

## Understanding the Impact of Culture on Interpretation: A Relevance Theoretic Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article proposes a relevance theoretic approach to understanding the impact of culture on interpretation. Theorizing about cultural differences in communication has been dominated to date by the ‘trait’ approach (e.g. Hong and Mallorie, 2004, p.60), and yet the dependence on this approach has been seen as not offering an account of the process of communication which would explain how culture affects people’s communicative behaviour (Casnir, 1999). In this paper I briefly review the prior work that has theorised cultural differences from a trait-focused perspective and argue that Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) has the potential for making more explicit what actually happens in the process of communication and allows a way for explaining the relationship between people’s contribution to the interpretation process, and the impact of culture on interpretation. I then report a study on interpretation of radio programmes by two groups of bicultural individuals, the aim of which is to demonstrate how Relevance Theory can provide a useful framework for exploring this sociocultural phenomenon. I conclude with a brief consideration of the methodological contribution of a relevance theoretic perspective to understanding cultural differences in general, and the impact of culture on interpretation in particular.

**Keywords:** Relevance theory, culture, impact, interpretation, bicultural individuals

### 1. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed an explosion of research on cultural differences in communication. Most research tends to identify the unique characteristics of people from different nations using Hofstede’s (1980) cultural values framework and then attribute the observed similarities and differences between cultures to traits that are deeply rooted in terms of individualism as opposed to collectivism. For example, much evidence shows that cultural orientations may predict choice of communication style and an individualistic culture is more inclined to direct style, whereas a collectivistic culture prefers indirect style (e.g. Adair & Brett, 2004; Brew & Cairns 2004; Cohen, 2004; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Within Hofstede’s model, culture has been characterised as a set of static, fixed values and norms shared among a social group such as national, ethnic or racial groups (e.g. Gudykunst and Kim 2003; Hofstede 1980; Lindsey *et al.* 1999; Lustig and Koester 1999; Spencer-Oatey 2008; Triandis 1995). For example, Spencer-Oatey (2008, p.3) conceptualises culture as

A set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence

(but not determine) each member's behaviour and his or her interpretation of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.

This trait approach, as Hong *et al.* (2003, p. 453) note, attributes culture to "territorial boundaries" or "national boundaries". What is implied in such an approach is that people who belong to a specific culture are a homogeneous group and those who have been exposed extensively to two cultures and "show behaviour competency in both cultures" are therefore not included (Benet-Martínez *et al.*, 2002, p. 495). Although this approach is eminently fruitful, it is "not based on an understanding of the actual communication processes involved when those from different cultural backgrounds interact" (Casnir, 1999, p. 92). Consequently, there is little evidence about how culture affects people's communicative behaviours. There is even less evidence about the process of how culture might exert influence on behaviours of those individuals who are bicultural. This is surprising given the ever increasing phenomenon that more and more people have become bicultural as a result of globalization. I argue that the issues in question can be investigated by using a different theoretical framework – Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory. The aim of this paper is to show the effectiveness of the framework in analysing the impact of culture on interpretations made by bicultural people and provide a new perspective on understanding cultural differences in communication.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I introduce the definition of culture used in this paper. I then briefly outline Relevance Theory, focusing on the insights pertinent to the issue of utterance interpretation. After this, I report a study on the interpretation of radio programmes by two groups of bicultural people from a relevance theoretic perspective, the results of which are then discussed. I conclude with a discussion of the methodological contribution of a relevance theoretic perspective to understanding cultural differences in general, and the impact of culture on interpretation in particular.

## 2. Culture

This paper takes a dynamic constructivist approach to culture proposed by Hong and her colleagues (e.g. Hong, 2009; Hong & Chiu, 2001; Hong *et al.*, 2000; Hong *et al.*, 2003; Hong & Mallorie, 2004). What is new about this approach "is its assumption that culture is internalized in smaller pieces, in the knowledge structures or mental constructs that social perceivers use to interpret ambiguous stimuli" (Hong *et al.*, 2003, p.454). "Stimuli" are "cultural clues", including, for example, utterances or icons (Hong *et al.*, 2004, p. 63). Moreover, this approach focuses on the dynamic nature of cultural process and it addresses the question of *when* and *how* culture exerts influence on human cognition, affect and behaviour. In essence, according to this approach, culture is seen as a shared "knowledge structure or construct" of ideas, values and beliefs (i.e. a shared cultural meaning system). The internalized construct "does not continuously guide our information processing" but rather does so when triggered or activated in response to a stimulus (Hong *et al.*, 2003, p. 454). An individual "can hold more than one cultural meaning system" and shift between these systems in response to cultural clues in the environment (Hong *et al.*, 2004, p. 63). A given cultural meaning system can have profound influences on one's judgements or behaviour when, in particular situations, the relevant implicit theories or shared assumptions are cognitively accessible, salient and applicable (i.e. relevant)

in the situation (e.g. Hong & Chiu, 2001; Hong *et al.*, 2003). Conceptualizing culture in this way makes it clear that cultural differences are not explained by value orientations, but rather “conceptualised as differences in systems of shared meaning among members of different cultural groups” (Hong & Mallorie, 2004, p. 63). What all this indicates is that when this meaning system is triggered or activated in response to a cultural clue, it will make intra- and intercultural communication possible. It also indicates that a dynamic constructivist approach to culture is a meaning-based approach.

