic management patterns in Cantonese meetings and linear/sequential patterns in English meetings?

*Research Question 2A:* Does second-language proficiency correlate with the communication behavior of Chinese bilinguals in four identified variables (amount of speaking time, number of turn-takings, felt degree of influence, and information exchange)?

*Research Question 2B:* Do individuals with higher second-language proficiency exhibit different communication behavior from individuals with intermediate or lower second-language proficiency?

*Research Question 3A:* Do Chinese bilinguals who followed my earlier study of topic management patterns exhibit similar communication behavior with regard to the four identified variables (speaking time, turn-taking, felt degree of influence, and felt degree of information exchange)?

*Research Question 3B:* Do Chinese bilinguals who did not follow my earlier study of topic management patterns exhibit different communication behaviors with regard to the four identified variables (speaking time, turn-taking, felt degree of influence, and felt degree of information exchange)?

## METHOD

The data set contains transcripts of the dialogues of 10 groups participating in computer-simulated strategic decision-making meetings. Individuals ( $N = 61$ ) enrolled in two sessions of an undergraduate strategic management course at a Hong Kong tertiary institution were chosen to participate and compete in a computerized business strategy simulation. Each group was made up of five to eight members. Although random assignment was not possible, the participants were comparable in the subject matter (level of knowledge in strategic management) covered during the simulations.

Although second-language proficiency levels varied among group members (ranging from 3 to 6 on a self-assessed 7-point Likert-type scale), all group members possessed adequate vocabulary and interactive listening skills for business-related communication in English. Individuals who self-reported their second-language proficiency at 3 were classified as low, and those who self-reported at 4 were considered intermediate. Individuals who scored 5 and above were classified as high second-language proficiency speakers. The self-reported second-language proficiency levels were also cross-checked with the overall impression gained from the videotapes of the various meetings and were found consistent with the self-reported scores.

The work experience of these simulation participants also varied and included part-time summer employment, mid-level regional managers in both government and private firms, and full-time low-level managerial positions. Sixty percent of participants had 5 to 15 years of work experience. There were 41 male and 20 female participants.

### Procedures

The simulation used in the study is a computer-based replication of a manufacturing industry that produces and sells consumer durable goods (Cotter & Fritzsche, 1991). The simulation participants assumed the role of the top management of individual companies in an industry. Although not formally required by the simulation exercise, all the groups designated functional roles for individual members, such as president, finance, marketing, human resources, and sales managers.

With the designated roles, members were responsible for providing information related to their functional areas when applicable.

The simulation required the teams to hold a series of meetings to develop and execute corporate strategies in the following eight areas: price and advertising, salespeople, finance, product models, research and development, production scheduling, plant construction and expansion, and sales (Cotter & Fritzsche, 1991, pp. 11-26). The teams were allowed to meet informally if they wished, but each team was required to hold four formal meetings—two in English and two in Cantonese.

---

The languages that speakers know and use will structure their understanding of the world, and in many ways the language people speak is a guide to the language in which they think. (p. 5)

---

The required decision-making meetings were held and videotaped in videotaping studios equipped with professional facilities. Due to missing data arising from technical problems, only the first Cantonese and English meetings were incorporated for analysis in this study. The meetings held in English were transcribed verbatim in English, and the meetings in Cantonese were transcribed in colloquial Cantonese. The dialogues of the 20 meetings were carefully coded for further analysis of topic management and turn-takings. Replicating the methodology and quasi-research design of my previous study, I plotted the topic management strategies in the data set and examined whether the groups followed different topic management strategies (i.e., spiral/circular in the Cantonese meetings and linear/sequential in the English meetings).

To conduct comparative analysis, similarities and differences in the use of Cantonese and English were defined by the length of speaking time by individual group members and by the number of turns taken by individuals. Speaking time was calculated by using a stopwatch to measure the exact length of each conversational turn. All of a speaker's times for these turns were then added together to obtain the total individual speaking time for a meeting.

The topic analyses of the various groups focused on their turn-taking behaviors and topic management in both the first-language and the second-language meetings. The utterances of each turn were related to one of the eight possible decision topic areas prescribed in the strategic management discussions, or a ninth category for background or nonrelated conversation. Once the dialogues were categorized by decision area, the turns were assigned numerical numbers starting at turn 1 and

continuing through the end of the dialogue. Then, each decision area was plotted to show its frequency in the dialogues in both the first- and second-language meetings.

