Context Preference Shifts in the Communicative Behavior of Chinese and Caucasian Students in Hawaii

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The high versus low context communication construct has been linked by theorists across disciplines as a major dimension of cultural variability. This study examines the context preferences of 134 Chinese international students and 147 Caucasian North American students at an American University. The primary objectives are to: (a) develop a context preference scale (CPS) to identify individual preference for high versus low-context communication; (b) assess the validity of the instrument by administering it to both Chinese and North American students; and (c) examine shifts in the preferred context level of these sojourners over time. Based on previous theory and research it was hypothesized that Chinese international students would prefer higher-context communication than Caucasian North American students and that over time context preferences among the Chinese students would tend to shift from high to low, while among the Caucasian students context preference would shift from low to high. Results support the first hypothesis, partially support the second, and suggest a revised model of context shifts for sojourners over time.

Considerable study over the last couple decades has focused on identifying the large range of cultural differences that affect the adjustment, performance, and satisfaction of international sojourners in contexts ranging from business to government to education (e.g., Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Some specific dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism (Triandis, 1995), independent versus interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), or those associated with leadership style (Gregersen, Morrison & Black, 1998) have been particularly emphasized at both the conceptual and empirical levels. Hall (1981) distinguished between high-context communication and low-context communication in a manner that has been identified by theorists across disciplines as another major dimension of cultural variability. He developed a ground-breaking framework that has been applied to various aspects of communication including non-assertiveness in organization communication, differences in conflict styles, and face negotiation theory and practices (Chung, 1998; McDaniel, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988). Hall's dimension appears often to link closely to individualism/collectivism (Gudykunst & Ting Toomey, 1988) with low context communication (LCC) predominating in individualistic cultures (e.g., American, German, and Scandinavian) and high-context communication (HCC) showing more prevalence in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean).

HCC is defined as a mode of communication in which both verbal and non-verbal behaviors are displayed with meanings implicitly embedded at different levels of the sociocultural context. Indirect verbal communication style is favored over direct verbal interactions. HCC relies on the receiver's ability to interpret messages from the appropriate aspects of the context rather than from the symbols exchanged. The symbols are used more as cues or guides to that part of the context which is either manifest in nonverbal

communication or remains still internalized in the person. More emphasis is placed on the "decoding" of messages. In problem-solving situations, HCC shuns face-to-face confrontation and is more likely to involve avoiding/obliging strategies and an affective-oriented style (Trubisky, Ting-Toomey & Lin, 1991). The avoiding/obliging style reflects the need for satisfying other concerns and face saving (Trubisky et al., 1991).

LCC, on the other hand, relies primarily on the *exchanged symbols* as a key to meaning. A direct verbal communication style is favored over an indirect style. Intentions and meanings are displayed clearly and have direct correspondence with verbal and non-verbal patterns. Concentration is placed on the "encoding" of messages. In problem-solving situations, LCC adopts more face-to-face confrontation and a controlling style reflective of the need to satisfy one's own concerns and own face-needs (Trubisky, et al.,1991).

Low-context communicators emphasize the exchange of ideas and thoughts. They tend to focus more on the words or *symbols* used to convey their ideas, information and feelings. They think it is important to be direct and to spell things out (Althen, 1992). They use their language in an instrumental form. They also attempt to defend their thoughts and ideas in a rational and analytical manner. They usually have a definite goal when they communicate, and the end product of the message is the most important part of the communication process (Ting-Toomey, 1985). Low-context communicators are usually not particularly skillful in attuning themselves to non-verbal messages (Althen, 1992).

High-context communicators, on the other hand, view the *process* of communication as important. In social situations, whether on a one-to-one or group basis, the emotional exchange, the being together, and the pleasure of communicating are equally important. High-context communicators usually try to guess and assess the feelings and state of mind of those present to maintain harmonious relationships and thus usually use indirect forms of communication.

Low-context cultures (particularly American culture) are more geared towards "freedom of speech" and "personal rights," with self-expression and verbosity highly prized. In making a clear comparison between the United States and Japan on how communication breakdown can easily take place in a workplace when people are not aware of the potential misunderstandings, Harris and Moran (1979) suggest:

> When a Japanese manager and an American manager work together, there are a great many possibilities for misunderstandings. The American is looking for meaning and understand [sic] in what is said; the Japanese is looking for meaning and understanding in what is not said – in silences and in the pauses between the silences. The American emphasis is on sending out or giving accurate messages (being articulate) whereas, the Japanese emphasis is on receiving messages that often do not have to be stated directly (p. 22).