### 3. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) is an inferential approach to pragmatics. One key claim in this theory is that human communication is intentional. According to Relevance Theory, in an act of communication, a speaker does not “merely intend to convey certain information, but must intend her audience to recognise that she has this intention” (Wilson, 2005, p. 1132). This is because “recognising a speaker’s meaning amounts to recognising the intention behind the speaker’s communicative behaviour” (Wilson, 2005, p. 1132). In such a model, communication is a cognitive process in which “the communicator produces a piece of evidence of her meaning – the ostensive stimulus – and the addressee infers her meaning from this piece of evidence and context” (Sperber & Wilson, 2006, p. 176). This cognitive process is guided by the principle of relevance, as it is assumed that “human cognition is relevance-oriented; we pay attention to information that seems relevant to us” (Wilson, 1994, p. 45). An utterance is a piece of linguistic evidence of the meaning a speaker wants to convey in a given context. However, communication can never be achieved by decoding what is linguistically expressed alone; it must include hearers’ use of the contextual information which the communicator intended the hearers to use to make appropriate inferences. This indicates that if an utterance is perceived by a hearer to be relevant, it is always the product of interaction between a stimulus and context in which the utterance is processed. Therefore, from a relevance-theoretic perspective, what is linguistically said determines only a fraction of what is intended, i.e., context plays a crucial role in understanding how a hearer generates an interpretation.

Context within Relevance Theory is a psychological construct that has to be established and developed in the course of communication in order to select the correct interpretation. It refers to part of “a cognitive environment of an individual” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 39). A cognitive environment of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him. The total cognitive environment of a person consists of all the information accessible to the person, either from perception, memory or by inference. From a relevance theoretic point of view, one holds cultural knowledge in one’s mind and uses it when activated as part of the available information. However, for the comprehension of a particular utterance, not all of the infinite number of assumptions that make up an individual’s cognitive environment are used. What an individual has access to is merely the subset of all the existing assumptions manifest to the individual. The subset of information is what Sperber and Wilson call “context” or “a contextual assumption” (1995, pp. 15-16). Sperber and Wilson emphasise that context is not fixed or given in advance of the comprehension process, but a product of a dynamic process of selection, driven by the search for relevance. Specifically, they argue that context is not

limited to information about the immediate physical environment or previous utterance; it also includes such things as general cultural assumptions. This is significant, in that in making this point, Sperber and Wilson suggest that if a hearer activates cultural knowledge in response to an utterance, then culture is dynamic rather than static, and this is in strong opposition to the view held by the trait approach.

Specifically, while emphasising the importance of cognitive environment in an act of communication, Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. 41) also argue that “the same facts and assumptions may be manifest in the cognitive environments of two different people”. In this case, the two people can have a mutual cognitive environment (what actually intersects in the cognitive environments of two people), but it would be impossible for the two people to have exactly identical cognitive environments. As Sperber and Wilson write,

[T]o say that two people share a cognitive environment does not imply that they make the same assumptions: merely that they are capable of doing so (1995, p. 41).

This suggests that in order for hearers to generate the same contextual implications in response to an utterance, there must be some degree of overlap in their cognitive environments, since hearers draw on this when generating contextual assumptions.

If Sperber and Wilson are correct, the above postulate would predict that people whose cognitive environments do not overlap with each other will interpret the propositional content of an utterance in different ways. It is reasonable to argue that people who have been brought up in China do not overlap in their cognitive environments with people who have been brought up in Britain. As a result, according to Sperber and Wilson (1995, p. 38), “they can construct different representations and make different inferences”. When interpreting a given utterance, Chinese and English hearers are likely to interpret it in different ways, in that they may activate contextual assumptions that are available to hearers of one culture alone, but may not be available to hearers of another culture under study. If this is true, this means that culture has a direct impact on interpretation.

In what follows, I report a study on interpretation of radio programmes by two groups of bicultural individuals. My intention is to explore what contextual assumptions each group generates and whether people who have access to different cognitive environments interpret the issues raised by callers in different ways.

#### **4. An Empirical Investigation of the Impact of Culture on Interpretation**

My aim in this paper, which is part of a larger research project on how cultural differences are actually realised in everyday interactions (see Yu, 2011), is to investigate how people’s interpretations of an utterance can vary, and how this variation in interpretation relates to people’s cultural backgrounds, and more precisely how culture might impact on interpretations. For this purpose, I collected two set of comparable radio talk programmes broadcast in China and Britain. The decision to choose radio talks was inspired by the aim of investigating how people understand an utterance in a specific context in a real life situation. It has been argued that the communicative style and manner of broadcasting are approximate to those of ordinary, informal conversation, and the style of radio talk is “overwhelmingly the preferred communicative style of interaction between people in the routine contexts of day-to-day life

and especially in the places in which they live” (Scannell: 1991, pp. 3-4). I therefore believe that the data collected from radio discourse provides a very useful data source for my research.