Last, three focus-group interviews (five persons per group) were conducted. To aid the interpretation of results, the focus-group discussion centered on the perceived felt degree of influence and information exchange when participating in Cantonese as compared with English meetings. When using such an objectifying interviewing technique (Redding, 1990; Sjoberg & Nett, 1968), the researcher engages in interactive dialogues with the interviewees and so can supply background and a frame of reference in which both parties explore issues. In the focus group discussion, participants were also asked whether and how out-of-meeting first-language discussions were conducted.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

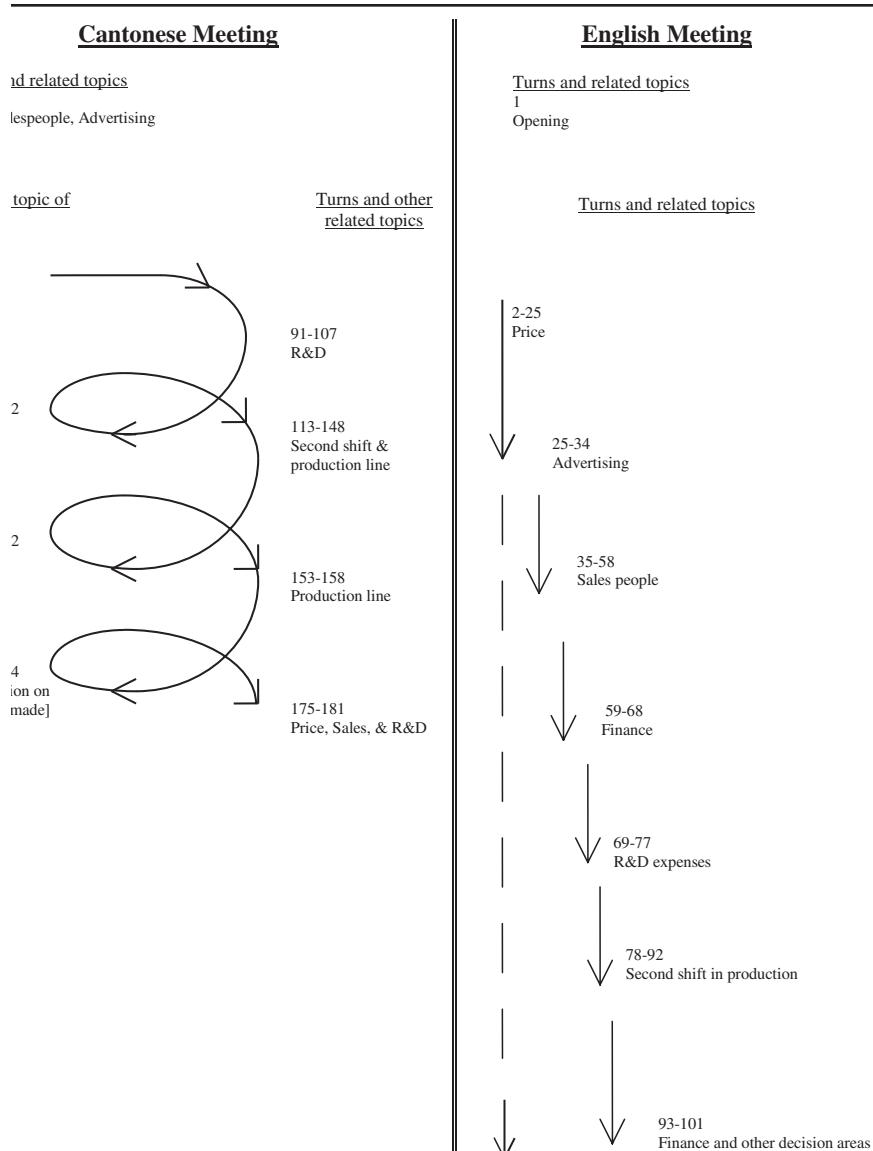
In this section, I describe the findings for the three research questions that focus on whether Chinese bilinguals exhibited similar or different topic management strategies and turn-taking behavior to those reported in my earlier study.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked whether Chinese bilinguals would adopt culture-specific topic management strategies between high-context Cantonese and low-context English language meetings. My 1999 study concluded that the interaction patterns displayed when discussing an identified decision area of production scheduling in Cantonese and English meetings were different. In the Cantonese meetings, the participants engaged in a spiral or circular and interactive communication behavior pattern, whereas a linear or sequential discussion pattern was observed when English was the medium of communication.

The results of this study show that 8 of the 10 groups followed the same patterns of topic management as reported in my earlier study. These 8 groups consistently displayed different topic management practices, where a spiral or circular topic management pattern occurred in Cantonese meetings and a linear or sequential pattern occurred in English meetings. In the Cantonese meetings, circular or spiral topic management discussions were organized around major topics, with finance, expansion, and salespeople being the most representative. In the English meetings, topics were sequentially discussed. Figure 1 presents the contrasting patterns of topic management in Cantonese and English meetings for a replicating group.

