



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Relationship between Language and Culture: A Study of  
Communication Styles and Social Identities of Post-Graduates in a  
University**

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**ABSTRACT**

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This study aimed at showing the inseparability of language and culture, discussing the relationship between communication styles and social identities. It focused on how conversational styles emerge, what they reflect and what impact they have. This is done on the basis of social constructivist ideas. The way, people speak, is determined in the social and cultural context, they live in. Language and language use are related to the culture, in different social classes. The data were collected through observation. The criteria, used, was Labov's qualitative approach that he proposed in "observer's paradox". To make the study more objective, a survey, through written questionnaires, was also conducted via direct elicitation. 60 samples, who were the students of post graduate program (M.Ed. and M.A. Education), were selected for the study, from Allama Iqbal Open University (Kot Radha Kishan Campus). Among selected 60 students, 10 were reserved for written questionnaires and 50 students for observation. The targeted students were chosen, representing two different social classes: the upper class, and the lower middle class whose communication styles were studied. The study ended with findings about cultural differences in communication styles and implications of strategies to harmonize relationships among diverse social groups. It also recommended suggestions for the curriculum of the subject of social studies.

**Introduction**

The phrase language is culture and culture is language is often mentioned when language and culture are discussed. It is because the two have a homologous although complex relationship. The interplay between language and culture is dialectical as they both reflect and influence each other. Communication is a creating source of culture as all the cultural characteristics like customs, roles, rules, rituals,

laws, or other patterns are communicated through culture. Culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through language.

Language and culture developed together and influenced each other as they evolved. Therefore, an intricate relationship was found between language and culture. Culture is a consequence of the interactions of humans, and the acts of communication are their cultural manifestations within a specific community. Prins and Ulijn (1998) described the inseparable relationship between language and culture. They felt that it was difficult to untie the language and culture. Brenneis (2002) claims that culture and language are closely united and linked and this union is widely acknowledged as well. Language is rooted in culture as language plays social function of communication between the groups of society. They communicate their values, traditions, perceptions, outlooks and beliefs through language from one generation to another generation. In this way, language cultivates social identities in various social groups of culture. Therefore, if we lose language we lose our culture and social identity (Mercuri, 2012). In the same context, Lebron (2013) adds that culture is sum of behaviors shared, learned and transferred through language that binds us in individual and social identities.

A communication style is the way, people talk to each other either verbally or non-verbally. Every culture has unique languages which constitute the essence of its people's style of communication. These styles are shaped by cultural values. Cultural diversity also affects communication styles as different cultures exist even in the same society. Therefore, whenever, we socially interact various communication styles come in the way. Communication styles enable our messages to be conveyed in a specific context. Therefore, culture and communication are interdependent and even remain interpretable in a certain context (Balc, 2018). Communication style can be characterized as the speech characteristics of a person which indicates the way of interpreting and transforming the information (Pânișoară. et al.2015). Communication styles are influenced by social class, the speaker belong to. The relationship between communication and social identity is intertwined. Exploring this relationship is relevant and important in order to understand human communication. The present study is theoretical contribution about dialectic interplay of communication styles and social identities. The main idea, that the study aims to put forward is that communication styles are determined by the culture that are particular in various social groups and communication styles are linked with these social identities.

## **Literature Review**

### **Dialectics of Language and Culture**

Culture can be seen as indicating everything that is shared in a society by a group of people that includes language also. Language is a means of communication so communication pictures culture. Culture is communication and communication is culture. The way people communicate reflect their culture. According to Giri (2006) culture and communication effect each other. Communication and culture have a

great influence on each other. The changes in cultural and socio economic conditions also alter communicative patterns. Communication styles are typical to a particular group in a society that reveal the social status of the members of a particular group.

