

**Article**

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**Cultural Values in the Practices of Communication and  
Diplomacy**

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**Abstract**

*This paper deals with the importance of cultural values in public diplomacy. The reason is that diplomatic misunderstanding is oftentimes influenced by different cultural values emulated by people who live in different countries. Some cases of cultural discrepancy in communication occurred when Indonesian and Australian people have different viewpoints. Some cases of public diplomacy, selected and discussed in this paper, were interestingly derived from different values.*

*Keywords: public diplomacy; cultural values; cultural discrepancy; communication.*

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**1. Introduction**

Felicitous face-to-face communication is based on a good relationship between two persons. The similar case is true with public communication of two different communities living in two different countries. When they have no public opinion in common, their communication may easily end up with misunderstandings or, even, conflicts. The reason is that when a group of society has public opinion different from that of another group, they both may be potentially engaged in

such unnecessary misunderstandings. The roots of misunderstandings may lie in different cultural values, which may influence the public opinion emulated by those two different groups. Such a situation may put the diplomacy between two groups of societies or countries to be in jeopardy.

## **2. Methods**

This is a kind of library research using the ethnography of communication approach. According to the study of the Ethnography of Communication, no communicative event can escape from the socio-cultural frames of any language speakers and, I believe, neither can the practice of diplomacy. The data are taken from three media, those are *Tempo*, Edition 19/01, 6 July 1996; *The Jakarta Post*, 25 November 2002; and CNN.com/asia, Jan 27, 2008.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1. Cultural Discrepancy in Communication**

Using the Ethnography of Communication approach, I would like to start opening the discussion with my two different head notes, which I recall as follows.

**First**, sometime in November 2011, the Australian public was outraged after reading and watching news on television broadcast from Bali. The news showed the interview between Da'i Bachtiar, the then Chief of Indonesian Police Force, and Amrozi, the Bali bombing suspect. During the interview, there were smiles, laughter and handshakes performed by the two persons. The fact shows how people from two different countries and cultures may have different interpretation on such cultural behaviors. Heryanto (2011), a sociologist at the Australian National University, gives comment on this cultural discrepancy as quoted below:

Despite these complexities, one can still recognize that the smiles that Amrozi and the Indonesian law enforcers demonstrated are so *common* among many Indonesians. Theirs in Denpasar may be somewhat more excessive than usually observed in Indonesia. Such smiles can mean different things within their immediate social environment, some are more commendable than others. In any case, they do not solely and unambiguously imply *malice* to the victims of the Bali bombing, and obviously not to the Australians in particular (*italic* HDP).

In this very case, the cultural discrepancy results from the way people interpret such a kind of cultural behavior (i.e. smiles). I have deliberately typed two words (*common* and *malice*) in italic fonts in the quotation in order to highlight the meaning of smiles, as pointed out by Heryanto. Both Da'i Bachtiar (or any other policemen) and Amrozi, I firmly believe, did not have any intention at all to laugh at the victims, let alone the Australian public. Thus, in the opinion of Indonesians, there is no reason for the Australians to be outraged.

Heryanto also mentions a similar reaction by Indonesian public after reading news on the diplomatic agreement between IMF and Indonesian government on television or/and in printed media, as I quote below:

It is also comparable to the controversial 1998 pose of IMF Executive Director Michel Camdessus. He stood straight, arms folded, next to then president Soeharto who bowed down to the table to sign a new reform package. Indonesians took offense of the pose, despite their being impatient to see Soeharto step down!

Mr. Camdessus' pose is culturally interpreted by most Indonesian public as "bossy" in front of the highly respected leader. The point is that most Indonesian public regard it as a sign of humiliating their leader. The case is almost similar to the smiles of Amrozi, when politically interpreted by the Australian public. Should these two different publics fully understand the underlying values of the other culture, this over-reactive response is not necessarily outspoken.

What we can learn from this case is that the act of smiling proves to be not

universal in meaning. Indonesians and Australians interpret its meaning differently due to the underlying cultural values. Smiles are common among Indonesians even when they are facing hardships or dealing with serious matters. Smiling is multi-interpretible in Indonesian culture. It does not “solely and unambiguously imply malice” (to borrow Heryanto’s phrase) nor, on the way around, ‘kindness’. For example, *The Smiling General*, a nick name used by Roeder (1970) to refer to President Suharto does not necessarily mean that the person he described was very ‘kind hearted’ because, according to international opinion, some policies the president had ever performed were sometimes regarded as ‘ruthless’ or, at least, against human rights. Atika Schubert wrote an obituary on January 20, 2008, with a cynical title: “Suharto was charming, but lethal”. My inference is that the cultural values embedded in the act of speaking (communicating) must be even more complicated than that of mere smiling, which has resulted in cultural controversy in terms of its meaning.