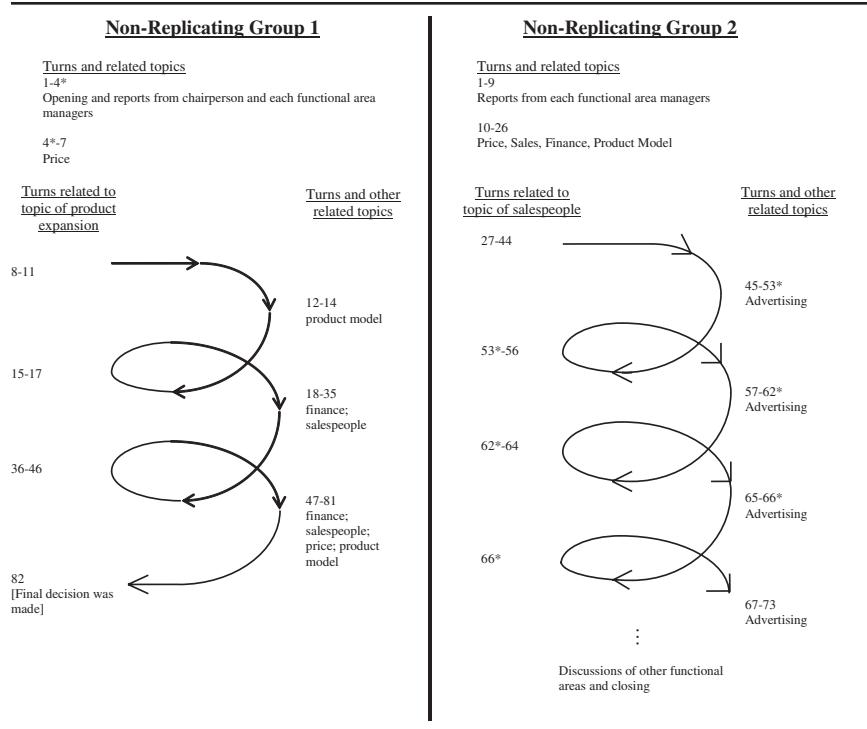
To illustrate these contrasting patterns, the analysis looked at the overriding difference and the dimensions that define this difference. In the Cantonese meeting, finance was discussed 4 times (in turns 69-90, 107-112, 149-152, and 160-174). The topic first arose in turn 69 and ended in turn 174 (see Figure 1). A group decision was made on the fourth occasion (turn 174). In contrast, finance was discussed



**Figure 1. A Comparison of Replicated Group Decision-Making Patterns: L1 (Cantonese) Versus L2 (English) Meetings**

only twice (in turns 59-68 and 98-99) during the English meetings, with the initial interaction occurring in turns 59 through 68 and a group decision being announced in turns 98 and 99.

In contrast to these eight groups, two nonreplicating groups did not follow the earlier findings in that these two groups developed a spiral or circular pattern in



**Figure 2. Topic Management Patterns of Two Nonreplicating Groups in English Decision Making**

Note: \*Turn in which more than one areas are covered.

both English and Cantonese meetings, but for different reasons. To illustrate, I will highlight how topics were discussed between these two groups. For discussion purposes, the groups are categorized as nonreplicating group 1 and nonreplicating group 2.

An analysis of the English meeting proceedings illustrates how nonreplicating group 1 members adopted and displayed a spiral or circular pattern. In the meeting, the chairperson focused the first seven turns (7 out of 85 of the total turns) on soliciting contributions from all the functional managers, reporting on the results of the company's competitiveness in the industry from the previous quarter's printouts, and suggesting a reaction to the market in the current quarter. After the group members had grasped the overall market situation, discussions were centered around three major areas: pricing, expansion, and salespeople. The remaining five topic areas were discussed only when they related to these three major areas. For example, the topic area of product expansion was discussed three times (turns 8-11, 15-17, and 36-46) and reconfirmed in turn 82. Figure 2 shows how the topic area of product expansion was discussed and dealt with in the meeting. The topic was first discussed briefly in turns 8 through 11 and 15 through 17, elaborated on in detail in

turns 36 through 46, and the decision finalized or reconfirmed in turn 82. During the discussion, other related topics such as product model (turns 12-14), finance (turns 18-22), and salespeople (turns 25-35) were also introduced.

To cross check, the video and transcript showed that the group members actively participated not only in their own responsible functional area but also in other functional areas where they thought the topic areas discussed were relevant to their own. It is believed that the structured environment (simulated decision making) created a framework for these working professionals to make decisions. Further cross-checking showed that this group included five working professionals with uniformly high second-language proficiency ranging from 5 to 6 on a 7-point Likert-type scale. This meant that both their work experience and uniformly high second-language proficiency most probably facilitated their discussion. As a result of the highly interactive and balanced second-language proficiency of the group members, the pattern of topic management was spiral or circular.