#### 4.1. Radio Advice Talk Shows

Radio advice talk shows are a form of audience participation programmes that emerged towards the end of the 20th century. “The guests in these shows are usually ordinary people and topics focus on their everyday dilemmas” (Haddinton, 2006, p. 257). In the programmes that I focus on, callers phone in to the show to seek advice on their problems related to family arguments, love relationships, and everyday ups and downs. For the purpose of my study, I collected a total of sixty cases of host-caller talks from five radio phone-in shows (30 cases from two Chinese programmes as opposed to 30 cases from three English programmes). In my empirical work, I have examined a large amount of host-caller interactions in the two sets of data (Yu, 2011). Because of the scope of this paper, I provided three extracts for analysis (see Appendix 1-3), two are from English programmes and one is from Chinese programmes.

#### 4.2. Data

In order to show how interpretations were generated, I adopted two steps in collecting data relating to contextual assumptions. The first step was a summary of my own interpretation, and the second step was a focus group interview, which referred to the opinions of actual hearers in the two cultures in consideration. The reason for the two-step method was that I believed that an analysis drawing on my own understanding of what a caller intended to communicate in her utterance could only represent my interpretation. Whether it was actually an interpretation that anyone other than myself would come up with is not self-evident. Only an interview asking actual hearers themselves would generate evidence to support this claim.

I examined the contextual assumptions as follows. In cases where hearers from China activated a contextual assumption in response to an utterance produced by a caller, I looked to see if the same contextual assumption was also available to hearers from Britain. If the answer was positive, I indicated that hearers from China and Britain generated similar interpretations. If the answer was negative, I indicated that the two sets of hearers generated different interpretations. In the latter situation, I indicated that Chinese culture has an impact on interpretations generated by Chinese hearers. Likewise, in cases where hearers from Britain activated a contextual assumption in response to an utterance produced by a caller, I looked to see if the same contextual assumption was available to hearers from China. If the answer was positive, I then indicated that hearers from Britain and China generated similar interpretations. If the answer was negative, I would then indicate that the two sets of hearers generated different interpretations. In the latter situation, I also indicated that British culture has an impact on interpretations generated by hearers from Britain.

According to the dynamic constructivist approach discussed earlier, people have culturally specific meaning systems that are shared by individuals within the culture. These cultural meaning systems are interpretative frames that influence individuals’ affect, cognition and behaviour (Hong *et al.*, 2000). The biculturals – those who internalize two separate cultural

frames (e.g. Hong, 2009; Hong *et al.*, 2000) – can shift between these frames in response to cultural clues such as an utterance. Since I am a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese and I have also been exposed to British culture for a number of years, I assume that I have had access to at least some knowledge constructs from both cultural meaning systems, and therefore I consider myself as a bicultural person for the purposes of my study.

### 4.3. The Respondents

In order to explore the potential contextual assumptions each group generates in the process of interpretation, I carried out a survey using two groups of students studying at the University of Warwick, UK. I called the first group the ‘English group’, which consisted of four English male students and one English female student. They knew each other as a result of taking a Mandarin Chinese course together at the Language Centre, and at the time of interview, they were still taking the same course and could regularly meet in the centre. They were at least bi-cultural individuals who have wider cultural knowledge, because they were native speakers of English, and learning Chinese language and culture. I called the second group the ‘Chinese group’ because it consisted of two Chinese female students and one Chinese male student doing MA degrees at the University of Warwick. They were friends who were all living in the same accommodation and who cooked dinner and had dinner together at the weekend. They were also bicultural individuals, because they were native speakers of Mandarin Chinese and had been exposed to British culture for a couple of years.

I interviewed the two groups separately. In each case, the group met at the Language Centre where I played the entire extracts from the radio talk data, replaying the relevant sections so that my respondents could refresh their memories whenever they wished. I then asked the respondents a series of questions. The interviews were all conducted in English. While analysing the inferences drawn by my respondents in discussing the call, I provide only those details of their responses that allow me to indicate or account for differences in interpretation.

### 4.4. Evidence on Differences in Interpretations

The analysis below examines the data, first English, and then Chinese. In the extracts below, H stands for the host and C stands for the caller.

#### [4.1]

- (1) C: She told me yesterday morning that she’s been seeing and <> having um sexual relationship...with ANOTHER MAN.
- (2) H: Ok not er the sort of information you want to hear from your girlfriend is it?
- (3) C: No. I was very hurt and I feel very troubled by it, I’m you know just wondering, I mean she is behaving like she’s a complete cow.
- (4) H: Em.
- (5) C: And I’m just you know I I I love her, and I’m not sure how to take this[...] (see Appendix 1)

I am assuming that the caller's problem in [4.1] is that he does not know how to accept the fact that his girlfriend has a sexual relationship with somebody else, and therefore, he asks advice on this. I propose, by drawing on Relevance Theory, that in making the above inferences, I as a hearer have to resolve certain ambiguities in the utterances produced by the caller and assign referents to deictic words. I believe it is the presence of these ambiguities that gives the utterances the potential for different interpretations. For example, in the context of discussing something that happened to the caller and his girlfriend, '*she*' refers to the caller's girlfriend. Moreover, where the caller states in (5) 'I love her and I'm not sure how to take this' the connective '*and*' implies a causal relationship between the two states in (5) which could be alternatively stated as 'and therefore'. I claim the way in which I resolve the ambiguities in the caller's utterance is significantly related to the way I interpret the overall extract. The particular assumptions which lead to the process of disambiguation I described above are the problem the caller intends to solve. The significance of the issue of ambiguity will be discussed in more depth after the following description of the respondents and their interpretations.