One of the pioneers in the field of Cultural Studies, who also took an interest in language, was Stuart Hall, according to whom (1997) culture is about shared meanings. The shared meanings can belong to the communicative styles also. What is shared in the culture of upper class is not shared in the culture of lower class. He suggests that people who belong to the same culture share “broadly the same conceptual maps.” Language is considered to play an important role in relation to culture. Language allows for sustenance of the dialogue between participants which enables them to build up a culture of shared understandings.

Communication derives its meanings from culture. Communication styles determine social identities. Ethical and moral values have different meanings in different societies and cultures. In the words of Gergen & Gergen (1986) the important point is that whenever people define what ethics are and what is the appropriate way to speak, they are always speaking from a cultural tradition. The meanings of the ideas are culture-bound. Outside of this cultural dimensions, there are misunderstandings and misconceptions. The way people think is reflected through their language. The thinking patterns are different in the culture of groups belonging to different social classes. Burr (1995) says about social constructionism that we should have a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world.

### **Culture and Communication Styles**

Communication styles are determined by the social context, speaker belongs to. Bernstein (1971) presented Sociolinguistic Theory of Language Codes in which he proposed conceptualization of restricted and elaborate codes in terms of language and social identities. Restricted codes involve transmission of messages through verbal (words) and nonverbal (intonation, facial features, gestures) channels. Elaborated codes, on the other hand, involve the use of verbal amplifications, or rich and expressive language, in transmitting meaning, placing relatively little reliance on nonverbal and other contextual cues.

Gudykunst and colleagues (1996) found that the individualistic and collectivistic values of members of these cultures are associated with their independent and interdependent self-construal, both of which mediate the influence of national culture on their communication styles. According to Hall (197) cultures differ in the importance they place on words, and one communication style tends to be more predominant in one culture than another. He proposed different communication styles that are the focus of the current study:

### **Direct and Indirect Communication Styles**

In a direct communication style, the speaker is obvious and explicit in his message that does not contain understatement going against what he has said. Here the speaker is true to his words that reveal his real intentions, opinions, and needs. On the other hand, in indirect communication style, there is a difference between the saying and its actual meaning. The speaker takes shelter of irony, paradox and contrariness to express what is not obvious through his words but what he actually

means. According to Gudykunst and Kim (2003), members of collectivistic cultures tend to be concerned more with the overall emotional quality of interactions than with the meanings of specific words or sentences. Courtesy often takes precedence over truthfulness, which is consistent with the collectivistic cultures' emphasis on maintaining social harmony as the primary function of speech in interpersonal interactions.

### **Self-Enhancement and Self-Effacement Communication Styles**

Another dimension categorizes styles of communication involving the degree of emphasizing, attending and elaborating the positive aspects of the self in interpersonal interactions. According to category, the communication styles fall into two kinds: self-enhancement and self-effacement styles. The former style encourages the speakers to be outspoken about their own selves whereas the latter one appreciates being devalued and submissive in expressions. The self-enhancement communication style is employed when the speaker individual is straightforward and exposed about the capabilities, participations, or achievements, whereas in self-effacement communication style, an individual is verbally restrained, hesitant and modest and shows self-disparagement when talking about his or her own capabilities, participations, or achievements, or when he responds for the praises of others. Akimoto and Sanbonmatsu (1999) say that, self-effacement is important to maintain harmony among group members because modesty helps the speaker to avoid aggression. By putting down one's own performance while stressing others' contribution, no threat or offense can be expected.

### **Elaborate and Understand Communication Styles**

The difference between communication styles can further be shown by the difference between elaborate and understated styles that involve the degree of talk. In elaborate style, the speakers use expressive language in daily conversation. The speakers also prefer using exaggeration or animation to communicate their point of view. Contrary to this style, in the understated style, the speaker involves extensive use of silence, pauses, and understatements during their conversations. Arab cultures are exemplary in this context where individuals generally feel compelled to over-assert during every sort of communication. The reason for this is obvious as in Arabic culture, simple assertions can be interpreted to mean the opposite of what has been said. While in the United States, the ideal speaker is supposed to avoid over-assertion and exaggeration in communication. This wide difference in communication styles is often thought responsible for various diplomatic misunderstandings between Arab countries and the United States (Martin & Nakayama, 2013).