In HCC the burden of drawing much of the meaning from the appropriate aspects of the context is placed on the receiver. Ramsey (1984) noted that the Japanese value catching another person's meaning before the other completely expresses the thought verbally or logically. Americans view talk as a means of social control, whereas the Japanese or the Chinese use more silence for this purpose and are therefore more tolerant of it (Giles & Franklyn-Stokes, 1989).

While there is no clear difference between high- or low-context cultures in the ability to communicate effectively with others *within* their same culture, significant communication problems can occur in interactions between those from different high-context cultures and between those from high- and low-context cultures. Such problems are experienced by a range of sojourners, including international students – our focus in this paper. The adjustment and success of international students has been explored by many researchers over the past decades (Andrade, 2005; Graham, 1983; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Hull, 1978; Mechanic, 1978; Rohrlick, Beulah & Martin, 1991; Shah, 1991; Westwood & Barker, 1990; Wong-Rieger, 1984). International students face the challenge of an often unfamiliar educational environment and the more general ecology (including the culture) within which they must study and live. They have to quickly develop a variety of strategies that would allow them to function adequately. The extent to which an individual is able to cope well in a new environment significantly depends upon his/her communicative ability (Kim, 1988). Kim (1977) suggests that social skills acquisition, including communication abilities, should reflect a linear improvement over time. For example, Ward and Kennedy (1993) examined the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of Singaporean and Malaysian students in New Zealand and Malaysian students in Singapore, and found that among other variables, the length of residence in the host culture predicted sociocultural adaptation.

There is ample empirical evidence that adjustment difficulties lessen with time as international students become better adapted to the environment (e.g., Hull, 1978; Kim, 1988; Klineberg & Hull, 1979). Klineberg and Hull (1979), in the most comprehensive study on the adaptation of international students at that time, found more satisfaction and involvement with U.S. culture in those international students who had been in the U.S. the longest. Those in the U.S. for more than two years indicated positive changes in more personal and intellectual development, greater change in political opinions and religious attitudes, and increased feelings of self-confidence and independence as a result of their experience living in the U.S.

Research suggests that much of what is happening over time in terms of sojourner adjustment, effectiveness, and satisfaction is associated with the development of intercultural communication competence; achieving a certain level of competence aids in adapting to a new environment and coping with unexpected stress. The goal is to be able to fit in and to negotiate with interactive aspects of the new culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). Part of this competence can involve a greater "other-directedness," i.e. by being able "to feel sensitivity rather than to analyze through rationality" (Miike, 2004, p. 72), or by meeting other-directed needs through "the ability to control emotion, the ability to express feelings indirectly, and the ability to save another's face" (Chen & Starosta, 1996, p. 372).

The recognized importance of dimensions such as individualism/collectivism or independent/interdependent self-construal has led to significant attempts to develop instruments to assess those values in individuals and cultures (Triandis, 1995). One would expect that such would also be the case for the LCC-HCC construct; only two attempts to do so, however, have been reported in intercultural/cross-cultural literature (i.e., Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Ohashi, 2000). Gudykunst et al. (1996) conceptualized the LCC-HCC dimension as two independent dimensions rather than the opposing poles of a single dimension by Hall (1981). Ohashi constructed a high-low context scale, framing his discussion and findings in a highly quantitative fashion of high-low

context communication that serves as an idealistic function of the social behavior that individuals are expected to conform in order to avoid being seen as "deviant." What was significantly missing in these studies was attention to the *dynamic* elements and complexities of human communicative behavior which is more realistic in the actual functioning mode of human behavior, particularly in cross-cultural settings. While previous theory and research hypothesized that Chinese students would prefer higher-context communication than Caucasian North American students, the current study highlights the shift in communicative behavior among the subjects and why and how shifts could occur over time through cross-cultural interactions.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The present study examined the context preferences of Chinese international students and Caucasian North American students at an American university. The primary objectives were to: (a) develop an instrument to identify individual preference for high- versus low-context communication; (b) assess the validity of the instrument by administering it to persons from cultures usually described in the literature as having high-context versus relatively low-context preferences; and (c) examine shifts in the preferred context level of these sojourners over time. The following hypotheses were proposed:

H1 Chinese international students will prefer higher-context communication than Caucasian North American students;

H2 Over time context preferences among the Chinese students will tend to shift from high to low, while among the Caucasian North American students the shift will occur from low to high in order to facilitate effective adaptation to the culturally diverse context.