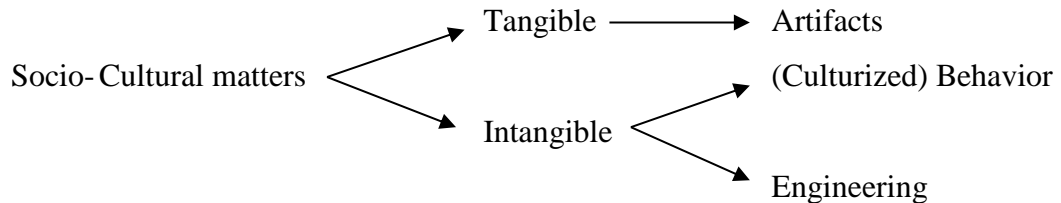
**Secondly**, in the spring semester 1987, I took a course of the ‘Ethnography of Speaking/Communication’ given by Hymes, at the University of Pennsylvania. A pretty MBA student sat beside me. I asked her to know the reason why she attended the lecture. The American girl boasted that, after graduation, she planned to join an international company in the hope that she could work in Russia. I did not take her answer seriously at all but the historical facts showed that McDonald’s opened its franchise there soon after the USSR collapsed in 1991.

The second head notes imply that the American student had ‘engineered’ a future career in a foreign country so that she had to equip herself with some cultural knowledge she might obtained in Hymes’ lecture on the ethnography of communication. Not only some foreign language did she learn but also the cultural values embedded in the native speakers’ mind. Thus, the issue of cultural values

becomes of paramount importance in this case, in addition to the mastery of the foreign language per se. In other words, to effectively deal with foreign interlocutors in communicative events, including diplomatic affairs, one must have equipped oneself with at least two different types of knowledge: the foreign language and the cultural values embedded in the interlocutors' native language. It is in line with the common dictum in the study of Discourse Analysis; in order to understand the interlocutor's intention, one must have the knowledge of, as obviously stated by Gee, "language and other stuff" (2008:7). I interpret the "other stuff" as cultural values. Thus, the mastery of foreign language alone is not enough for felicitous communication (or diplomacy) because cultural discrepancies most likely result from poor knowledge of cultural values embedded in the language, rather than understandable errors in grammar and other linguistic features. As long as the others' cultural values are well understood, any premeditated public diplomacy can be wisely engineered.

### **3.2 Cultural Values in Communication**

The public notion has it that socio-cultural matters can be grouped into the 'tangible' and the 'intangible' ones. The former term refers to cultural products; the latter to cultural values. Anytime dealing with culture, I also regard it as an entity with three different keywords, namely: *artefak* (artifact), *perilaku* (behavior) and *rekayasa* (engineering), see Purwoko (2003, 2011). The essential notion of my own keywords is not far different from that of the public notion although, when talking about the practice of diplomacy, I would rather refer to my own keywords that I reckon to be aptly applicable. To see my explanation, please learn the following figure.



(Premeditated actions)

Any practice of diplomacy is always correlated with the ‘culturized behavior’ of the representatives engaged in the diplomatic event. What I mean by ‘culturized behavior’ here is the representatives’ communicative action which reflects the way they perform cultural values emulated by their native society. The cultural values cover not only the language used in communication but also any kinds of “other stuff”, such as: communicative strategies, tactics, skills, know-how, courtesy, arts, historical background, political aspiration or whatever necessary in a given diplomatic/communicative event. Those cultural values are acquired or learned by any language speakers in daily interactions with family, peer groups or other speakers in their linguistic community. Therefore, through ethnographic reports, a diplomatic professional can learn the way other people speak or communicate in accordance with the cultural values they have to conform with. If the professional fully understands the others’ cultural values then s/he would possibly ‘engineer’ any diplomatic/communicative event in order to achieve the most purposeful goal, without being unnecessarily trapped in any cultural discrepancy.

To learn the cultural values of others is of paramount importance before speaking with foreign interlocutors or diplomatic representatives in particular. The act of speaking, by some anthro-linguists, is commonly seen as “a social activity

involving always more than linguistic expressions” (Duranti, 2000:20). Thus, any speaker, who is speaking with others in any given situation (especially in a diplomatic event), can be considered as a ‘social actor’ performing both linguistic and non-linguistic actions based on the cultural values s/he has kept in mind. The cultural values of other parties can be learned through various reports of ethnographic research and/or social interactions with native speakers in their home country, where the values are being spontaneously enacted and performed naturally.