### **Material and Methods**

This study aimed at unfolding the dialectical relationship between language and culture. It focused mainly on the conversational styles of two social groups: the upper class, and the lower middle class that mirror their diverse cultures. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect the data. Following is the detail of the methodological process:

## **Participants**

Overall, 60 students, enrolled in Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU Sub-campus) were selected. The participants belonged to post graduate programs (M.A. Education & M.Ed.) who comprised both female and male members with age ranged from 25-35 years old. The rationale behind choosing Allama Iqbal Open University in was two-fold. First, there was no attempt of studying the relationship between communication styles and social identities before this, in the university. Secondly AIOU is the only university that offers distance education and people belonging to every strata of society study here. Such a diverse variety of social groups is not possible in other university in Lahore. Among the 60 students, 10 students were selected for direct elicitation in form of a questionnaire. The selected students were taken as representatives of the upper class and lower middle class respectively and they were the only students who were competent enough to fill the questionnaires reliably. Other 50 students were selected for observation. Keeping the ethical considerations in view, the participants were given consent forms to understand the objectives of the research. Moreover, the written permission of the coordinator of Allama Iqbal Open University regarding the use of data, was also sought

## **Data Collection Tool**

On the whole, two different types of tools were used for collecting data:

### **Data Collection through Questionnaires**

To make the research objective and authentic, data were collected in the form of open opinion questionnaires that were composed of different types of questions/ elicitation frames, designed to yield information on different types of research questions.

Each questionnaire was comprised of 6 different questions, based on the relationship of language and culture and variation of communication styles among different social groups. The technique of direct elicitation was used for collecting data because the data were taken directly from the students. In direct elicitation, the participants were free to respond according to their view. The questionnaires were distributed among 10 students both male and female and they were directed to fill the relevant column. Questionnaires were also used to elicit information on participants' perception about the inseparable link between communication styles and social identities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Scholars have suggested various paradigms of communication styles. One of the theoretical perspectives, proposed to understand cultural variations in communication styles, is the differentiation between high-context and low-context communication styles, by Edward Hall (1976) that has been selected as a theoretical framework for this study. It focuses on communication styles that differ people of different cultures.

### Data Collection through Observation

Along with the questionnaires, an observation was also conducted using Labov's (1972) model of Observer's paradox that means to observe the people when they do not know that they are observed and they are talking in an unsystematic way, in their original communication style, but the observer should observe systematically. This made the data more authentic. 50 Students were observed continuously for 10 days. The observation took place during discussion in class and break time that was recorded simultaneously for the authenticity of the research. The students who were observed belonged to different social groups. Before conducting research, the demographic information of the participants was already collected to yield authentic results.

### Results and Discussion

The research followed both quantitative and qualitative approach, and used the tools of survey, in form of written questionnaires, and observation. The communication styles of the upper class and the lower middle class, were analyzed numerically and descriptively. The analysis examined the relationship between culture and cross-cultural communication style, and reviewed how culture and communication are interdependent. Communication and culture reciprocally influence each other. The findings of data strongly agreed with the relationship of language and culture in terms of communication styles and social identity. The intimate relationship between language and culture was strikingly illustrated by the collected data which confirmed the view that language and culture cannot exist without each other. Following is the detail analysis of data. The data in pie chart, have been derived from questionnaires whereas the data, obtained through observation, is in description.