Method

Design

To test the hypotheses, a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial was designed with gender, ethnicity, and year in college as the independent variables, and context preference as the dependent variable.

Participants

Participants were students of Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus (BYU UH), located in northern Oahu in the state of Hawaii. The culturally diverse composition of BYU UH offers an excellent opportunity to probe differences in values, attitudes, and behaviors across a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Data were collected from 281 students (140 males and 141 females) who volunteered to participate in the study.

The participants comprised 76 Caucasian freshmen (38 male and 38 female) and 64 Caucasian seniors (31 male and 33 female) from North America (U.S. – 136 and Canada – 6); 54 freshmen Chinese (25 male and 29 female) and 70 senior Chinese (38 male and 32 female) from the Asia-Pacific region (Hong Kong – 55, China – 31, Taiwan – 23, Singapore – 13, Malaysia – 9, Philippines – 4, and Korea – 4).

Instrument Development

In order to construct an instrument, scenarios were developed to reflect high- and low-context communicative behaviors as defined by Hall (1981). The initial step was to meet in small (3-person) groups of Caucasian (9 total) and Chinese (9 total) students arbitrarily selected. A total of 6 discussions were conducted with the first author acting as facilitator. Each group was first instructed on the purpose of the study and given clear definitions and examples of high- and low-context behavior as established by Hall. The students were then encouraged to give examples of how high- and low-context persons could behave in specific situations. They were also asked to relate any personal experiences in social, classroom, and work situations in which high- or low-context behavior was manifested. All discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and categorized into high- and low-context communicative behaviors. Twenty-two scenarios representing different types of situations drawn from the discussions were selected by the facilitator for the development of the instrument. The high- and low-context scenarios were then reviewed by a graduate level intercultural discussion group of 6 members who met once a week, including one of the authors and another professor from the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii. The final *Context Preference Scale* (CPS) was constructed using 17 of the 22 initial scenarios somewhat modified from the originals to reflect the comments and suggestions offered by this latter group.

The scenarios represent a wide variety of common social situations commonly encountered in everyday life in and around universities: interrupting a group's discussion, doing a favor for a friend, saying goodbye to a friend, having to say "no" to an invitation, participating in a classroom discussion, dealing with a problem with a roommate or a friend, asking a guest to obey house rules, dealing with an employee's work evaluation, talking to friends in public places, expecting friends to sacrifice time for you, accepting criticism, expecting friends to offer rides and asking for rides, dealing with jokes, interpreting a relationship, expecting friends to keep their word, paying for lunch, and saying "no" to a professor. A sample scenario and response scale is provided below:

Suppose your friend has a car and you don't. In this situation, you would prefer:

> Not having your friend automatically offer you a ride home when you do not ask for it; your friend to offer you a ride home without even having to ask for it, especially if your friend knows you do not have a car and had in the past given you rides home. You would become upset if this expectation was overlooked.

Participants were provided with written instructions in which they were told to read each of the scenarios and on each respond with their preference on six-point Likert-type scales with a high-context alternative as one anchor and a low-context alternative on the other, with these anchors randomly varied in right versus left positions on the scale. The context preference score for each participant was computed as a mean score across the 17 scenarios; the higher the score on the CPS, the greater the preference for high-context communication. Participants also completed questions eliciting their gender, ethnic/national background, and year in school.

Procedure

The CPS was distributed to 3 groups of 12 female students (2 Asian Chinese, 4 Caucasians, and 6 Polynesians), who were enrolled in a course on Organizational Behavior and were earning credit for a small research project as part of the requirements of the course. Each group of students was assigned to distribute the questions equally to 4 categories of students on the campus; i.e., freshmen and senior Chinese from Asia and freshmen and senior Caucasians from mainland North America. Student assistants were told to stand by the entrance of the cafeteria during dinner time to distribute the questionnaire together with a piece of candy as a small reward, or to hand the questionnaires to the students residing in the dormitories. Of the 320 questionnaires that were distributed, 291 were received and 10 were rejected because the subjects were American-born Asians. A total of 281 questionnaires were includes in the analysis.