When discussing this call with my two groups, I first asked each group a question about what they thought it might mean if one told one's partner that one had a sexual relationship with somebody else.

**The English group responded:**

G: Just tell the fact.

S: Just mean what they say.

A: That's the fact. If they decide that's a problem then that's a problem, if they decide that it's not then it's not.

T: Yeah.

J: I guess what he's trying to say depends on the situation. It can mean anything that means that she's bored, it could mean she's not having enough sex as it is, or maybe she's found somebody better than the one she has had before, so it's really hard to say just from saying that she's had sex with someone else.

**The Chinese group answered:**

L: She had sexual relationships with someone else and even told her partner. Obviously she doesn't take the issue of sexual relationship seriously... a good name for this kind of women is open but probably I am deeply influenced by my parents. I call her a morally bad woman.

C: A slut. I think a case like this is rare in China. She even TOLD him she had a sexual relationship with somebody else when she is IN a relationship. I assume if someone in a relationship has a sexual relationship with somebody else, they try to hide it and not to tell anyone and it would be silly if this person tells her partner what has been done.

G: Yeah. Maybe it's common in Western countries like England that they don't really care whether you are a virgin or not. But in China a large majority of us still think those people who have sexual relationship before getting married are not good at least morally.



For the English group, the referents of the expression 'having a sexual relationship with somebody else' are quite distinct from that of the Chinese group. The English group as a whole came to an agreement that this expression is just 'the fact' although J inferred that this fact 'can mean anything'. Their remark that 'if they decide that's a problem then that's a problem, if they decide it's not then it's not' indicates that the English group did not think having a sexual relationship with somebody else was a particularly important issue in a romantic relationship. For the Chinese group, in contrast, this expression has a much wider field of reference, potentially covering their referent for 'the fact' in the sense of Chinese morals. They thought that having a sexual relationship with somebody before getting married was an important issue, and assumed that a woman with such a behaviour was 'a morally bad woman'. Although G in the Chinese group compared how England and China treated the issue of virginity differently, she quickly switched from her knowledge of English culture to that of Chinese culture, and inferred that sleeping around before getting married in China was a morally wrong behaviour. This indicated that G had a choice of context to call on, and finally depended on her Chinese cultural specific knowledge to interpret the issue raised by the English caller.

Later in the interview, I asked the groups what problem they thought the caller wanted to solve in this case.

**The English group responded:**

- T: He is trying to say whether he would be with her or not.  
 A: I think it's also a problem with his own self-image. He's a kind of confused about how he should react to that situation.  
 G: Like he said...I don't know how I've got her in the first place. Like he's lucky to have a girlfriend like this. So he doesn't want to break up.  
 J: I think he's really confused as well. So he's calling to get some clarification as to what he should do.  
 S: I think he wants to know if it's wrong for her to cheat on him because he wants to get radio host's opinions.

**The Chinese group answered:**

- G: I think if in China a man in this situation knows exactly how to react to this. They will end the relationship straightaway. I think he's just feeling hurt that someone he wants to marry turns out to be like this and he's trying to find someone to express his anger. Probably he thinks radio programme is the best place to tell because he is in the dark and nobody knows him.  
 L: I don't think he needs advice on this issue. He just wants to tell someone otherwise he may feel mad.  
 C: I agree it's hard for him to accept the fact that his girl is a bad woman.

It became clear that although both groups understood what the caller was saying in similar ways, in that they both inferred that the caller's utterances were about his relationship with his girlfriend who had a sexual relationship with somebody else, they varied in terms of their assessment of the problem the caller was constructing. Again, I argue that the differences in their interpretations arise from the differences in contextual assumptions each group activated.



For example, in inferring what problem the caller intended to solve, the two groups used distinct sets of assumptions as evidence. Their responses to my first question show that the English group did not have, as part of their knowledge, the assumption articulated in varying ways by members of the Chinese group that 'having sex with somebody before getting married is a morally bad woman'. Because of this, the two groups activated a distinct set of assumptions when later asked to explain what problem they thought the caller intended to solve. A, in the English group, drew on his previous articulated assumption about 'the fact' to infer that the caller was just 'kind of confused about how he should react to that situation'. In contrast, G, in the Chinese group, drew on her previous articulated assumption about 'a morally bad woman' to infer that the caller's (if he were a Chinese) phone in to the show was not to solve any problem because 'he knows exactly what to do', but to express how angry he was at his girlfriend's morally impermissible behaviour. In general, there are some broad differences in each group's understanding of the problem the caller intended to solve: the English group saw the caller's utterances as designed to communicate the fact that he wanted to know what he should do in this situation. The Chinese group saw the caller's speech as designed not to solve any problem, but to express how angry he was with his girlfriend's morally impermissible behaviour.

I am also aware of the differences within the groups of my respondents. For example, although members of the English group activated similar contextual assumptions about 'the fact', their understanding of the problem the caller intended to solve varies: T inferred that the caller wanted to know whether he should be with his girlfriend or not. In contrast, both A and J inferred that the caller was confused about how he should react to that situation; F, however, inferred that the caller wanted to know if it is wrong for his girlfriend to cheat on him. The English group as a whole did not indicate that they were interpreting the caller's issue in exactly the same way as I had, but did indicate that they inferred that the caller was confused as to what he should do in this situation. The Chinese group produced interpretations that were different to my own, but which did indicate that we all understood the caller's speech as implying that he was concerned with his relationship with his girlfriend after she had a sexual relationship with somebody else.