The cultural values of other people are also very effective to prevent a speaker (representative of a diplomatic mission) from misunderstanding or misinterpreting the intentional meaning of the interlocutor. The case of Amrozi’s smiles is a good example of cultural misunderstanding between two different publics (Indonesians and Australians). The reason for such a cultural discrepancy is that both sides do not have what some discourse analysts call “common knowledge” (Lewis 1969) or “mutual knowledge” (Schiffer 1978) or “shared knowledge” (Tannen 1982) or “socio-cultural knowledge” (Gumperz 1981). Consequently, each side interprets the single cultural phenomenon differently in meaning. In other words, their interpretation of ‘smiles’ has nothing to do with the “relevance” (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986) to the meaning of that cultural issue. Basically, the ‘mutual knowledge’ or, I had better call, shared “cultural values” become a key factor in enhancing any kind of public diplomacy. Thus, in order to avoid cultural discrepancy and create ideal/shared values instead, all sides must try hard to enact, what Grice (1975) terms as, “cooperative principles”.

Unfortunately, the realization of cooperative principles in public diplomacy is hard to achieve, especially when it is in relation to socio-politically sensitive issues, such as: the Amrozi’s smiles, the wire tapping from an embassy in Jakarta,

or the navy corvette named KRI Usman-Harun (which was banned by the Singapore authority to enter its territory). Some difficulties in establishing cooperative principles might also be due to the sociolinguistic competence of non-native speakers at the discursive level because no matter how fluently they can speak a foreign language, they often miss some cultural values of the natives embedded in the language. For example, when there is a diplomatic problem (between two countries, let us say, for example: between Indonesia and China), to be settled down in a meeting, both diplomatic representatives may select English as the medium of diplomacy. Theoretically speaking, the spoken English of both representatives cannot escape from the “interference” (cf. Winford 2003:12) of the cultural values embedded in their own native language. Such a kind of interference may lead to misperception.

The following quotation may illustrate how an interference of cultural values is obviously embedded in the language of its native speakers. Amy Tan, who lives in San Francisco, wants to treat her uncle and aunt, who live in mainland China, for dinner. Please notice how they decline her suggestion to dine in a Japanese restaurant, as in her description below.

“We are not being polite. **We can eat it**,” my aunt insisted.

So I drove them to Japan town and we walked past several restaurants featuring colorful plastic displays of sushi.

“Not this one, not this one either,” I continued to say, as if searching for a Japanese similar to the last. “Here it is,” I finally said, turning into a restaurant famous for its Chinese fish dishes from Shandong.

“Oh, Chinese food!” cried my aunt, obviously relieved.

My uncle patted my arm. “You think Chinese.”

“It’s your last night here in America,” I said. “So don’t be polite. Act like an American” (Tan, 1990:32)

Perhaps, this Sino-American writer speaks Chinese very well but her guests doubt whether she still follows the traditional Chinese politeness (or her guests’ native



cultural values), at least, in terms of declining someone's offer. In the act of responding to an offer, the Chinese linguistic utterance, "**We can eat it**", does not literally mean "**We like to eat it**". The meaning of the speaker's utterance is not always parallel with her aunt's real intention. It is, therefore, Amy has wisely inferred it as "**We don't like it**". According to the study of Pragmatics, Amy exactly knows "how more gets communicated than is said" (see Yule 1998:3). Thus, the uncle's complimentary remark, "You think Chinese" indicates as if she has passed a test of sociolinguistic interference and her diplomatic behavior can be considered as "already Chinese". The point is most likely similar to the common labels in Javanese cultural values, namely: *durung Jawa* (not yet Javanese) and *wis (kaya wong) Jawa* (already like Javanese people) or *njawani* (like the well-demeaned Javanese).

### **3.3. Some Cases of Diplomacy**

When I was a student at Monash university, I got a rare opportunity to engage in a personal conversation with H. E. Mr Sabam Siagian, the then Indonesian Ambassador to Australia in the period of 1991 – 1995. I told him that I was writing a dissertation on linguistics at that time. Then, he informed me about the importance of language use and personal touch in formal diplomatic affairs. Mr Siagian had suggested that Mr Paul Keating, the then Prime Minister, used a more personal address term "Bapak Suharto" instead of the formal one "Mister Suharto" before his departure to Jakarta. I do not know for sure whether this suggestion was really enacted by the PM or not but historical records have proved that the diplomatic relation between these two leaders was relatively smooth albeit there was a serious disagreement in the case of East Timor.

