

AMBIGUITY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY ON LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

Semantic ambiguity constitutes a fundamental impediment in intercultural communication, especially where language and cultural divergences intersect in workplace settings. This qualitative case study examines how Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan and their Taiwanese employers navigate communication challenges arising from linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural ambiguities. Data from interviews, observations, and document analyses reveal that phonological confusions, dialectal variations, indirect speech acts, and divergent cultural norms engender persistent misunderstandings. Findings highlight the need for comprehensive intercultural competence training incorporating linguistic nuances and pragmatic cultural awareness to mitigate ambiguity, improve communication effectiveness, and foster harmonious labor relations.

Keywords : Intercultural Communication, Semantic Ambiguity, Migrant Workers, Pragmatics, Cultural Differences, Language Barriers

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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by increasing labor migration, intercultural communication has become indispensable to global workforce integration. Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan, a significant labor group, face multifaceted communication barriers rooted in linguistic and cultural differences. Semantic ambiguity—where utterances possess multiple plausible meanings—is heightened by variances in language proficiency, dialectal influences, and culturally embedded communication conventions. Such ambiguity impairs effective interaction, contributing to workplace misunderstandings that affect performance, satisfaction, and social harmony. While prior research acknowledges language barriers in migrant worker contexts (Juddi et al., 2019), less attention is devoted to the interplay of linguistic ambiguity and cultural factors. This study investigates (1) the types of linguistic and cultural ambiguities in Indonesian-Taiwanese workplace communication, (2) their effects on interaction and task outcomes, and (3) strategies to reduce ambiguity and enhance communication efficacy. The study’s significance lies in bridging linguistic and intercultural theoretical frameworks with practical workplace realities, thereby informing targeted interventions.

Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Intercultural Communication

Gudykunst’s Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) posits that effective intercultural communication requires managing uncertainty and anxiety engendered by cultural differences (Gudykunst, 2004). Failure to regulate these factors leads to misinterpretation and ambiguous comprehension, particularly in second language contexts. Complementing this, Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) charts progression from ethnocentric to ethnorelative perspectives, underscoring

how individuals' cultural awareness shapes communicative outcomes (Bennett, 1993). Indonesian migrant workers and Taiwanese employers often reside at differing DMIS stages, influencing their tolerance and interpretation of ambiguous messages. Hall's high-context vs. low-context communication theory further elucidates this dynamic, where implicit, nonverbal reliance in Indonesian culture contrasts with more explicit communication expected in Taiwan's evolving labor environments (Hall, 1976). The resultant mismatches exacerbate semantic ambiguity.

2.2 Cultural Dimensions and Communication Patterns

Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide a framework for understanding how power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and collectivism affect communication styles (Hofstede, 2001). Indonesia's high power distance engenders indirect communication and respect for hierarchy, often manifesting as avoidance of direct disagreement. Taiwan shares a high power distance but applies a more pragmatic, task-focused communication style, potentially interpreting Indonesian indirectness as evasiveness or incompetence. Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory emphasizes the centrality of face-saving in Asian cultures, highlighting how Indonesian migrants prioritize harmony and indirectness to avoid confrontation (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Such cultural negotiation influences interpretation of ambiguous utterances and intentions.

2.3 Linguistic Ambiguity: Types and Processing

Semantic ambiguity encompasses lexical ambiguity (polysemy, homonymy), syntactic ambiguity, referential ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity (Degani & Tokowicz, 2010). Bilingual processing complicates disambiguation, as non-native speakers rely heavily on contextual and pragmatic cues often absent or culturally coded (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). Indonesian workers' limited Mandarin proficiency, compounded by Taiwan's regional dialects (notably Hokkien), amplifies phonetic and lexical confusion. The frequent use of indirect speech acts necessitates advanced pragmatic competence, often lacking in migrant workers' communication repertoire.

2.4 Pragmatic Failures in Intercultural Contexts

Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962) and Searle's subsequent elaborations (1969) conceptualize language as action, emphasizing speaker intent. Intercultural pragmatic failures, as categorized by Thomas (1983), divide into pragmalinguistic (incorrect linguistic forms) and sociopragmatic (misinterpretation of social norms) failures. These failures are salient in Indonesian-Taiwanese interactions, where indirectness and politeness strategies clash with Taiwanese directness and task orientation. For instance, an Indonesian worker's non-assertive response may be misconstrued as ignorance rather than politeness.