More specifically, I am aware that the bicultural participants have a choice of context to call on when they interpret the problem constructed by the caller. Their responses to my second question show that G, in the Chinese group, made an immediate connection between the caller's issue and how a Chinese man in the same situation would actually act, and inferred that the caller (if he were a Chinese) 'was trying to find someone to express his anger'. What this indicated is that G depended on her Chinese cultural specific knowledge to infer the issue raised by the English caller.

To summarise, there are differences both between and within the groups in understanding the problem the caller was expressing. For the English group, the caller's speech was designed to solve the problem of how he should react to that situation. For the Chinese group, the caller's speech was designed not to solve any problem, but to express how angry he was at his girlfriend's morally impermissible behaviour. Moreover, although members within the English group resemble each other in their cognitive environment, and consequently they activated similar contextual assumptions about 'the fact', there are variations in their understanding of

the problem the caller wanted to solve. Specifically, there is evidence that the Chinese group depended on their Chinese cultural specific knowledge to infer the issue raised by the English caller.

**[4.2]**

- (1) H: Hi there what's happening in your life at the moment then?
- (2) C: [...] basically (.) I've been on a ... I've seen this guy eight times over two months.
- (3) H: Um-hum.
- (4) C: And he's kind of like DUMPED me.
- (5) H: Right. [...]
- (6) C: And basically he (.) he's currently like kind of saying <> the connection doesn't feel right. But he ... while we were dating ... he did make a big thing about how would be great to be friends of somebody first and ... and even when he dumped me (.) said we can still be friends but I didn't say anything cos I was upset.
- (7) H: Ok.
- (8) C: Basically... I'm just wondering I'm thinking about ... maybe calling him when he <> comes back and saying <> well (.) be nice and clearly I want to be friends, but I'm thinking is that too needy or is that a good way to try to win somebody back. (Extract 2)

Below is my brief summary of the issue raised by the caller in Extract 2 (see Appendix 2):

The man the caller was dating indicated his interest in maintaining a friendship with the caller when he ended his dating relationship with her. Because the caller did not give the man an answer as to whether she wanted to be his friend, she now tries to give the man a call and tell him about this. My inference is that she does not know whether or not telling him she accepts his friendship would help to re-establish their dating relationship, and therefore she wants advice on this.

When discussing this call with my two groups, I first asked each group what they thought it might mean if someone has dumped her.

**The English group responded:**

- S: He's finished the relationship.
- G: Yeah.
- A: He's ended the relationship.
- T: He doesn't want to continue seeing her.
- J: It's a kind of like dumped. I think it's only about eight times they've seen, probably it's not a proper relationship yet.
- A: I agree. It doesn't sound like they've been in a real serious relationship.

**The Chinese group responded:**

- L: He's ended the relationship.
- G: He doesn't want to date her any more.
- C: Yeah.

On the basis of evidence such as this, it became evident that the referent of the term ‘dumped’ was similar to both groups, referring to the man’s ending the relationship with the caller.

Later in the interview, I asked them to sum up in their own words what problem they thought the caller wanted to solve.

**The English group responded:**

T: She wants to find out if she is ok to call that guy back and to see if she may fix the relationship with him or if it’s too desperate.

A: Yeah I think basically right.

J: Yeah she wants to know if it’s worth pursuing the relationship or not.

S: I think she’s trying to decide if she has a chance to have a relationship with him again.

G: She’s just trying to have a relationship with him again.

**The Chinese group answered:**

C: She still wants to have a relationship with him.

L: She’s trying to find out if she can keep the relationship going.

G: I agree she’s just asking whether he will be back to her again if she tries.

Responses such as these indicate that the two groups did appear to share the assumptions I took to be manifest to the caller when she was constructing her problems. Because of the shared contextual assumptions about ‘dumped’ activated by the two groups, as well as myself, our understanding of the problem the caller was expressing was similar.

To summarise, the two groups’ understanding of the caller’s problem overlapped with my own interpretations, in that we all inferred the caller’s problem to be that the caller wanted to know whether or not building a friendship with the man could win him back to the relationship. I believe the similarity in our interpretations is the consequence of the similar contextual assumptions activated by the caller’s account in the process of interpretation.

**[4.3]**

- (1) C: 我認識一個比我小五歲的男人我想和他在一起  
I know a man five years younger than me, I want and he together  
I know a man five years younger than me, and I want to be in a relationship with him
- (2) C: 可他的家裡不願意  
but his family not agree  
but his family do not agree
- (3) C: 我該怎麼辦?  
I should how do  
How should I do? (See Appendix 3)

My brief summary of the caller’s problem is that she does not know how to persuade the man’s parents to accept her romantic relationship with their son, and therefore she asks advice on this. My interpretation is based on my inference that it is not seen as appropriate in China that an older woman has a romantic relationship with a younger man, and their relationship is objected to by the man’s parents.

When discussing this call with the two groups, I first asked each group why the caller was telling us that she wanted to be in a relationship with a man five years younger than the caller herself.