**Table 1**  
**Dialectical Relationship between Language and Culture**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
50%	30%	0%	20%	0%

8 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the relationship of language and culture. Only 2 respondents refuted the statement and disagreed that language does not reflect culture. Those who refuted this relationship, had different and limited approach of culture, according to which language is not the part of a culture

Through observation, it was revealed to a great extent that the communication styles of upper class and lower middle class reflected their culture and social identities respectively. The students of upper class were observed to use coded language and implicit styles in communication. And they had no concern for the inconvenience of all those who could not understand it. Whereas the students of the lower middle class were found to be explicit and clear in their communication, taking others' convenience into consideration. An example from the communication of a student of upper class that reveals his style: "**Aj to sequence nahi aya**" (Today *sequence* did not come). The word *sequence* was used for a teacher who always advised the students to sit with proper sequence in the class. The students of the lower class were not found using such language

**Table 2**  
**Communication Styles of Social Identities**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
20%	30%	0%	20%	30%

The respondents were almost divided in their opinions. 6 agreed/strongly agreed that communication styles reveal the social identity of the speaker. Whereas 4 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. They went contrary to this point. Through **observation**, it was strongly felt that language determined the social status of the speakers and different speakers' communication styles were in correspond to their social status. In one instance, there was a hot debate on one point during discussion on a religious topic. It led to a serious edge. The teacher asked both the students to leave the class. One student (belonging to upper class) rudely commented that he would not like to sit in such a class and left the room. Other student (of lower middle class) begged for teacher's forgiveness and showed humility, after which he was allowed to sit. Moreover, the pronunciation of different words also revealed the class distinction. The words, observed during class, (spoken by the lower class) were: "**lack city**" instead of "**lake city**", "**snake**" instead of "**snack**", "**maneignment**" instead of "**management**" and "**warruk shop**" instead of "**workshop**".

The finding reveal that communication styles vary in different social groups and they can very quickly reveal something about the speaker that he or she may or may not want others to know e.g., the lower social class. The way, speakers communicate is sufficed to indicate their social identities. The speakers of the upper class are more refined in their speech and represent their sophisticated social background.

**Table 3**  
**Self-Effacement in Lower Class**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
20%	50%	0%	20%	10%

Majority (7) of the respondents agreed upon the modesty of the lower class that was demonstrated in their communication styles. Only 2 respondents disagreed with it and 1 respondent strongly disagreed.

During **observation**, the students of the upper class were found boasting of their status and achievements. During a session of self-introduction, the students of the upper class not only introduced themselves but their power and references also. All those who were earning livelihood, boasted their monthly income. On the other side the students belonging to the lower middle class simply said "**Allah ka shukar hai.**" (Thanks be to Allah). They were reluctant to disclose their salary or monthly income. In answer to the question, "Who has done some action to be felt proud over?", the students of the upper class, proudly shared their abilities, accomplishments, and contribution. Whereas the students of the lower middle class humbly said that they had done things in that regard. But they had no ability. It was Allah's will for their actions. Allah wanted them to do so they did.

The findings show that the middle class uses self-effacement style in communication that helps maintain group harmony because modesty may allow an

individual to avoid offense. On the other hand, the upper class shows Self-enhancement that helps them to promote their self-image.

**Table 4**  
**Upper class: More Direct in Communication**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
50%	20%	0%	20%	10%

7 respondents agreed/disagreed that the members of upper class use direct communication style. Whereas 3 disagreed/strongly disagreed.

During a class, it was **observed** that in spite of the direction of the teacher, not to use the mobile phones during the class, a few students kept on using phones whenever they received a call. They did not bother to seek permission even. Instead they. They were so direct in their communication that they simply informed that they were going out to attend call and went out. Most of those students were the representatives of the upper class. In comparison to the students, those who belonged to the lower middle class never dared do so. At one occasion, it was seen that 2 students received calls but they did not attend it, even did not dare seek permission of the teacher. Instead of it, they asked the teacher, "when is the class going to have a short break?" This was an indirect way of asking for going out of the class. At another occasion, some students of lower class were invited to accompany some others of upper class to cinema. They did not want to go or did not feel like going, but approved going. After that they did not go actually. They could not refuse directly because a direct refusal was considered more face threatening for them.