2.5 Empirical Studies on Migrant Worker Communication

Studies by Juddi et al. (2019) and Chang & Hsu (2021) underscore the persistence of language and cultural barriers in East Asian migrant labor settings. Juddi et al. stress the role of pragmatic competence in reducing misunderstanding, while Chang & Hsu identify dialectal interference as a key obstacle. However, a holistic integration of linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural factors remains underexplored, motivating the current case study.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to deeply examine the communication dynamics between Indonesian migrant workers and Taiwanese employers within workplace contexts (Yin, 2014). The case study enables contextualized analysis of ambiguity manifestations and their impacts. This study employed a qualitative case study

design to examine the communication dynamics between Indonesian migrant workers and their Taiwanese employers in workplace contexts, allowing for an in-depth exploration of linguistic and cultural ambiguity. Participants consisted of 10 Indonesian workers and 5 Taiwanese employers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured bilingual interviews with interpreter assistance, three weeks of participant observation, and analysis of workplace documents. All interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes, were transcribed, translated into English, and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, supported by NVivo 12 software. Coding followed an iterative process involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to develop themes on phonological, pragmatic, and cultural ambiguity. To ensure rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness: credibility was enhanced through triangulation and member checking; transferability through thick description; dependability via systematic coding; and confirmability through a transparent audit trail. Ethical considerations were upheld through informed consent, participant anonymity, interpreter confidentiality agreements, and institutional ethical approval from Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. These methodological procedures ensured that the findings were robust, ethically grounded, and contextually rich.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling recruited 10 Indonesian migrant workers (ages 22-40) engaged in caregiving and construction sectors, with Mandarin proficiency ranging from basic to intermediate, and 5 Taiwanese employers (ages 35-60) overseeing these workers.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data comprised semi-structured interviews with workers and employers, conducted bilingually with interpreter assistance; participant observation over a three-week period documenting interactions; and review of workplace materials (instructions, schedules). Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, exploring experiences of misunderstanding and ambiguity. Observations focused on verbal and nonverbal exchanges.

3.4 Data Analysis

Transcriptions were translated to English. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006), entailing data familiarization, coding for ambiguity types, theme development, and triangulation across data sources to ensure validity.

RESULTS

4.1 Types of Linguistic and Cultural Ambiguities

4.1.1 Phonological and Lexical Ambiguity

Workers frequently misinterpret Mandarin homophones due to phonological similarity and limited vocabulary. For instance, “mǎi” (买, to buy) is often confused with “mài” (卖, to sell), leading to reversed actions in market-related tasks. Similar issues arise with Taiwanese Hokkien terms interspersed with Mandarin, such as “khi” (去, go) misheard as “khi” (起, rise). Workers report difficulty discerning meaning from tone variations, often relying on context or guessing. Lexical ambiguity is compounded by polysemous terms. The word “bān” (班), meaning “shift” or “class,” is interpreted variably depending on workplace context, causing misalignment in scheduling or reporting.

4.1.2 Pragmatic Ambiguity

Indonesian workers interpret employer directives literally, struggling with indirect Mandarin expressions. For example, when an employer says “你可以帮忙一下吗?” (“Can you help for a bit?”), some workers assume it's optional, not directive.

The use of hedges and politeness markers like “一下,” “可能,” and “麻烦你” adds to ambiguity. Speech act analysis reveals misunderstanding in indirect requests, refusals, and warnings, especially when tone is neutral but intent is strong. Workers unfamiliar with these pragmatic structures respond inappropriately or remain passive.

4.1.3 Cultural Norm Conflicts

Cultural ambiguity arises in hierarchical deference, non-verbal communication, and perception of time. Taiwanese employers expect punctuality and task-oriented efficiency, whereas Indonesian norms allow more flexible time management and emphasize relational harmony. This misalignment results in perceived laziness or disrespect. Employers expect initiative and direct clarification; Indonesian workers avoid direct questioning to preserve face, interpreted by employers as disinterest. Differences in smiling, eye contact, and gesture usage also cause misinterpretation; smiles meant to show respect are sometimes misread as mockery or defiance.

4.2 Effects of Ambiguity on Workplace Interaction

Ambiguity directly affects work efficiency, safety, and interpersonal trust. Workers completing incorrect tasks or misunderstanding safety instructions face reprimand or accident risks. A caregiver reported misunderstanding “给他洗澡” (bathe him) as “帮他洗手” (wash his hands), delaying essential hygiene care. In construction, a misinterpreted command led to scaffold misplacement. Employers report frustration due to repeated clarification needs and reduced trust, resulting in micromanagement. Workers express anxiety and reduced confidence, further inhibiting communication and initiative.

4.3 Strategies Used to Cope with Ambiguity

4.3.1 Nonverbal Reinforcement

Both parties use gestures, pointing, and miming to clarify. For instance, pointing to a mop when saying “拖地” (mop the floor) reinforces intent. However, gestures differ cross-culturally; a thumbs-up may be interpreted differently, sometimes leading to new confusion.

4.3.2 Simplified Language and Code-Switching

Employers attempt to simplify Mandarin and avoid idioms or regional dialects. Some adopt Bahasa Indonesia keywords or English terms (e.g., “finish,” “clean,” “toilet”) for clarity. Workers develop a hybrid communication style mixing Mandarin, Bahasa Indonesia, and gestures.