**The English group responded:**

- G: She wants to get someone else's opinion to see if they think that him being five years younger is ok. Like someone else's perspective on the situation.
- T: I guess it maybe like... not as common in China... like if in this country... five years age difference wouldn't usually matter. Unless one of the people was like... a teenager... say that one person is fifteen the other one is twenty. That will be a problem. But one is twenty the other is twenty five. That's not.
- S: That's indicating that that's a problem. She's not actually said that that's the problem.
- G: She probably thinks she's too old. She wants to know if the age gap is a problem.
- A: Yeah that's a good point actually. Maybe she wants to attribute to that. Maybe she's also a bit weird.
- J: I think in China it's a bit strange for her to have an older woman than a man in a relationship like five-year difference is quite significant. I think specifically like older family wouldn't agree with it, so I think she seeks justification whether five years is too much even though it wouldn't be that strange in this country.

**The Chinese group responded:**

- C: There is a big gap between them and also she is a lot older than the man...5 year gap not 1 year. So not appropriate.
- G: Yeah not like this country...they don't really care about this and a bachelor in this country can marry a lady with two or even three children which is unbelievable in China.
- L: She is worried about that age gap and she is older than the man...and that's not common in China and hard to accept.

The responses indicated that for the English group, the referent of the expression 'the man is five years younger than the caller' is somewhat distinct from that of the Chinese group. For the English group, this expression has been assigned different interpretations: G sees the issue of being 5-year older than her man as providing background information to the assumption the caller made about herself that 'she is too old'; T and J made an immediate connection which links the caller's case to their knowledge about Chinese culture. For example, J inferred that the issue of 5-year age gap 'may not be common in China' and made a point that in China it's a bit strange 'to have an older woman than a man in a relationship'. For the Chinese group, the expression 'the man is five years younger than the caller' refers to the assumption articulated in varying ways by members of this group that it is not an appropriate relationship if 'a woman is a lot older than the man'. Although this assumption sounds similar to the point made by J in the English group, the Chinese group did not talk of it being about an issue with 'older families'. Moreover, G, in the Chinese group, linked the issue of age gap to her knowledge of British culture, and inferred that British 'don't really care about this'. These responses indicate that

both groups depended on their bicultural knowledge to make a comparison about the issue of age gap, to infer what the caller was trying to communicate.

I then asked each group the question of why they thought that it mattered if the man's family did not agree with the relationship.

**The English group responded:**

- T: It depends on like how serious the relationship is. Like if this one has been going for a few years and you're thinking of getting married. That will be because she's going to join your family.
- G: Clearly it implies that family is important and the family's opinions about their relationship are obviously important.
- A: It sounds like if the family doesn't agree, it will be difficult for them to be together. Whereas I think if in this country if the guy left home...he wouldn't really care what the family think so much.
- S: Presumably if his family is involved then this is a very serious relationship.
- J: I think it's the bonus. At the end of the day you're an adult. You make the decision and you know yourself better than anyone else...so if you can get your family to like her then that's good. But if they don't then it doesn't matter.

**The Chinese group responded:**

- G: Parents' idea is important and if the man's parents don't agree and she has to think it over and see whether that man is indeed ok for her.
- C: It DOES matter. If it's me...I'd like to listen to my parents' idea before having a relationship with a man ...but a lot of people don't.
- L: It is important. It determines whether she can be together with the man.

The responses indicated that members of both groups understood the caller's statements as implying that she did care about the man's family's opinions about her relationship with the man. The two groups, however, differed in their assessment of the caller's point about the man's family's opinions as to whether the parents' acceptance is important. All the members of the Chinese group inferred that parents' opinions were very important to one's relationship. In contrast, the English group generated varying interpretations: G inferred that 'approval is important'; A in the English group admitted that the approval sounded important for the caller, however, A made a direct connection between the caller's issue and what he could experience in his own country, and inferred that if it were in UK, a guy 'would not really care about the family's opinions so much'. This indicated that A depended on his bicultural knowledge to infer the issue raised by the caller. The responses by J that 'if you can get your family to like her then that's good, if they don't, it doesn't matter' implied that he did not take family's opinions as significant in a relationship. More specifically, T and S extended the issue of parents' opinion which they expressed as having to do with 'how serious the relationship is', and inferred that 'if his family is involved then this is a serious relationship'.

Later in the interview, I asked them to sum up in their own words what problem they thought the caller wanted to solve.

**The English group's response was:**

- J: It looks like she actually wants practical advice rather than the other ones. She just seems to want some kind of affirmation or someone to tell them it's ok.
- S: Well 'what should I do' is quite an open ending. Like...should she try and get approval from his family or should she just give the whole thing up.
- G: I think you're absolutely right.
- T: Yeah she doesn't know whether she still needs to try to get approval or to give up.
- A: Yeah.

**The Chinese group's response was:**

- L: It sounds like she still wants to be together with that man although his family do not agree. So probably she is asking how she can be together with that young man.
- G: I think her question implies many different issues. Being older than a man is difficult to accept and this is a face issue. And it's difficult to convince the man's parents. Also she herself may not be certain about her relationship with the man and after all the man is 5 years younger. So she may need someone to say OK you two can be together.
- C: Not sure really ... but it doesn't sound like she wants to give up.