In contrast, nonreplicating group 2 included eight members with wide and varying second-language proficiency (ranging from 3 to 6 on a 7-point Likert-type scale). With its larger size, developing balanced communication among members became more difficult. The group lacked cohesiveness and developed "free riders" who either missed meetings or came to the meetings unprepared. For example, one group member missed three of the four taped meetings, and another two members missed two. Consequently, these members were not familiar with the previous discussions and decisions. To place themselves in context, these three individuals sought relevant information from other group members, resulting in their presence being disruptive and their uneven presence limiting the development of an effective communication environment. In one incident, two members who had missed prior informal meetings asked other group members to bring them up-to-date (summarizing prior discussions) so they could participate in the current meeting. This irregular attendance of group members and uneven preparation created the conditions for random and chaotic spiral topic management practice in the second-language meetings. The video and English meeting transcript show that the spiral or circular topic management pattern exhibited by the group represented a repeat or rehash of previous meeting discussions and a random, potentially chaotic discussion process.

To illustrate this group's interactions, I will use two topic areas, salespeople and advertising, as examples (see Figure 2). From turns 27 through 44, the discussion was centered on salespeople issues and the decision was semi-made at turn 44, whereas advertising was discussed 3 times in turns 45 through 53, turns 57 through 62, and turns 65 through 73. When analyzing the advertising issue discussion, it was found that the two unprepared group members interrupted the group discussion twice (turns 53-56 and 62-64) to seek information and confirm the discussion of salespeople on issues for which a decision was already semi-made in turn 44. If the interrupted turns (53-56 and 62-64) made by the two unproductive members were ignored, the interaction pattern became linear, with the topic of salespeople discussed between turns 24 and 44, and advertising between turns 45 and 73. Thus, the spiral or circular interaction pattern of the English meeting was only introduced

**Table 1. A Comparison of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient Among the Four Identified Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>L2P</i>	<i>TIME</i>	<i>TURNTK</i>	<i>INF</i>	<i>EXC</i>
L2P	1	.315*	.125	.161	.298*
TIME	.315*	1	.696**	.005	.146
TURNTK	.125	.696**	1	.086	-.106
INF	.161	.005	.086	1	.295*
EXC	.298*	.146	-.106	.295*	1

Note: L2P = second-language proficiency; TIME = amount of speaking time; TURNTK = turn-taking; INF = degree of influence; EXC = information exchange.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

by unprepared group members who needed to check and confirm previously discussed issues.

### Research Question 2

Research Question 2 examined the effect of second-language proficiency on a bilingual's communication behavior. Research Question 2A asked whether second-language proficiency correlates with the communication behavior of Hong Kong bilinguals in four identified variables: amount of speaking time, number of turn-takings, felt degree of influence, and information exchange. Research Question 2B asked whether bilinguals with higher second-language proficiency exhibited different communication behaviors from those with intermediate or lower second-language proficiency.

To answer Research Question 2A, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient was performed. The results (see Table 1) showed that second-language proficiency positively correlated with the amount of English used during the meetings ( $r = .315, p < .05$ ) and felt degree of information exchange ( $r = .298, p < .05$ ). Significant correlations were not found between second-language proficiency and the number of turn-takings and felt degree of influence. Although second-language proficiency did not correlate with individuals' perceived degree of influence and the number of turn-takings, the results showed that individuals who participated at higher rates took more turns ( $r = .696, p < .01$ ) and that individuals who felt more influential also felt that more information was exchanged ( $r = .295, p < .05$ ) in the second-language meetings.

To cross check the effect of the second-language proficiency on the four identified variables, Research Question 2B was put forward and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also performed to examine whether there were differences (see Table 2) among individuals with low, intermediate, and high second-language proficiency.

The results of the ANOVA tests were mixed in that mean scores of individuals with intermediate second-language proficiency generally participated at higher rates than those with low second-language proficiency. Similar results were also

**Table 2. A Comparison of Mean Scores of the Four Identified Variables Among Three Groups**

Variable	Mean Scores			Mean Differences		
	L	M	H	M-L	H-L	H-M
Amount of speaking time (seconds)	204.44	365.74	497.55	161.29	293.10*	131.81
Turn-taking (number)	17.11	23.79	25.23	6.68	8.12	1.44
Felt degree of influence	4.25	4.26	4.53	.01	.28	.27
Felt degree of information exchange	3.50	3.95	4.50	.45	1.00	.55

Note: L = low second-language proficiency; M = intermediate second-language proficiency; H = high second-language proficiency.

\* $p < .05$ .

recorded for the mean score differences between individuals with high and intermediate second language proficiency levels and between high and low second-language proficiency levels. The results also showed a .05 significance level with regard to the amount of speaking time between individuals with high second-language proficiency and individuals with low second-language proficiency. In all four identified variables, no significant difference was found between intermediate and low second-language proficiency individuals, nor between intermediate and high second-language proficiency individuals. However, it was noted that individuals with higher second-language proficiency took more turns, felt more influential, and more information was exchanged than those with intermediate or low second-language proficiencies.