Results

The means on the CPS for gender, ethnicity, and year in school are presented in Table 1. The overall mean for all subjects was 3.18, near the midpoint of the scale. A main effect of ethnicity was significant (F=15.28, df=1/256, p<.001), indicating that Chinese preferred higher-context communication than Caucasians, thus supporting hypothesis 1 and providing evidence for the construct validity of the CPS. A main effect of year in school was significant (F=11.52, df=1/256, p<.001), indicating that senior students preferred lower-context communication than freshman. In other words, preference for lower-context communication increased for *both* ethnic groups over their length of stay at the University, thus supporting hypothesis 2 for Chinese students but not Caucasians – the latter were hypothesized to move toward a higher-context preference to accommodate international students. In fact, Caucasian students over time came to prefer even lower context than they did as freshman. A weak interaction between ethnicity and year (F=2.09, df=1/256, p<.15) suggests that there was a tendency for the Chinese students to move more in the low-context direction than Americans. There were no significant main effects or interactions of gender.

In order to see if scenarios could be clustered based on participant responses, principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed with SPSSPC software on the responses to 17 scenarios. Six factors were extracted, accounting for 56.2% of the total variance. With an Eigen value of .50 for inclusion of a scenario in interpretation of a factor, responses to 4 of the 17 scenarios did not load on any factor. These were scenario 3 (saying goodbye to a friend), scenario 4 (dealing with having to say "no" to an invitation), scenario 6 (dealing with a problem with your roommate or a friend), and scenario 8 (dealing with an employee's work evaluation).

Loadings of scenarios on factors are shown in Table 2. *Factor 1*, consisting of scenarios 2 (doing a favor for a friend) and 7 (asking a guest to obey house rules), was tentatively labeled "*positive confrontation*" and accounted for 16.3% of the total variance. *Factor 2*, consisting of scenarios 1 (interrupting a group's discussion), 10 (expecting friends to sacrifice time for you), 11 (accepting criticism from a professor), and 12 (expecting friends to offer rides and asking for rides) was labeled "*negative confrontation*," and accounted for

Table 1: Mean Context Preferences for Gender, Ethnicity & Year in School

Gender	Male	Female
	3.19	3.17
Ethnicity	Chinese	Caucasian
	3.32	3.06
Year	Freshmen	Senior
	3.29	3.08

Table 2: Factor Analysis

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Q01	.063	.528	.254	.403	-.137	.000
Q02	.606	.179	.305	.179	-.179	.039
Q03	-.158	.054	.388	.488	.222	.167
Q04	.465	.126	.229	-.364	-.319	.106
Q05	.285	.157	-.124	.560	.172	.036
Q06	.445	-.015	.398	.339	-.111	.018
Q07	.746	-.215	.087	.013	.068	.061
Q08	.464	-.065	-.068	.119	-.173	.439
Q09	.060	-.166	.119	.684	-.073	.041
Q10	.111	.664	.199	-.057	.215	.102
Q11	.236	.600	-.205	.118	.346	.091
Q12	-.104	.714	-.082	-.153	-.125	.052
Q13	.173	.123	-.033	.237	.714	.121
Q14	-.012	.039	.121	-.046	.001	.879
Q15	.125	-.003	.739	.129	-.116	.006
Q16	.282	.003	-.110	.142	-.682	.026
Q17	.189	.049	.715	-.060	.179	.100