The responses to my first and second questions show that the English group did not make the assumptions articulated in varying ways by members of the Chinese group that (a) it is not an appropriate relationship if a woman is 5 years older than a man, and that (b) parents' opinions 'determine whether she can be together with that man'. Because of these, the two groups vary in terms of their assessment of the problem the caller wanted to solve: the Chinese group saw the caller's utterances as designed to communicate a problem of how the two can be together. For the English group, the differences in the contextual assumptions they drew on to infer the issues about age gap and family's opinions on the man's relationship led to variations in their understanding of the caller's problems: one of them inferred that the caller wanted someone to tell her that the two were OK, implying that the age gap was not too much; all the other four inferred that the caller wanted to know whether she needed to try to get approval or to give up the relationship. Neither of the groups produced interpretations that overlapped with my own, but they did indicate that we all inferred that the caller did care about the man's parents' opinions about her relationship with the man and she did think about the issue of age gap.

To summarise, there are differences both between and within each group's understanding of the caller's problem: the Chinese group as a whole saw the caller's utterances as designed to communicate the problem of how she can be together with her younger man, rather than of how she can get approval from her young man's parents, which was the interpretation I formulated. The English group generated two different interpretations: all but one of them saw the caller's speech as designed to solve the problem of whether she needed to get approval or to give up her relationship with her younger man. One of them inferred that the caller merely wanted to have someone's opinion to confirm that her relationship with her younger man was acceptable. As my analysis shows, it was the differences in the contextual assumptions each group drew on that led to the differences in their interpretations. Moreover, there is evidence that both groups depended on their bi-cultural knowledge and drew a comparison between the two cultures

about the issue of age gap raised by the caller.

#### 4.4.1. Summary

My analysis has shown the following:

- (1) When hearers of one culture activated assumptions that were not available to hearers of the other culture, their understanding of the relevance of what a caller was saying was in radically different ways, as in the cases of [4.1] and [4.3].
- (2) When hearers in one culture activated contextual assumptions that hearers of the other culture also had access to, their understanding of the relevance of what a caller was saying was similar, as in the case of [4.2].
- (3) My respondents were flexible in using their bicultural knowledge, in that they sometimes depended on their knowledge about a culture foreign to their own, as in the case of [4.1], but sometimes they depended on their cultural specific knowledge, as in the case of [4.3], to draw the inference.

### 5. Discussion

My analysis brought out variations in interpretation, both between and within the groups, but there was a pattern that indicated that members of each group were drawing on a set of assumptions about what a caller was saying that were not available to the other group. Consequently, the two groups interpreted the caller's problem in different ways. For example, in inferring the problem the caller was trying to express in [4.1], because of the cognitive environments of the Chinese group did not overlap with that of the caller in the same way that those of the English group appeared to, they did not access the contextual assumptions about 'having a sexual relationship with another man' that the caller's utterances appeared to require if they were to be understood in the same way that (based on my own understanding) the caller intended. Because of this, their understanding of the caller's problem was distinct: the English group as a whole saw the caller's utterances as designed to communicate the fact that he wanted to know what he should do in this situation. In contrast, the Chinese group saw the caller's speech as designed not to solve any problem, but to express how angry he was with his girlfriend's morally impermissible behaviour.

There was also evidence that members within the same group were drawing on a distinct set of assumptions about what a caller said. This indicated that members within the same speech community sometimes interpreted the meaning of a caller in different ways. Moreover, there were patterns that the bicultural individuals flexibly display a tendency to switch their bicultural meaning systems according to contextual clues (an utterance). For example, in inferring the problem the caller intended to solve in [4.3] about parents' approval of the relationship she was in, one of the members in the English group appeared to shift his knowledge of Chinese culture and the knowledge he holds about British culture, and contrasted the experience the caller recounted with his own life and inferred that 'if in this country if the guy left home...he wouldn't really care what the family think so much'. This indicates that he appeared to have



access to his knowledge of both cultural meaning systems, and flexibly use them to interpret the given utterance. What evidence such as this indicates is that the bicultural individuals are very sensitive to their deeply-rooted cultural norms, beliefs and values that inform them how to behave in a particular situation.

My analysis also shows that when people activate a similar set of contextual assumptions in response to an utterance, their interpretation of the utterance is similar, as in the case of [4.2].

Therefore, by drawing on Relevance Theory, it is possible to show that variations between interpretations of an utterance can be traced to the existing assumptions people held, and that culture has an impact on interpretation if hearers with diverse cultural backgrounds rely on different contextual assumptions in response to an utterance. The implication is that in intercultural communication encounters, the difference in contextual assumptions people from different cultures draw on is more likely to lead to differences in communication. Yet despite the evidence, as I acknowledged above, clearly the space precludes the possibility to analyse more data, which may limit the generalizations of the findings that emerged in this study. The restrictions of space also have required that the complexity of issues involved in my study such as respondents' linguistic and cultural conventions have not been fully addressed because they may be too broad a categorisation to draw out the most relevant distinctions between respondents. It is equally clear that three Chinese participants had lived in Britain for only a couple of years, which may have limited their ability to express their thoughts fully in English. However, it has to be pointed out that my aim has been to show how a methodology based on Sperber and Wilson's inferential model of communication can make explicit the relationship between interpretations and cultural backgrounds, and ultimately the impact of culture on interpretations from a new perspective. If further research is carried out with more data, then it would add greater insights to the findings of this study.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the 'trait' approach does not provide an explanation for the actual communication processes involved when those from different cultural backgrounds interact, and consequently it is not known how culture might impact on people's communication behaviour. I have also argued that Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory gives an explicit description of how that process works and therefore allows a way for exploring the sociocultural phenomenon. Drawing on the insights from Relevance Theory, I have shown that culture has an impact on interpretation made by bicultural people when they rely on distinct sets of cultural knowledge to interpret an utterance. I have also shown that if people draw on different contextual assumptions in response to an utterance, they would then generate different interpretations.

