Linguistic accommodation and identity negotiation in cross-cultural communication: a multimodal analysis of English as a contact language

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Abstract: This study explores how English functions as a linguistic contact zone in intercultural interactions, analyzing phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic adaptations shaped by cultural norms. Combining language contact theory (Thomason, 2001), communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973), and corpus linguistics methodologies, it examines code-mixing patterns, prosodic adjustments, and politeness strategies in three contexts: ASEAN business meetings, African digital communication, and EU academic exchanges. Findings reveal the systematic linguistic hybridity that challenges native-speaker hegemony, advocating for a descriptive approach to English variants in global contexts.

Key words: intercultural communication; language accommodation; English contact language; language contact theory

1 Introduction

Research focus: Linguistic mechanisms (phonology, syntax, pragmatics) mediating cross-cultural communication.

Thesis: Cross-cultural English interactions generate systematic linguistic innovations (e.g., lexical borrowing, prosodic convergence) that reflect identity negotiation and power reconfiguration.

Significance: Challenges prescriptivism in English language teaching (ELT) and contributes to World Englishes frameworks.

2 Theoretical framework

• Language contact theory (Thomason, 2001): Lexical borrowing, calquing, and structural convergence.

• Myers-Scotton's matrix language frame model (1993): Code-switching hierarchies.

• Interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982): Contextualization cues and cultural framing.

• Pragmatic transfer (Kecskes, 2014): Politeness strategies across cultures.

3 Linguistic analysis of cross-cultural communication

3.1 Phonological accommodation

In cross-cultural English communication, phonetic accommodation reflects the most intuitive adjustment behavior in language interaction and is a critical component of identity negotiation and social adaptation. This study uses the ASEAN Business English Conference as a case study, selecting 20 hours of online meetings conducted on Zoom by professionals from Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines in 2023 as the corpus basis to analyze their pronunciation adjustment

patterns [1]. The research finds that in a collaborative context, pronunciation is not just a choice of phonological systems but also an expression of cultural identity and communicative strategies. Specifically, in the phonetic manifestation of speech, the neutralization phenomenon of the /θ/ phoneme is particularly pronounced. For example, the word "think" is commonly pronounced as [tɪŋk], where the dental fricative /θ/ is replaced by the labiodental stop [t]. This phenomenon not only reflects non-native speakers' simplification of standard British or American pronunciation features but also demonstrates the principle of linguistic economy in real communication. Since /θ/ does not exist in Malay, Indonesian, or Mandarin, it is closely related to the transfer effect (L1 transfer) from the native phonological system. However, at a deeper level, it is also a compromise in pronunciation —— developed to ensure smooth communication, following the principle of "least resistance path".

In addition, Filipino speakers have gradually adopted the typical non-rhoticity (non-rhoticity) feature of Singaporean English, which means not pronouncing the /r/ sound at the end of words. For example, "worker" is often read as [ˈwɜːkə] rather than [ˈwɜːrkər]. This adjustment is not the result of a single phonological system but rather a social accommodation strategy aimed at aligning with dominant phonetic norms. As a regional hub for business and finance, users in Singapore often hold a dominant position during meetings. Filipino and Malaysian participants, valuing interaction efficiency and harmonious relationships, tend to actively "approach" the pronunciation of the dominant party on a phonetic level. This adjustment reflects the cultural power structure in language: whoever holds the dominant discourse power may inadvertently set the "phonetic standard" [2].

Phonetic accommodation in cross - cultural communication isn't just imitation. It reflects the construction of cross - cultural group identity. Through phonetic convergence, speakers show their desire to belong to a multilingual community and negotiate their identity. Phonetic accommodation can also act as a cultural masking strategy to evade pronunciation - related social pressures and gain recognition. In ASEAN Business English Conferences, it reveals language contact - induced pronunciation changes and the complex interplay of language, culture, identity, and power. In a globalized world, this micro - level communicative behavior holds macro - level significance for cultural negotiation and social reconstruction, which is vital for building a diverse and inclusive World English framework.

3.2 Syntactic hybridity

Syntactic blending is a deeper form of linguistic innovation in cross-cultural English use. It not only reflects the transfer and reconstruction of grammatical structures but also reveals the ongoing influence of native language cognitive patterns on English expression. This study, based on an analysis of social media data from African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana (primarily Twitter/X platforms), finds that various English sentence patterns have been profoundly influenced by local language systems, resulting in structurally distinctive changes. These changes are not sporadic errors but systematic evolution under the background of language contact, reflecting the process of multilingual users actively expressing their identities and transmitting culture in language practice [3].

In Nigerian English, the "post" structure like "Car the has broken down" stems from the influence of Nigerian Pidgin. In standard English, it's "the car" with the qualifier before the noun, but Nigerian Pidgin places modifiers after nouns, altering English word order. This structure doesn't impede understanding and is locally acceptable, showing that syntactic adaptation links to cultural familiarity. The origin is that native languages like Igbo and Hausa typically use the "noun + modifier" order, causing speakers to naturally adopt this in English.

Secondly, the widely used "topic-prominent structure" in African English also demonstrates a profound linguistic and cultural background. For example, the structure "That man, his behavior is worrying" is clearly different from the subject-verb structure of standard English, emphasizing the topic element at the beginning of the sentence before

introducing commentary. This structure can be traced back to the expression traditions of languages such as Yoruba in Nigeria, where the "topic-comment" structure is often used to highlight the focus of characters, events, or emotions. This mode of expression emphasizes relationality over linear logic, aligning more closely with African cultural values that prioritize context, social roles, and communication coordination [4].

4 Cultural identity and linguistic innovation

4.1 Lexical borrowing as cultural resistance

Example: Indian English: "prepone" (vs. "postpone") to assert temporal logic opposing Western norms.

Japanese "salaryman": Retained in global English to preserve cultural specificity.

4.2 Prosody and cultural schema

Analysis: Rising declaratives in Australian Aboriginal English (disputed as "uptalk"):

Function: Signaling collaborative floor-holding (Eades, 2013), misinterpreted by Anglo-Americans as insecurity [5].

5 Implications for linguistic theory and pedagogy

• Redefining "Standard" English: Validate hybrid syntactic structures (e.g., Singaporean "Can or not?") in ELT.

• Intercultural pragmatics training: Teach context-dependent politeness strategies (e.g., mitigating face threats in Confucian vs. individualist cultures).

• Corpus-based approaches: Use Global Englishes corpora (e.g., GLoWbE) to normalize linguistic variation [6].

6 Conclusion

Cross - cultural communication has made English a pluricentric language full of innovations. Alterations in phonology, syntax, etc., show the interplay between culture and identity. This research questions traditional English teaching ideas and advances the World Englishes framework. Future work could focus on optimizing research methods and doing in - depth phonetic analysis, enabling a better understanding of language phenomena and promoting equitable global language communication.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Key Areas for Expansion

1. Methodology: Detailed corpus construction (e.g., tagging syntactic innovations in African Twitter data).

2. Phonological analysis: Spectrogram comparisons of ASEAN vowel shifts.

3. Pragmatic case study: Apply Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to German-Korean email data.

4. Theoretical debate: Contrast Chomsky's "I-language" with contact linguistics' "E-language" approaches.

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