4.3.3 Peer Mediation

Experienced co-workers or translators often mediate difficult interactions. Informal translation networks emerge in workplaces, relying on individuals with stronger language skills to bridge gaps.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that ambiguity in intercultural communication arises from the complex interplay of phonological, lexical, pragmatic, and cultural factors.

The findings confirm that ambiguity in intercultural communication arises from the complex interplay of phonological, lexical, pragmatic, and cultural factors. These results align with Thomas's (1983) distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures. Phonological ambiguity, as seen in the confusion between tones in Mandarin or dialectal interference from Hokkien, underscores the limitations of phonological awareness among non-native speakers, especially those with limited formal education in tonal languages. These issues

are intensified in high-pressure workplace settings, where quick comprehension is expected and mistakes can lead to real consequences, such as safety violations.

From the data, it is evident that lexical ambiguity disrupts the alignment between the semantic content of an utterance and its intended operational meaning. Terms like “bān” (班), which have multiple meanings depending on context, illustrate how limited vocabulary and contextual knowledge contribute to misunderstanding. According to Degani & Tokowicz (2010), non-native speakers process ambiguous lexical items with increased cognitive load, which may explain why migrant workers resort to guessing or non-response during interactions.

Pragmatic ambiguity, especially in indirect speech acts, reveals a profound mismatch between expected communicative norms. Indonesian workers, shaped by high-context communication styles (Hall, 1976), tend to interpret utterances based on relational cues rather than direct content. In contrast, Taiwanese employers, while culturally still valuing harmony, operate in task-oriented settings where clarity and immediacy are critical. As shown in case transcript examples, requests using mitigated language (e.g., “你可以帮忙一下吗?”) are often interpreted as optional, leading to incomplete or delayed actions. This affirms Ting-Toomey’s (1999) Face-Negotiation Theory, where face-saving strategies inadvertently contribute to communication breakdown.

Culturally, the contrast in power distance orientation between Indonesian and Taiwanese expectations complicates initiative-taking. Indonesian workers’ reluctance to question or clarify—stemming from deference to authority—clashes with employers’ expectation of proactive behavior. Hofstede’s (2001) model explains how such cultural traits directly influence communication style and perceived competence. Employers often interpret silence or lack of response as inattentiveness or resistance, not realizing it may be a culturally motivated effort to avoid confrontation or embarrassment.

Another important insight from the study is the emotional dimension of communication ambiguity. Repeated misunderstandings led to employer frustration and increased micromanagement, while workers reported anxiety, self-doubt, and hesitancy to engage. These emotional responses, although less visible, compound communication challenges and perpetuate an unequal power dynamic. According to Gudykunst’s AUM Theory (2004), unmanaged anxiety and uncertainty lower interpretive accuracy, thus reinforcing a cycle of ambiguity and mistrust.

Coping strategies observed in the study—such as nonverbal reinforcement, simplified language, and peer mediation—demonstrate a form of adaptive intercultural competence, albeit informal and inconsistent. These adaptations suggest that while formal training is lacking, participants are actively engaged in constructing mutual understanding through trial-and-error. However, reliance on peer translators or code-switching also introduces new risks, such as inconsistent message transmission and over-dependence on certain individuals.

The interaction text analysis in Appendix B further illustrates the context-sensitive nature of misunderstanding. Expressions like “休息一下吧” (Take a short rest) may carry implicit imperatives in Taiwanese workplace culture, but are processed by Indonesian workers as polite suggestions. This discrepancy exemplifies how surface-level linguistic comprehension does not equate to pragmatic comprehension, a point emphasized by Kroll & Bialystok (2013) in their work on bilingual language processing.

In summary, the discussion reinforces that ambiguity in this context is not accidental but systematic—rooted in structural, cognitive, and cultural asymmetries. It is therefore insufficient to attribute miscommunication to language deficiency alone. Rather, an intercultural systems approach is needed—one that accounts for language instruction, cultural literacy, emotional sensitivity, and power relations within transnational labor environments.

Appendix A: Case Transcript Examples

Case 1: Task Misunderstanding

Employer: “你可以整理一下那边的桌子吗？”

Worker: “Okay, I’ll clean it now.”

→ The worker wiped the wrong table because they misunderstood “那边” (over there) and “整理” (to organize, not clean).

Case 2: Safety Instruction

Employer: “这里不能踩，很危险。”

Worker: Ignored the warning because they didn’t understand “踩” (to step on) and didn’t clearly hear the word “危险” (dangerous).