The findings from this paper have implications for the way in which culture and its relationship with communication can be explored further, in that my findings suggest that contextual assumptions may be one of the possible contributors to cultural differences in communication. Therefore contextual assumptions that hearers from different cultures draw on should be studied systematically.

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### Appendix 1:

- H: Ok you're a twenty-three year old guy and have been for (.) a relationship with your girlfriend for about six months now yeah?
- C: Yeah six months exactly actually this month.
- H: Ok and she's just turned around and said what to you.
- C: She told me yesterday morning that she's been seeing and <> having um sexual relationships ... with ANOTHER MAN.
- H: Ok not the sort of information you want to hear from your girlfriend is it.
- C: No. I was very hurt and I feel very troubled by it, I'm you know just wondering, I mean she is behaving like she's a complete cow.
- H: Em.
- C: And I'm just you know I I I love her, and I'm not sure how to take this, because I don't want to take it lying down, I want to do something about it.
- H: Em.
- C: And I'm not sure what.
- H: Ok so (.) your girlfriend of six months said to you yesterday I've been sleeping around and having sex with an another guy, you know another guy or another guyS?
- C: Yeah it was it was TWO men, I I mean she said she's been doing some rather ridiculous things, she (.) she she even said she's been in (.) relationships with two men at one time in (.) in one room. She's had (threesome) with two men.

- H: Right ok (.) well my question to you is, do you want to be in a relationship with a girl like that?
- C: I'm not sure because I love her ever so dearly.

## Appendix 2

- H: Hi there what's happening in your life at the moment then.
- C: Well basically (.) I've been on a (.) I've seen this guy eight times over two months.
- H: Um-hum.
- C: And he's kind of like DUMPED me and said that the connection doesn't feel right.
- H: Right.
- C: He's gone abroad for three weeks and //
- H: //When when did this happen. When did he (.) when did he finish with you.
- C: About a week and a half ago.
- H: Ok. that's so fairly fresh then.
- C: Yeah. And basically he (.) he's currently like a kind of saying <> the connection doesn't feel right. But he ...while we were dating, he did make a big thing about how would be great to be friends of somebody first ...and even when he dumped me (.) said we can still be friends, but I didn't say anything cos I was upset.
- H: Ok.
- C: Basically, I'm just wondering I'm thinking about, maybe calling him when he <> comes back and saying <> well, be nice and clearly I want to be friends, but I'm thinking is that too needy, or is that a good way to try to win somebody back.
- H: It's difficult isn't it. I know exactly what you mean I mean if he's called (.) you know called it a day you know.
- C: Yeah.
- H: I'll be tempted to to say, well you know (.) fair enough, that's the decision, that's it, move on, but you still feel that some kind of connection there.
- C: I do.
- H: That's worth investigating and I can understand very much that urge that want to contact him. Mo, what do you, what do you think.
- Expert (Mo): Well, I think, it's, it's very interesting. It sounds to me, like, you Kelly would very much like to have a relationship with him.
- C: Yeah.

## Appendix 3:

- C: 我 想 問 一 件 事 兒.  
I think ask a issue  
I have something to ask you for help.
- H: 好. 你 請 講.  
Good you please talk  
Ok, please go ahead.

- C: 我認識一個比我小五歲的男人我想和他在一起。  
I know a than I small five year of man I want and he in together  
I know a man five years younger than myself. I want to be together with him.  
可他的家裡不願意,我該怎麼辦?  
But his family no agree I should how do  
but his family do not agree. How should I do?
- H: (heh, heh)  
他家裡不願意,你今年多大了?  
He family no agree you this year many big  
His family do not agree, then how old are you?
- C: 二十七。  
Two ten seven  
Twenty-seven.
- H: 啊你今年二十七歲了。  
Ah you this year two ten seven year (particle)  
Oh. You're already twenty seven.
- C: 嗯。  
Em  
Em.
- H: 對方才二十二歲,是嗎?  
Other only two ten two year be ?  
Your young man is only twenty-two, right?
- C: 嗯。  
Em  
Em.
- H: 那你倆年紀的確相差五歲呀人家說五歲就有代溝了。  
Then you two age indeed gap five year people say five year just have generation gap  
But you two indeed have a five-year age gap. People often say five-year age gap is a generation gap.
- C: 是嗎?  
Be (?)  
Really?
- H: 當然,我們說愛情是不受年齡限制的。  
Of course we say love be no receive age limitation of  
Of course we always say love is not constrained by age.
- C: 對呀。  
Right (!)  
Yeah.
- H: 但是畢竟呢,年齡差距比較大的話就會有代溝。  
But after all age gap compare big of words so may have generation gap  
But after all, if there is a big age gap, then there will be a generation gap.  
他今年才剛剛22歲,但你27歲,應說是一個成熟的年齡段了。  
He this year just only 22 year but you 27 year should say be a mature age period  
He is only twenty-two, but you are already twenty-seven, which is a mature age.