The findings revealed that individuals who possessed higher second-language proficiency participated at higher rates than those with intermediate second-language proficiency but that they may not necessarily take significantly more turns in the English meeting (25.23 and 23.79, respectively). Such conflicting results may be due to the method used in measuring turn-takings, because the number of turns taken was based on the turns taken by each individual irrespective of the length of time spent on each turn. Also, as noted in my earlier study, it is likely that individuals who had lower second-language proficiency were "followers" and tended to devote their turns to confirming and following the lead of the higher second-language proficiency participants.

To further examine whether individuals with low second-language proficiency were inclined to devote their turns to confirming or showing involvement and agreement in their second-language decision-making meetings, the frequency of back channels was counted. Back channel is behavior where a participant responds or reacts to a previous statement made by the speaker at that time (e.g., Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Kendon, 1990). As back channels are usually short, some researchers do not consider them to be complete utterances. Studies by Goodwin and Goodwin (1992) and by Kendon (1990) suggest that nonverbal back channels (e.g., eye gaze, head nodding, facial movement) are essential in social interaction. However, in this study, only verbal back channels were measured. Prototypical

back channels commonly used in this study included such utterances as "yes," "OK," "U-hmm," and "2.35 per unit, right?"

To quantify the verbal back channel behavior, the frequency of back channels was computed against the total number of turns taken by each individual, to obtain a percentage. The mean scores of the verbal back channels among three groups were then compared. The results showed that the mean scores of back channels used by low second-language proficiency groups (16.4%) were more than those of intermediate second-language proficiency groups (11.5%) or high (10.9%) second-language proficiency groups. This result may explain why lower second-language proficiency individuals can still maintain an almost equivalent number of turn-takings, irrespective of any possible second-language deficiency constraints.

### Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examined whether replicating groups that followed my 1999 study topic management strategies exhibited similar communication behavior in interconnected first- and second-language decision-making meetings (Research Question 3A) and whether nonreplicating groups exhibit different communication behaviors in interconnected first- and second-language meetings (Research Question 3B) in comparison with the results reported in the previous study. To answer Research Questions 3A and 3B, I compared and contrasted the communication behavior of the first- and second-language meetings of the eight replicating groups and two nonreplicating groups (see Table 3). Paired sample *t* tests were performed to investigate whether there were any significant differences between the English and Cantonese meetings with regard to four identified variables, namely, amount of speaking time, turn-taking, perceived influence, and perceived amount of information exchange. Table 3 compares the mean scores of eight replicating groups, nonreplicating group 1, and nonreplicating group 2. The results of the eight replicating groups show that the speaking time in English meetings was slightly shorter than that in Cantonese meetings (423.32 seconds and 454.58 seconds, respectively) and that the average number of turn-takings in Cantonese meetings was more than that in English meetings (39.78 turns and 26.09 turns, respectively). In addition, the length of speaking time per turn was almost one quarter shorter in Cantonese meetings as compared with English meetings (16.22 seconds per turn and 11.42 seconds per turn, respectively). The results also showed that individuals felt that more information was exchanged in Cantonese meetings than in English meetings (4.84 and 3.92, respectively,  $p < .001$ ). They also felt more influential in Cantonese meetings than in English meetings (4.62 and 4.26, respectively). In all, the results of the eight replicating groups in the four identified variables were consistent with the earlier findings.

In comparison, the results of the two nonreplicating groups were mixed. For nonreplicating group 1, whereas the mean scores of the amount of speaking time in the Cantonese meeting were longer than in the English meeting (364.80 seconds and 275.00 seconds, respectively), the average number of turn-takings was signifi-

**Table 3. Mean Scores of the Four Identified Variables in English and Cantonese Meetings**

Variable	Replicating Groups (8 groups)				Nonreplicating Group 1				Nonreplicating Group 2			
	English		Cantonese		English		Cantonese		English		Cantonese	
	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Difference	Meeting	Meeting	Mean	Difference	Meeting	Meeting	Mean	Difference
Amount of speaking time (seconds)	423.32	454.58	-31.26		275.00	364.80	-89.80		402.60	369.20	33.40	
Turn-taking (number)	26.09	39.78	-13.69		16.60	10.20	6.40*		15.40	11.80	3.60	
Felt degree of influence	4.26	4.62	-.36		4.25	4.25	.00		4.80	6.20	-1.40**	
Felt degree of information exchange	3.92	4.84	-.92***		4.50	5.75	-1.25		5.00	5.86	-.86*	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

cantly more in the English meeting than in the Cantonese meeting (16.60 turns and 10.20 turns, respectively,  $p < .05$ ). As for the perceived degree of influence and information exchange, whereas individuals felt that more information was exchanged in the Cantonese meeting than in the English meeting (5.75 and 4.50, respectively), they did not feel that they were more influential in the Cantonese meeting (4.25 and 4.25, respectively).