11.8% of the total variance. *Factor 3*, consisting of scenarios 15 (expecting friends to keep their word) and 17 (saying "No" to a professor), was labeled "*self-assertion*" and accounted for 8.7% of the total variance. *Factor 4*, consisting of scenarios 5 (participating in a classroom discussion) and 9 (talking to friends in public places), was labeled "*expressing one's feelings/opinions*," and accounted for 7.3% of the total variance. *Factor 5*, consisting of scenarios 13 (dealing with jokes) and 16 (paying for lunch), was labeled "*face maintenance*" and accounted for 6.0% of the total variance. *Factor 6*, consisting of scenario 14 (interpreting a relationship) accounted for 6.0% of the total variance. This factor is not easily interpretable because it was a single-item factor. It involves a judgment on a particular behavior – in this instance, a romantic behavior (respondents were asked how they would "construe" the behavior of this particular setting). Because of the "romantic" component plugged into the friendship ties involved in the given scenario, respondents seemed to isolate and exclude romance from the rest of the other social situations. Generally, though, the other factors appear to deal with issues noted in the literature between high- and low-context communication – issues associated with *confrontation* labeled under "Positive Confrontation" and "Negative Confrontation"; *self-assertion* labeled under "self-assertion"; *verbal and non-*

verbal expression labeled under "expressing one's feeling/opinions"; and *saving face features* labeled under "face maintenance."

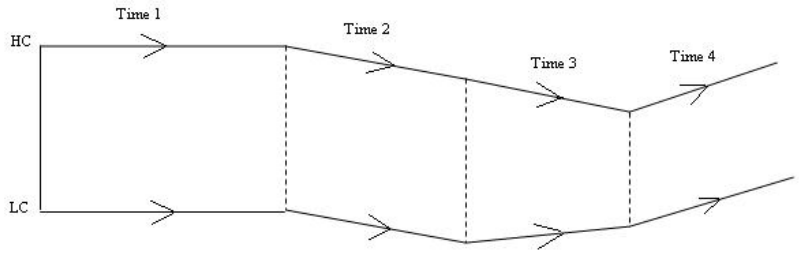
Discussion

When international students settle into a country such as the U.S., they are thrown into a vast range of new cultural challenges and experiences, ranging from an alien education system to an often culturally different roommate. Efforts to communicate identity or signal meanings, jokes, special terms, or jargon which worked well in the native culture are frequently thwarted because of the wide gap between high- and low-communicative behaviors. According to Pearce and Kang (1987), the first stage of the sojourn depicts an "outsider," or one who is minimally competent in an international language and has yet to be submerged into the new cultural milieu. In the case of a high- and low-context person, he/she is a "greenie" and at the initial stage of adaptation is encountered with situations of deviation from the familiar. Over time and with practice, some old patterns are unlearned, while those deemed acceptable or desirable by the host society are acquired, because the human nervous system is structured in such a way that "the patterns that govern behavior and perception come into consciousness only when there is a deviation from the familiar" (Kim, 1988, p. 52). In this respect, the shifting of the context in the process of learning and acquiring a new system of communication patterns that are acceptable in the host society for both low- and high-context communicators is experienced as individuals undergo their interaction activities, and the sojourners experience the new culture or type of communication pattern and begin the deculturation/acculturation process (Kim, 1988). This is achieved when "one must decide how much time to invest in contexting another person. A certain amount of "contexting" is always necessary, so that the information that makes up the explicit portions of the message is neither inadequate nor excessive" (Hall, 1981, pp. 92-93). When people have the same amount of "contexting" in interaction, they can communicate with each other.

A common situation that leads to major problems between high- and low-context communication is when a low-context communicator is puzzled at the ambiguities contained in a high-context message and a high-context communicator feels patronized, talked-down to, and frustrated with more words than are necessary. Low-context communicators find it too difficult to interpret context in meaning because they are not accustomed to it. Therefore, attempts by a low-context person to try to communicate like a high-context person are difficult because high-context behaviors are deeply enmeshed in complex cultural traditions, such as the saving face mechanism which stems from Eastern Confucianist ideologies. Furthermore, transforming verbal utterances into the non-verbal "context language" and communicating without words is difficult, especially if one is not used to that communication style.

Figure 1 presents a prospective model of the shifting of context of the high-context (HC) Chinese and the low-context (LC) Caucasian North Americans in the adaptation process while in their varied sojourning periods (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior year). During the time 1 frame (typically the freshman year), a wide variation in the context level between the American and Chinese subjects would be expected as they brought their

Figure 1: Accommodating Convergence in Context Preferences Over Time



HC = High Context
LC = Low Context

culturally based communication preferences with them into the new cultural milieu. During time frame 2, both cultures would be expected to decrease their context level as they found the need to be somewhat more explicit or elaborate in their communication to be understood effectively. Freshmen international students encounter difficulty when writing clear and concise essays or term papers. Coming from a high-context culture where meanings are indirect, implied, and ambiguous, and language, even the dialect spoken at home, is "pictographic," the Asian students have a tendency to express their thoughts and feelings in more words than are necessary.