Appendix B: Interaction Text Analysis

Original Text	Literal Translation	Actual Meaning	Potential Ambiguity
“休息一下吧。”	“Take a short rest.”	A polite command to rest	May be misunderstood as optional or merely a suggestion
“可以了吗？”	“Is it okay now?”	Confirmation if the task is finished	Might be interpreted as a neutral question with no urgency
“你帮我一下。”	“Help me for a bit.”	A request for assistance	If spoken with soft intonation, may not be taken seriously

Appendix C: Summary of Intercultural Training Module

Topic: Overcoming Ambiguity in Workplace Communication

1. Language Materials:
 - Basic work-related vocabulary (bathe, clean, cook, care)
 - Common command and prohibition phrases
 - Clarification expressions: “Sorry, could you repeat that?”, “Which one do you mean?”
2. Cultural Training:
 - Expectations of time and responsibility in Taiwan
 - Nonverbal expressions (eye contact, smile, nod)
 - Politeness norms in asking questions and giving suggestions
3. Role-Play Practice:
 - Scenarios: cleaning, elderly care, cooking tasks
 - Responding to ambiguous instructions
 - Dealing with minor workplace conflicts politely

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ambiguity in intercultural communication between Indonesian migrant workers and Taiwanese employers stems from a dynamic confluence of phonological, lexical, pragmatic, and cultural elements. Ambiguity is not merely a linguistic issue but a sociocultural phenomenon that permeates everyday interaction, work instructions, conflict resolution, and interpersonal dynamics.

Key findings include:

Phonological ambiguity impedes comprehension due to tonal misinterpretation and homophones.

Lexical and pragmatic ambiguity results in distorted speech acts, particularly with indirect directives and idiomatic expressions.

Cultural ambiguity emerges from differing norms regarding hierarchy, time, initiative, and politeness.

These ambiguities are not neutral—they shape power relations, task efficiency, trust, and safety. Misunderstandings affect worker wellbeing and employer satisfaction, often reinforcing stereotypes and deepening cultural distance.

Coping mechanisms, while creative and adaptive, remain inconsistent and largely individual-based. They highlight the necessity for systematic intercultural training and structured language programs as part of the labor migration process.

The evidence reveals that phonological ambiguity—exacerbated by tonal variation and dialectal interference—frequently leads to misinterpretation of key instructions. Lexical ambiguity, particularly involving polysemous terms, challenges comprehension due to limited contextual knowledge and vocabulary. Pragmatic ambiguity, especially with indirect speech acts, often results in distorted understanding of intent, which is compounded by culturally grounded differences in politeness, face-saving, and hierarchy norms.

Furthermore, cultural ambiguity influences expectations regarding time, authority, initiative, and interpersonal behavior. These misalignments shape not only communicative clarity but also the emotional atmosphere of the workplace, often generating anxiety, frustration, and reduced trust on both sides.

Despite these challenges, workers and employers have developed coping strategies—such as code-switching, gesture use, peer mediation, and simplification—that demonstrate adaptive intercultural competencies. However, these strategies are informal, unsystematic, and vulnerable to breakdowns. Thus, effective and sustainable communication in transnational labor contexts requires institutional support, targeted training, and culturally-informed policy interventions.

Ultimately, this study underscores that ambiguity in intercultural communication is a systemic issue that calls for systemic solutions—ones that integrate language education, cultural awareness, emotional sensitivity, and equitable power relations. Without such integration, workplace communication will remain fraught with misunderstanding, inefficiency, and relational strain.

6.2 Recommendations

For Employers and Institutions:

Develop pre-departure training modules on basic Mandarin and Taiwanese workplace culture tailored to specific job roles.

Provide in-service intercultural communication workshops for both employers and migrant workers.

Incorporate visual aids, simplified Mandarin glossaries, and mobile apps for common instructions.

For Migrant Workers:

Practice common workplace phrases and request clarification strategies.

Engage with peer mentoring from experienced workers with higher Mandarin competence.

Participate in cultural simulations or role-play exercises to reduce pragmatic misunderstandings.

For Policy Makers:

Mandate language and culture preparation programs pre-migration and ensure employer participation in cross-cultural orientation.

Fund research into multilingual communication technologies and community-based interpreting services.

The future of intercultural workplace harmony depends not just on acquiring the right words, but on building mutual understanding grounded in empathy, structure, and shared intent.

To address the recurring ambiguities in intercultural workplace communication, it is recommended that employers and institutions implement integrated onboarding programs combining basic Mandarin instruction, Taiwanese workplace norms, and visual aids for clarity. Employers should also receive intercultural sensitivity training to better interpret indirect communication styles. Migrant workers are encouraged to participate in targeted language courses, peer-led mentoring, and adopt active clarification strategies such as polite questioning and gesture use. Additionally, policymakers should mandate comprehensive pre-departure training covering language, cultural adaptation, and emotional readiness, while supporting the development of multilingual communication tools and community-based interpreting services to foster long-term intercultural harmony.

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