The results of nonreplicating group 2 were also mixed. Contrary to the results of the eight replicating groups, the amount of speaking time in the English meeting was longer than in the Cantonese meetings (402.60 seconds and 369.20 seconds, respectively), and the average number of turns was also more in the English meeting than in the Cantonese meetings (15.40 turns and 11.80 turns, respectively). As for the perceived influence and information exchange, significant results were obtained, showing that the felt degree of influence was higher in the Cantonese meeting than in the English meeting (6.20 and 4.80, respectively,  $p < .01$ ), and the felt degree of information exchange was also higher in the Cantonese meeting (5.86 and 5.00, respectively,  $p < .05$ ).

The results for Research Questions 3A and 3B were partially consistent with the findings in 1999 in that although the eight replicating groups exhibited consistent communication behavior with what was previously reported, the findings of the two nonreplicating groups were mixed.

Aside from examining the differences of the communication behavior of Chinese bilinguals, the focus-group discussions also explored the perceived felt degree of influence, information exchange, and methods of the meeting discussion. These discussions not only confirmed the quantitative measurements but also gave rise to one unexpected finding. Focus-group discussants representing the eight replicating groups reported that their groups held out-of-meeting first-language discussions and that most second-language meeting decisions were made during these informal out-of-meeting discussions. In contrast, the nonreplicating groups made all the decisions within the allocated meeting time and did not hold out-of-meeting first-language discussions. These discussions of the replicating groups, lasting up to 15 minutes, either preceded or followed up the scheduled meetings as participants either arrived early or stayed later. Due to time lapse between the scheduled meetings and input on decisions, Chinese bilinguals were able to delay decisions on difficult issues by exploring them in their out-of-meeting first-language discussions. Although this study did not have access to or have any control over these out-of-meeting discussions, the out-of-meeting discussions reflect a realistic aspect of communication environments in Hong Kong.

In all, the findings of this study partially confirm my 1999 study. The findings reveal that 8 of the 10 groups followed the same topic management strategies as reported by my earlier study in that the Hong Kong Chinese bilinguals engaged in a linear or sequential topic management pattern when English was the medium of communication. In contrast, spiral or circular topic management patterns appeared in meetings where Cantonese was used. With regard to the four identified variables, the results of the 8 replicating groups were consistent with the previously reported

findings. In other words, the participants spoke more, took more turns, felt more influential, and felt that more information was exchanged when using Cantonese in their strategic discussion meetings as compared with meetings conducted in English. In addition, the results show that second-language proficiency played an important role in that bilinguals with higher second-language proficiency participated at a higher rate and felt that more information was exchanged.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, I discuss the research findings, limitations, and implications of this study. I use these findings as a foundation to compare and contrast the applicability of my earlier study framework on topic management strategies and turn-taking behaviors. I then propose recommendations for facilitating international business communication research and practice on communication encounters, where Asian bilinguals or high-context communicators participate in intercultural decision-making meetings.

### **Findings**

The analyses of topic management strategies drawn from the 10 additional groups partially confirmed my 1999 study findings in that 8 groups of Chinese bilinguals adopted a spiral/circular pattern in Cantonese meetings and a linear/sequential pattern in English meetings. Nonetheless, these findings require a partial reinterpretation of the factors and conditions that stimulate sequential or linear topic management patterns in second-language meetings. In the initial 1999 analysis, I implicitly assumed that I had identified a universal pattern that would apply to all bilinguals in the Hong Kong language and cultural environment. Overall, the conclusions drawn in that initial study held for a sizeable majority of the bilingual groups (8 of 10 groups) in this data set. Also, the analysis of the topic management by 10 groups in this study confirms the 1999 study discussion. However, this study adds some clarifying detail. In particular, this study further identifies reasons that two nonreplicating groups unexpectedly carried out circular or spiral topic management patterns in both English and Cantonese meetings. I will now turn my discussion to plausible explanations for these overall results.

The communication behavior of the bilinguals can only be understood in light of how group communication fits into the Hong Kong language and cultural environment. That is, in a multiple language environment such as Hong Kong where one language (Cantonese, in this case) is dominant, messages in the dominant language carry more weight or value than equivalent second-language communication.