Another area is the acquisition of English language competence. Competence in English is clearly related to one's self-confidence and is important if the student is going to have a fair chance to interact successfully in the U.S. educational environment. To be fluent in a language is not an overnight accomplishment but is a skill which is usually acquired from a young age. Thus, international students, who are thrown into a low context environment, are not always completely fluent in the English language even though they may have passed the TOEFL requirement test. With numerous expectations to fulfill – from attaining good grades, which is their primary objective in the first place, to successfully interacting with other cultures and a host of other interacting adjustment variables – students will inevitably make the shift by lowering their context level to adapt to the various facets of university life which, in the academic area, include class presentations, writing skills, verbal expressions, and class participation. Grades are usually based on the clarity of presentation in both verbal and written expression. Most American professors have little significant international experience and are not familiar with the human and economic issues that concern international students. The more ethnocentric ones scorn students who do not speak proper English, but do not realize that students are often more linguistically proficient than their professors through their ability to speak, read, and write in more than one language, including English. The students struggle to be as clear as possible for the professors and engage in classroom participation to attain good grades. Thus, the low-context educational system and environment play a major part in pressuring them to shift to a lower-context communication style.

During time frame 3, this process of shifting toward lower-context communication would continue, perhaps at somewhat varying rates for the two groups depending on the "background" level of context in the community. It might be expected that the lower-context Americans in this study would to some degree "bottom out" as they may be as low as they can go (e.g., a reverse "ceiling effect"). This varying rate of context shift over time might be reflected in the weak ethnicity X year interaction detected in this study, and it is likely that this was the stage of most participants sampled in this study. Generally, the findings of this study are consistent with this model, although there was no tracking data for the intermediate sophomore and junior years.

By the end of time frame 3, some degree of convergence would have occurred as these cultures attempted to accommodate one another. While they may not necessarily have the same communication context preferences (or skills) they would be closer than before, and the interactions would be more effective because of it. Also, over time, both the Chinese and American participants would have had increasingly *shared experiences* at the interpersonal, institutional, and community levels. Such shared experiences would allow them to begin communicating with one another in a higher-context manner as fewer words and elaboration of messages in symbols becomes less necessary (Fontaine, 1989; Giles, 2001; Kincaid, 1988). Kincaid (1988, p. 282) states that "if two or more individuals share information with one another, then over time they will tend to converge toward one another, leading to a state of greater uniformity," but not suggesting perfect identity or absolute uniformity. This would be reflected in both groups shifting upwards in context preference as depicted in time frame 4.

We do not know how much or little these students have interacted with one another or the depth of their relationships. As we pointed out earlier, increased interaction results of less frequent usage of exchanged symbols suggests that both would either become high in their context level or both would accommodate each other by low-context communicators increasing their context level and high-context communicators decreasing their context level. Although length of stay may be a predictor of socio-cultural adaptation, the number of years spent in college does not equally correlate with the depth of social interactions that may have taken place. Some students may have lived in the U.S. previously or had other overseas experiences. Thus, even if we had been able to collect data from students at the intermediate sophomore and junior levels, we wouldn't necessarily expect year in school to perfectly map the time frames in Figure 1. It would be interesting to study Chinese or other "high-context" students in their post-sojourn period to determine the degree to which they continue to maintain their relatively low-context behavior. Anecdotal accounts suggest that overseas sojourners switch their predisposition to communicate low- or high-context depending on the people (local or international) they come in contact with and the location of their residence. They live a linguistic "double-decker" life and are comfortable with the shifting and shuttling. A local Singaporean who spent two years in Boston to get his MBA speaks with all the "lahs, lehs, and dahs" (Singapore English) thrown in and uses his Bostonian accent when he communicates with low-context people. It is a matter of making himself understood. His Bostonian friends would never understand his Singlish (Singapore English), and his Singapore friends would never understand his Bostonian accent and would be mystified by all the "marbles" in his mouth.

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