The findings show that the members of the upper class do not bother about any loss. Their sense of loss is different than those who belong to the lower middle class. For the people of the lower middle class, saving the face is very much important, whereas the members of the upper class don't pay importance to any face. The lower middle class prefers an indirect style of communication with an emphasis placed on saving face. They tend to use expressions like "Actually, you know, I mean"

**Table 5**  
**Cultural Etiquette Considerations Vary in Social Groups**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
40%	30%	0%	20%	10%

The majority of respondents (7) agreed/strongly agreed with the variation of cultural etiquette considerations in different social groups. 2 respondents disagreed while 1 strongly disagreed.

During a lecture, in a discussion session, it was **observed** that the students were asked to share their point of views about a topic. All the students were asked to raise their hands and wait for their turn for the smooth discussion but some students did not wait for turn-taking and kept on interfering in others' discussion. Their communication style was high involvement. Those students whose discussion was interrupted did not react negatively and demonstrated silence. Their communication style was high considerate. After close examinations, it was brought to surface that those who had high involvement belonged to upper class and those whose communication style was high considerate belonged to lower middle class.

The findings show that the upper class and the lower class have different communication styles in respect of high involvement and high considerate style. For the lower class, silence in a conversation is common and appreciated at that time when somebody is interrupting the conversation. They believe that interrupting another speaker should be avoided. Whereas the upper class does not consider it and believe that they have a right to speak whenever they want.

**Table 6**  
Some People Are Elaborative Than Others

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
80%	10%	0%	10%	0%

The respondents highly favoured this view. 9 respondents agreed with the opinion that some people elaborate the things more than others. Only 1 disagreed. One lecture was **observed**. During the lecture, the teacher was discussing the topic of “population dynamics”. At the point of the difference between fertility and mortality, the students were invited for discussion. The students belonged to the upper class were elaborative in their discussion. One student went to the extent to say that in our country the situation is so alarming regarding fertility that in our families, old people wait to die but young people do not wait to produce more and more children. Another student proceeded him and said that in Pakistan more than 2 children should be banned. he even used exaggeration and said **“itni to makhyan bhi peda ni hoti pakistan me jitne bche peda hote hn”** (In Pakistan, the rate of the production of children is higher than production of flies.) Quite contrary to this, some students belonging to the lower middle class were reluctant to be so elaborative and responded precisely. They simply said that such a matter could be resolved by awareness.

The findings reveal that the members of the upper class use elaborate style in communication. They don’t hesitate to speak anything. They use expressive language, sometimes with exaggeration. Whereas the lower middle class feel reluctant to speak so elaborately about those matters which are not confidently shared in their culture.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

After the analysis of the data it is obvious that communication styles vary from culture to culture and different social groups show different cultural representations. The variations in ethical beliefs and social considerations lead varied communication styles. Such a multiplicity of communication styles reflects the diversity of culture. Diversity is the core of man’s nature, as every individual is different from other in his/her communication. But such diversity also causes clashes and indifferences between the members of different social groups. It has been strongly felt that there is a dialectical relationship between language and culture and the communication styles of the speakers reveal their social identities to a great extent. Although there are some exceptions also but generally, an individual’s communication style mirrors his/her social bonds. It is recommended that such variations should be acknowledged by all the members of the society. They should be enlightened about the different cultural patterns that reveal themselves through the communication of the people. The way people speak, is, more or less, the culture’s production, they belong to. So the people should be accepted as they speak, not as we expect them to speak. Such an

enlightenment can be given to the students through the subject of social studies/Pakistan studies that is compulsory in Pakistan till graduation. In the book of social studies, at all levels, there must be a chapter about the impact of culture on language that in turns change communication styles of different people. It will enable the students, gradually, to bear strong civic sense. Such a step will surely make Pakistani students a good citizen. The students will learn how to harmonize society, overcoming the stereotypical misconceptions about different social groups and bridging the gaps among different social groups.

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