The bilinguals in eight of the groups developed a differentiating approach to managing first- and second-language meetings. In their scheduled second-language English meetings, group members sequentially exchanged information but did not make decisions in most of the cases because the decisions were made

mostly in their out-of-meeting first-language Cantonese discussions. The English meetings were conducted in such a way that the members reported their respective functional areas one after the other, without in-depth analysis or integration among all the related areas. As a result, the bilinguals produced a linear and sequential topic management pattern of information exchange. This linear or sequential pattern of topic management, however, did not meet the information processing requirements of the integrated decision-making task. Because the participants were less confident in communicating in their second language and were seeking to balance their communication behavior, the Hong Kong bilingual Chinese were motivated to supplement their second-language communication with additional informal out-of-meeting first-language discussions. Adding the out-of-meeting first-language communication to the scheduled in-meeting second-language discussions allowed lower proficiency members to compensate for their second-language deficiencies. Consequently, these meeting attendees would explore the difficult issues in their first-language meetings so as to avoid the relative discomfort of interactive second-language exchanges. The end result was that the bilinguals exchanged information in an orderly and organized way during the scheduled second-language meetings, and they better prepared themselves to interactively analyze and make complex decisions in the out-of-meeting first-language discussions. As there was a time lapse between videotaped meetings and input of their decisions on the computer, these bilinguals knew that they were not compelled to make decisions in their second-language meetings and so, understandably, chose to analyze and make decisions in their first language where they had higher language proficiency.

The second factor that possibly contributes to spiral-linear topic management patterns in the English meetings is the composition of second-language proficiency of the group members. In nonreplicating group 1, the group possessed one characteristic that differentiated it from the other groups in that all of the members had high and balanced second-language proficiencies (ranging from 5 to 6 on a 7-point Likert-type scale). Due to their high and balanced second-language proficiency, the group members were able to engage in interactive discussion where the members not only responded to the designated functional areas they were responsible for but also gave comments or suggestions to the issues that might be relevant to their functional areas. Consequently, the sequence of the issue discussions becomes a spiral or circular pattern in that the members of nonreplicating group 1 could inject their viewpoints where they spotted the discussed issues that were relevant to their designated functional areas.

In contrast, although nonreplicating group 2 also developed circular or spiral topic management patterns in their second-language English meetings, these patterns represented a disorganized and inefficient information exchange rather than an integrated analysis of interconnected variables. As directed by the chairperson, the topic management pattern could have been linear or sequential but became spiral because the discussions were interrupted by members who were previously

absent and who requested to be updated on earlier decisions. Thus, if their disruptive turns are removed, the sequence of topic management becomes linear.

---

In the Cantonese meetings, the participants engaged in a spiral or circular and interactive communication behavior pattern, whereas a linear or sequential discussion pattern was observed when English was the medium of communication. (p. 10)

---

In sum, 2 of the 10 additional groups in this study continued the spiral or circular patterns normally associated with Cantonese meetings when interacting in English meetings and did not develop the expected linear or sequential topic management patterns in their second-language meetings. This result suggests that speaking in English did not by itself, or independently, introduce a so-called Western linear pattern into their second-language meetings. Consequently, the results of this study support the language proficiency argument and cast doubt on language use theory in that the bilinguals in both nonreplicating groups 1 and 2, who had interactive proficiency and related confidence in second-language communication (group 1) or who had to participate in disorganized conversations (group 2), used circular or spiral topic management practices regardless of the language used.

The findings on second-language proficiency also showed that second-language proficiency correlates with the amount of speaking time and the felt degree of information exchange and that the amount of speaking time strongly correlates with the number of turn-takings. Overall, the differences in the amount of speaking time and turn-taking behavior were not significant between individuals with low and intermediate second-language proficiency levels or between those with intermediate and high second-language proficiency. However, individuals with high second-language proficiency outperformed those with low and intermediate second-language proficiency in all four identified variables.

### Limitations

As an extension study, I attempted to follow the same research design as in my 1999 study and use the same codification of topic management patterns. The out-of-meeting first-language communication could not be controlled due to the time lapse between videotaped meeting discussion and actual data input for market competition. This could be the drawback of the research design. These additional

meetings do, however, accurately reflect a common phenomenon in Hong Kong's second-language business communication environment (perhaps also typical of most Asian language environments). That is, whenever time or conditions allow, Hong Kong bilingual Chinese hold out-of-meeting first-language meetings and then act them out during required second-language meetings. Circular or spiral topic management patterns were displayed in the English meetings for only two groups; consequently, with a sample size of two, the analysis of why the respective topic management patterns arose in these groups can only be suggestive.

Last, the composition of the groups does not permit the measurement of intercultural communication that would have accrued if non-Cantonese individuals had been included in the groups. Whether and how Hong Kong bilingual Chinese would have interacted similarly or differently with individuals from other cultural backgrounds remains speculative and is an issue for further research.

### Implications

Against the background of the findings and limitations of these data, I recommend that further research investigate and more precisely define how Chinese (as well as individuals from other high-context cultural societies) with varying second-language competencies communicate in a language environment where English or another low-context language is a dominant language. These studies could better define how to structure a communication environment to solicit the involvement of second-language speakers with intermediate second-language proficiency in intercultural group meetings. As such, these studies could be structured to investigate how bilinguals from high-context cultural societies (e.g., Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong) communicate in a language environment where English (or another international business language) is the dominant mode of communication (see Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001) and where they do not have ready access to other native speakers.