Some cultural values, emulated by a given society, oftentimes result from political experiences or historical background. For example, the heartbreaking

incident in Dilli, claiming around 50 lives, in 1991 became a sensitive issue in Australia due to their understanding of human rights and to the historical ties of their army to the East-Timorese natives during the Second World War. Therefore, any diplomatic mission in relation to such a sensitively politico-historical issue will invite controversial debate. There was obvious evidence which invited controversial public diplomacy in July 1995. When General Mantiri was appointed to be the candidate for Ambassador to Australia, many Australian political activists performed protests against this appointment. On the way around, in June 1996, there was another controversial case of Mr Miles Kupa, who was appointed to be the candidate for Australian Ambassador to Indonesia. Both Mantiri and Kupa failed to take the ambassadorship due to sensitive issues overlooked by the authorities, as explicated by Mr Sabam Siagian (1996) in a column, published by the Tempo magazine.

Do cultural values have a strong impact on political matters? The answer is positive although the typical argument in political discourse is somewhat different from that in other social discourses. Wilson (1990:25) states that a political argument sometimes is based on the speaker's implication leading to audiences' inference and not statements of fact. Wilson's opinion is in consonant with the process of meaning-making in discourse, as suggested by Fairclough (2008:10), which always involves three different things, namely: the production of the text, the text itself and the reception of the text. Most politicians, so to speak, will tend to give emphasis on the reception of the text or, to use other words, the implication of the utterance/speech instead of the factual truth of what they saying. They are not only speaking but also performing a process of meaning-making so that the utterance should be interpreted as more than what is said. So, the act of public speaking (which is the same as the act of meaning-making in discourse) is always

political in characteristic (cf. Gee 2008:1). To illustrate my point, I will quote a paragraph of Wilson below.

When, on 15 April 1982, Ronald Reagan was asked by a group of elementary school children for his views on gun control in the United States, he offered an example from British law as part of his response. Under this law ‘a criminal with a gun, even if he was arrested for burglary, was tried for first degree murder and hanged if found guilty.’ Fascinating though Reagan’s example might be, an extensive by the New York Times fail to discover any such law (Green 1982; cf. Johannesen 1985). Larry Speaks, the then White House Deputy Press Secretary, defended the President’s use of the example, however, by noting that ‘It made the point, didn’t it?’ (*sic*. Wilson 1990:10).

Did Reagan tell a lie before the children? Nobody will agree to the factual truth of his statement; nevertheless, he has succeeded in making his political implication to be interpreted by his young audiences, as he has really intended to. It is ‘politically true’, at least according to Larry Speaks. The underlying reason is that gun control has become a very sensitive issue in the US even up to this very moment. Therefore, to tell the children a make-belief story of a heavy-handed policy on gun control is a ‘politically’ acceptable act of public diplomacy.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The cultural values are very crucial in enhancing public diplomacy. The problem is that some cultural values are not universal in meaning. Some are typical and local (not to say, national) in nature. Most cultural values are best embedded in the language and in its native speakers’ way of speaking or communicating with others since the use of any language always reflects the culturized behavior of its speakers. When non-native speakers use a foreign language in social interaction (or public diplomacy) they cannot escape from the interference of their own native cultural values. The reason is that cultural values govern not only people’s sociolinguistic behavior but also their way of perceiving the world, influenced by their socio-cultural traditions. How the native-speakers of a given language see the world may

be different from the way of native-speakers of another language.

Some typical kinds of cultural values are best manifested in certain issues which are considered to be sensitive in social interaction (or public diplomacy) between people of two or more different countries. The problem is that, politically speaking, every country (nation) has its own sensitive issue worth paying attention to. For example, the Singaporean public is quite sensitive to the issue of military force; while, the Australian public is very sensitive to that of human rights. Therefore, in order to enhance smooth public diplomacy with any nation in this world, I would like to suggest that the *Center for Policy Analysis and Development on American and European Affairs* (Deplu) conduct a serious research project on collecting sensitive issues, based on cultural values from various countries in this world. Although the project sounds ambitious, it may be quite easily implemented if the team of researchers can make use of the members of Indonesia Diaspora Network, residing in 56 chapters in 26 countries. As resourceful Indonesians, they must be highly reliable, as I quote from the Ambassador's remark below.

Diasporas, you have resources. But even if you don't have resources, you are resourceful. *Banyak akal nya dan pandai-pandai*. Diaspora can do many things. You can beat poverty, you can kill hate, you can crush extremism, you can bring down tyranny, you can cure diseases, destroy ignorance and light up hope.

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