This study provides possible markers for improving both the quantity and quality of intercultural communication in which bilinguals with varying second-language proficiency participate in international business communication. When bilinguals with intermediate second-language proficiency participate in an intercultural group meeting requiring interactive decision making, the challenge is to create a communication structure where their communication potential is more fully used.

This expansion study clarifies when and why bilinguals (in this Hong Kong bilingual case) communicate differently in their first- and second-language meetings in a language environment where they have ready and easy access to other Cantonese first-language speakers. All 10 groups were made up of members who had sufficient second-language competency to present topics prepared in advance in their second language, but only one group had members whose second-language proficiency and confidence allowed them to interactively discuss and make decisions entirely in the second language. This study has also identified that second-

language proficiency collectively influences the communication behavior of Hong Kong bilinguals, namely, amount of speaking time, number of turn-takings, felt degree of influence, and information exchange. It is hoped that the analysis and interpretations proposed in this article can guide international business communication practice and further research.

## REFERENCES

- Babcock, R., & Du-Babcock, B. (2001). Language-based communication zones in international business communication. *Journal of Business Communication*, 38, 372-412.
- Bilbow, G. (1996). *Managing impressions in the multicultural workplace*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.
- Cotter, R., & Fritzsche, D. (1991). *The business policy game: Player's manual* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, R. L., & Corbett, G. G. (1997). A cross-cultural study of colour grouping: Evidence for weak linguistic relativity. *British Journal of Psychology*, 88, 493-517.
- Davies, R. L., Sowden, P. T., Jerrett, D. T., Jerrett, T., & Corbett, G. G. (1998). A cross-cultural study of English and Setswana speakers on a colour triads task: A test of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. *British Journal of Psychology*, 89, 1-15.
- Du-Babcock, B. (1999). Topic management and turn taking in professional communication: First- versus second-language strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 12, 544-574.
- Du-Babcock, B. (2003). *A comparative analysis of individual communication processes in small group behavior between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups*. Proceedings of the 68th annual convention for the Association for Business Communication, Albuquerque, NM.
- Du-Babcock, B., Babcock, R., Ng, P., & Lai, R. (1995). *A comparison of the use of L1 and L2 in small-group business decision-making meetings* (Research Monograph No. 6). Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong, Department of English.
- Ducan, S., & Fiske, D. (1977). *Face-to-face interaction*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Erickson, F. (1982). Money tree, lasagna bush, salt and pepper: Social construction of topical cohesion in a conversation among Italian-Americans. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp. 43-70). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Gildsorf, J. (2002). Standard Englishes and world Englishes: Living with a polymorph business language. *Journal of Business Communication*, 39, 364-378.
- Goodwin, C., & Goodwin, M. (1992). Assessment and the construction of context. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 151-189). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gudykunst, W., & Nishida, T. (1994). *Bridging Japanese/North American differences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organization: Software of the mind—intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill (UK).
- Hunt, E., & Agnoli, F. (1991). The Whorfian hypothesis: A cognitive psychology perspective. *Psychological Review*, 98(3), 377-389.
- Kachru, B. (1992). Teaching world Englishes. In B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue* (2nd ed., pp. 355-365). Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Kameda, N. (1996). *Business communication toward transnationalism: The significance of cross-cultural business English and its role*. Tokyo: Kindaibungeishai.
- Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education. *Language Learning*, 16(1/2), 1-20.

- Kaplan, P. (1987). Cultural thought pattern revisited. In U. Connor & R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text* (pp. 9-21). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Kay, P., & Kempton, W. (1984). What is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis? *American Anthropologist*, 86, 65-89.
- Kendon, A. (1990). *Conducting interaction: Patterns of behavior in focused encounters*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, P. (1996). *The Whorf theory complex: A critical reconstruction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lee, P. (1997). Language in thinking and learning: Pedagogy and the new Whorfian framework. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67, 430-471.
- Ma, R. (1993, February). *Taoist thinking pattern as reflected in communication*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Albuquerque, NM.
- Matsumoto, D. (1994). *People: Psychology from a cultural perspective*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Ng, S., Loong, C., He, A., Liu, J., & Weatherall, A. (2000). Communication correlates of individualism and collectivism: Talk directed at one or more addressees in family conversations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 19(1), 26-45.
- Redding, G. (1990). *The spirit of Chinese capitalism*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematic for the organization of turn-taking from conversation. *Language*, 50, 696-735.
- Sjoberg, G., & Nett, R. (1968). *A methodology for social research*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Yamada, H. (1990). Topic management and turn distribution in business meetings: American versus Japanese strategies. *Text*, 10, 271-295.

Copyright of Journal of Business Communication is the property of Association for Business Communication. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.